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# Work-based learning and an investigation into racial hostility, an autoethnographic study

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## **Biography**

The author is studying for her BA (HONS) Education Studies degree as a mature student while bringing up her three children and working in partnership with her husband. She intends to complete a PGCE in post compulsory education following her degree and would like to teach in the adult education sector long term. She has a particular interest in Access to Higher Education courses and issues surrounding inclusivity and equality for mature students.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research enquiry was to explore autoethnography as a useful and valid form of sociological research. To gain an understanding of its complex ethical considerations that differ from other methodologies and create an autoethnographical focus on experiences within a work based learning environment. This enquiry explores the thoughts, emotions and reactions provoked by a critical incident relating to racial hostility that stemmed from reactions to the days top news story. Investigating racism from biological and cultural aspects and examining critical race theory creates a perspective on how racist events can occur, develop and be maintained or reproduced. Combined with an investigation into embodied knowledge it was possible to recognise racism as being deeply embedded within society. Further reflection of my actions towards combatting racism on a personal level led to a realisation that I may be contributing to perpetuating racial stereotypes rather than challenging them. This pivotal moment of transformation, while being uncomfortable, was also enlightening and confirmed the validity of autoethnography as a method of research.

## **Keywords**

Autoethnography, Work Based Learning, Critical Race Theory, Embodied Knowledge, Racism, Cultural Racism.

EDST503  
Introduction To Work Based Learning

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## **Work-based learning and an investigation into racial hostility, an autoethnographic study**

### **Introduction.**

This research project will explore autoethnographic research within work-based learning, looking at what this methodology is, why it is used and its complex ethical considerations. It will focus on an autoethnographical study that I have immersed myself in within a work placement, exploring work-based learning and how it differs from other learning experiences. Specifically I will explore my thoughts, feelings and reactions towards an incident relating to racial hostility. This critical incident generated questions about the battle between academic intelligence and embodied knowledge and the influence both have on my own reactions and thoughts. I will be critically examining where embodied knowledge may originate from and whether it is possible to incite change in those thoughts and feelings through exposure to logical, cognitive arguments and diverse experiences. Explorations into how racism develops using models such as cultural racism and critical race theory will enable me to reflect upon my own efforts to combat negative racial connotations. I am particularly interested in understanding whether these efforts are likely to affect any prejudice my own children may develop through exposure to on-going racial stereotypes portrayed within social and other media and society in general.

### **Methodology.**

Autoethnography can be a particularly challenging genre of research to define or comprehend. It is a branch of ethnography, which is a version of participant observation techniques initially utilised by anthropologists to study small-scale, pre-industrialised societies (Haralambos, 1995, Toren, 1998). Ethnography studies individuals in real life situations where the researcher is a participant in the culture they are studying, either overtly or covertly. This method of data collection provides rich, detailed qualitative information that would not be obtained by using other canonical methods. Ethnography became a more popular method of social research during the postmodern period of the 1980's when sociologists began to question the 'truths' of research that were dictated by the epistemological and ontological limitations found within a scientific and fact obsessed era. Sociologists began to realise the importance of multiple 'truths' and that universal narratives do not necessarily help individuals to make sense of the world around them and their position within it (Rossman, 2012).

With autoethnography, the researcher is studying themselves, their own thoughts, feelings and reactions to the situation or culture that they are in. The researcher creates a narrative of autobiographical self-reflection, relating their story to wider issues and theories socially, culturally and politically (Ellis, 2011). By critically analysing experience, rather than simply telling their story, autoethnographers validate their experience, providing insight to others into why they, within that cultural context, may share an experience or otherwise. It

is a method of data collection and analysis that rather than claiming to be objective, actually celebrates subjective, interpretivist characteristics. Objectivity occurs when the researcher critiques their experience in the light of academic theory (Wall, 2008). When considering the usual aspects that ensure the quality of research, such as validity, reliability and generalisability, it needs to be noted that these terms still apply albeit under slightly different definitions (Hopson, 2016 & Wall, 2008).

