

# Autoethnography as a Research Method in Happiness Studies

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**Abstract:** The pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal that has been studied by philosophers, theologians, and scientists for centuries. Despite its universal importance, the definition and means of achieving happiness vary greatly across cultures and individual experiences (Uchida, Norasakkunkit and Kitayama, 2004). Cultures have different beliefs, values, and customs that shape their understanding of happiness. For example, some cultures may place a higher value on material wealth and success, while others may prioritize spiritual fulfillment or strong relationships (Joshanloo and Weijers, 2014). In this autoethnographic paper, I reflect on my own personal journey towards happiness during a one-year travel across 22 countries within southern Africa, southeast Asia, and south America, focusing on the first part of the trip – southern Africa. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that involves the researcher reflecting on their personal experiences and cultural positionality in order to understand and analyze cultural phenomena (Bunyan, 2021). It combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, as the researcher uses their own experiences as a way to explore and understand the cultural context in which they participate (Hamilton, Smith and Worthington, 2008). Through the use of personal narrative and cultural analysis, I delve into the ways in which my own cultural background and societal expectations shaped my understanding of happiness. I also explore the ways in which immersing myself in a new culture and community impacted my pursuit of happiness and well-being. By reflecting on my own experiences and observations, I aim to shed light on the complexities of the pursuit of happiness and the potential for personal and cultural growth that can result from stepping outside of one's comfort zone. Through this autoethnographic lens, we hope to offer a unique and personal perspective on the pursuit of happiness, and to encourage readers to consider the cultural and individual factors that influence their own pursuit of this universal goal. We also reflect on how innovation and technology, essential to business, may not be as important to achieve happiness in certain contexts. This essay is a call for reflection on what truly matters in life.

**Keywords:** Autoethnography, Happiness, Well-being, Innovation.

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## 1. Introduction

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that involves the researcher reflecting on their personal experiences and cultural positionality in order to understand and analyze cultural phenomena (Bunyan, 2021). It combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, as the researcher uses their own experiences as a way to explore and understand the cultural context in which they participate (Hamilton, Smith and Worthington, 2008). It involves analyzing and interpreting these experiences, while also making connections between the author's insights and their own cultural identity, communication practices, traditions, symbols, emotions, values, and broader social, cultural, and political issues (Poulos, 2021). Essentially, autoethnography seeks to contextualize the personal within the broader social and cultural frameworks that shape our lives (Gant et al., 2019).

The purpose of autoethnography is to provide a detailed and reflexive account of one's own experiences, while also exploring the social and cultural context that shaped those experiences. One of the key features of autoethnography is its emphasis on reflexivity. This means that the researcher reflects on their own positionality and how it influences their research. By acknowledging the researcher's own biases and subjectivity, autoethnography aims to produce a more transparent and honest account of the research experience.

Another important feature of autoethnography is its use of personal narrative. Autoethnography is often based on personal stories, which can be used to explore broader social and cultural issues. These stories are not only used to illustrate the researcher's own experiences, but also to shed light on the experiences of others who share similar backgrounds.

Critics of autoethnography argue that it is too subjective and lacks scientific rigor. They also argue that the use of personal narrative can be seen as narcissistic and self-indulgent (Stephens-Griffin and Griffin, 2019). However,

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