Autoethnographic validity is dependant on the researcher being able to write their story in a way that connects with the reader; the story needs to be coherent, believable and enable the reader to understand the point of view of the researcher, even when it differs from their own (Mayan, 2001). Closely linked to validity is the reliability of the research. This would be concerned with credibility; did the researcher genuinely have this experience? As memory is fallible, people who experience the same event often recall different versions. Has the researcher recorded their experience factually or has it strayed into a more fictional area (Thomas, 1993)? Finally, with generalisability, autoethnography would not look to apply research findings to large groups of people but would see if a story speaks to a reader, teaching them about why their lives differ or are similar to the researchers, highlighting and analysing issues that may never otherwise be considered (Dyson, 2007).

It is important to understand that, as with any research, there are important ethical considerations to apply. One of the most important ethical considerations within my study relates to safe wellbeing. Exploring emotions and reactions may produce troubling thoughts, or an awareness of traits I had no realisation of. When coupled with decisions on how much of the deeper self is acceptable to expose to others, issues with confidence and even identity could arise. In today's world of social media, judgement from others surrounds us constantly and as a researcher I will need to balance academic honesty with comfort in how I may be viewed by others.

I will need to consider confidentiality issues, ensuring that there is no exposure of, or ability to identify either the work place in which I am based, or those within it. The people I encounter within this experience are non-consensual participants. Although I am not studying them directly, simply by interacting with the environment that I am in and their influence on me means they are forming part of my research. I must look at how my research may affect those who are part of the social and cultural groups I am entering into and accept responsibility for how their or others views about them may differ following my conclusions (Winkler, 2017).

### **Work Based Learning (WBL).**

Why does this form of research lend itself well to WBL? Answers to this question can be found by considering what WBL is and why it differs from other forms of learning. In its most basic terms, WBL refers to any learning that takes place in a work environment or directly due to workplace concerns. Much of the learning is not recognised with any form of qualification but may be considered essential in workplace understanding or progression. The learning is often

unplanned, informal and invokes both explicit and tacit knowledge, with tacit learning being the most difficult to replicate within a university or other educational setting (Lester & Costley, 2010). WBL has become increasingly important as a component of university programmes, with their increasing need to justify their value within society (Brodie, 2007). As graduates require the same skills as employees already in the workplace, WBL enables the acquisition of these skills while also applying theory to practice, something which is often difficult to achieve in a traditional learning environment (Horden, 2017).

WBL also develops meta-cognition within students, as they need to learn how to identify an awareness of their own thought processes and an ability to evaluate their cognitive processes, adapting them where necessary to achieve desired results (Gross, 2005). To assist my own metacognition I will be keeping a journal to aid recognition, reflection and adaptation of my own learning processes and to record my thoughts and feelings which are harder to recall accurately as time passes.

### **Critical Incident.**

I was a few days in to my work placement when the breaking news that day was the story of Shamima Begum, the 'ISIS bride' looking to return to the UK (Busby & Dodd, 2019). That morning I observed a sociology lecture covering the role of mass media and crime. At the end of the session the students began talking about the daily news and their opinions on whether ISIS brides should be allowed to return home, with every student saying no. I was fascinated and horrified as they discussed their reasons, as I was surprised at the level of racial hostility they were expressing. My first thought was how quickly they had forgotten about everything they had just covered in the lecture about media influence, moral panic and why this occurs. My second thought, the one that I verbalised, was that there are two sides to every story and perhaps it would be useful to consider why any underage girl would be compelled to give up their home, family and freedom to join militant fighters in unfamiliar countries, with little or no rights once there. My reasoning fell on relatively deaf ears and I remember walking away feeling mildly frustrated and slightly amused. However, the conversation kept replaying in my mind over the next few weeks and I realised that this was becoming a critical incident: something that is made critical by awarding it significance and meaning (Angelides, 2001).

So many questions were forming in my head! I had realised that despite my arguments and my disappointment at others inability to accept another point of view, I had shamefully admitted to myself, that my own initial first reaction to the story had also been to think that no, once that traitorous decision has been made, you must now live with the consequences. But where did this reaction come from? It was spontaneous and unconscious and it has made me question one of the most fundamental aspects of me, my belief that I am not racist. As I live in an area where ethnic diversity is minimal, I have always prided myself on the conscious effort made to establish an

awareness of racial differences with my children and me. For us to gain a greater awareness and acceptance of society outside of our predominantly white lives, I have taken them to other countries to experience other cultures first-hand. From trips exploring Egypt, Mexico, Cuba and Turkey, to finding pen pals online, I have encouraged my children to develop into the accepting, understanding members of society I believed I was a part of.

### **The Process of Discovery...**

My initial thoughts related to why I felt this reaction and led to an investigation into embodied knowledge, the phenomenon whereby the body reacts instinctively, independently of the mind (Tanaka, 2011). From the very basic but essential processes such as breathing, more complex skills such as riding a bicycle, once the technique is mastered, represent a classic example of embodied knowledge; the body habitually performs the processes without requiring conscious input from the brain (Dove, 2016).

Embodied knowledge does not only relate to motor skills, as evidenced by the uncomfortable feelings generated when an individual intrudes into your personal space, or the inevitable itchy sensations felt when head lice are discussed. Essentially, the body develops schema in response to environmental stimuli which critiques would argue are merely a conditioned response equal to that demonstrated by Pavlov's dogs (Granger, 2010 & Gross, 2005) However, cultural differences in environment must be taken into account. Using personal space as an example, Hall (1966) envisaged 'zones of personal space' that individuals abide by following two proxemic rules, the amount of physical distance appropriate in daily relationships and the kind of situations in which closeness or distance is proper. He argues that embodied knowledge evokes differing responses to the same stimuli in differing cultures. For instance, India, with its highly formalised society employs a greater degree of public personal space than Sweden, which has a much more tactile culture. A stranger deposited into either of these cultures would abide by the cultural rules whether cognitively aware of it or otherwise (Hall, 1988).

With regard to racism, Shusterman (2008,25) summarises embodied knowledge perfectly,

Much racial and ethnic hostility is not the product of logical thought but of deep prejudices that are somatically expressed or embodied in vague but disagreeable feelings that typically lie beneath the level of explicit consciousness...

The 'deep prejudice' that Shusterman refers to warrants further exploration. Embodied knowledge may help to explain my initial reaction but how did I acquire this schema in the first place? To find further answers I want to further explore racism, how it occurs or develops and why, in our multicultural society, does racism still exist?

Racism can be defined as a belief that one race is superior to another, often leading to prejudice or discrimination. It is the assumption that all members of each race possess certain undesirable characteristics or qualities that

distinguish them from other races (Malik, 1996). I have to ask myself the question, “do I consider myself superior to others because of my race?” I genuinely don’t think I do but I need to unpack that thought more carefully. Thinking about some of the places I’ve visited with the children, I’ve always made an effort to explore areas outside of tourist zones, which are generally the more affluent areas. Have I done this believing that all people in those cultures live in poorer areas, without even realising it? Have I inadvertently been teaching my children that we are superior because we are lucky enough to be able to afford to live a more affluent lifestyle? These questions are uncomfortable to consider as they reveal a tendency for me to fall into racial stereotype traps, but from another perspective, I know that I do not assume all ethnic minorities in the UK are impoverished and inferior. I believe I treat all people the same, irrespective of skin colour.

I also need to consider that thought more closely however; do I make too much effort to ignore the colour of a persons skin? This could indicate racial colour blindness, an ideology whereby skin colour is considered insignificant (Apfelbaum, Norton & Sommers, 2012). Upon first consideration this would appear to be a positive ideology, creating harmonious, equal societies rendering racism obsolete. However, this ideology is controversial and may even contribute to reinforcing the systems that perpetuate white privilege. By ignoring colour and treating everyone the same we are ignoring the hardships that minority groups experience and belittle the historical wrongs many races have endured (Carr, 1997). Thinking back to the discussion at my work placement, many of the arguments involved comments about Muslim cultural differences and I would argue that cultural rather than biological differences are what segregate races. My previous definition of racism needs to be reconsidered with greater emphasis on those cultural aspects.

Cultural racism encompasses this idea that certain cultures are fundamentally incompatible and therefore should not co-exist within the same society (Fernando, 2003). During the 1970’s economic and political instability, the blame for many problems landed on immigrants (Malik, 1996). The differing values that immigrants held to traditional British values set minorities apart and this was seen as undermining British strength and that it is unnatural for people with very different lifestyles to live together. For example, British families were predominantly married couples with children but black families had a greater frequency of single parents and were therefore seen as incapable of maintaining traditional family life. Likewise, Asian families were largely extended, leading to overcrowding and again, going against established British norms. Having a British passport was not enough to make someone truly British, only those with a British lifestyle upholding British values could be British (Fernando, 2003). These differences led to conflict between immigrants and the ‘real’ British. However, is cultural racism really still indicative of societies views today? Postmodern effects on family life for instance, have led to an acceptance of more than one family type. While married couple households are still most prevalent, many different structures have emerged including same sex and single person households (ONS,



2017). Along with attitudes towards family, has societies attitude towards race changed or is there still something restraining it, either overtly or covertly?

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework that places race at the centre of analysis of policies, both formal and informal, within society, law and power, proposing that racial inequality and white supremacy are created and maintained over time (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT places emphasis on story telling, much like the manner of autoethnography, to understand how policies intended to create equality effectively reverse this. For instance, laws created to enable freedom from slavery dictated that black women had to prove they descended from a free maternal ancestor. If they could not provide evidence to support their claim, it would be denied on the basis that black people are slaves, white people are free. White 'owners' did not have to provide any evidence to support their claim (Haralambos, 1995). While this example is historical in nature can we argue that times have changed? Over fifty years after the introduction of the Race Relations Act inequality still exists in many areas. The unemployment rate for all ethnic minorities is 11.3% and is more than double the rate for white people at 5.5% (ONS, 2019). Ethnic groups are also 60% more likely to suffer from depression and black people are 6.6 times more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act (ONS, 2018).

This leads me to question why racism still exists in our society today, is it accidental or deliberate and if the latter, what purpose does it have? I've always had a frustration with the way Muslim extremism is often portrayed within the media. Many stories neglect to use 'extremists' when talking about Muslim terrorists, which implies it is a cultural trait rather than behaviour attributed to a small minority (Cottle, 2000, Streeting, 2019, Tanner, 2019). This false theory is backed up by Government advice to British travellers to avoid Muslim countries where terrorist attacks have occurred (Egypt and Tunisia) but offers no concerns about travel to European countries that have suffered the same attacks (France, Spain, Germany) (GOV.UK, 2019).

The media is a powerful institution that can mislead the public or affect socialisation by creating distorted images that suit the ideology of the people who produce them, an ideology that helps to maintain a false consciousness. Institutions like the media and the Government maintain power by distracting members of society from the true causes of issues, directing blame onto minorities whose ability to fight back is minimal (Haralambos, 1995). It could be argued that by generating suspicion of all Muslims, society will not stop to consider why terrorism occurs, they will only be concerned with who carries it out.

## **Conclusion.**

This ethnographic study has taken me on a journey that I never expected to travel. When I chose my work placement I was more concerned with choosing somewhere relevant to the field I want to work in as I was under the mistaken belief that the 'naval-gazing' idea of autoethnography would not amount to anything really useful. I never expected to find myself investigating

racism, let alone discovering unconscious racist traits within myself. I have gained so much from this study, new friends, new academic knowledge, an idea of the career path I would like to take and an ability to dig a little deeper, to question even the mundane.

This process has been an emotional one, with the whole spectrum experienced. With the power of reflection and the confidence of being able to discuss this topic with close friends and new colleagues, I have reconciled my cognitive knowledge with my embodied thoughts. Only time will tell if embodied knowledge can change with enough exposure to environmental differences and intellectual analysis. Since looking at embodied knowledge and various theories of racism I now need to consider the original questions I proposed. My initial thought that I could influence racial prejudice in my children simply by limited exposure to alternative cultures now seems naïve. Deeper societal prejudices are going to influence them irrespective of any combative measure I take but what I hope to achieve is awareness. Not just for racial or other oppressive issues, but awareness that even small things have a bigger picture. If I can teach my children to become critical thinkers then I believe I am preparing them to become independent thinkers, providing them with the skills to evaluate their own decisions and actions.

Finally, the work-based environment became one of the most useful educational experiences I've had and the autoethnographic methodology enabled me to really learn about myself, something I never want to explore as a perpetual sufferer of low self-esteem. The confidence boost this experience has given me is astonishing and I have elected to continue with my work placement until the end of term. I feel like I've invested in these students and want to witness their achievements at the end. This module has highlighted the many different ways in which we learn and I have found it truly transformational.

Word count - 3346

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