'Real-Time Autoethnography' in Migration Research: Towards Capturing Past Lived Experience as It Is Lived
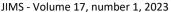
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Abstract. Qualitative scholars who employ autoethnography as a qualitative approach have largely focused on personal recollections or hindsight or retroactive writing to capture and document lived experiences of researchers or authors. Qualitative scholars note that employing autoethnography has limitations, such as missing complete details of past lived experience because an author relies on his/her memory to record their past experiences. Such retroactive writing may not fully represent the nuanced details and complexities of lived experience as it is being lived. This paper attempts to contribute to the methodological approach of autoethnography by developing a new methodological perspective or approach namely 'real-time autoethnography' to capture researcher's lived experiences in real-time or as it is lived. Real-time autoethnography's main focus is on documenting lived experience as it is being experienced rather than relying on hindsight memory to capture lived experience. This paper argues that employing standard autoethnography is inadequate to document the nitty-gritty of lived experience and that real-time autoethnography enables researchers to record the complexities and nuances of researcher's/authors' lived experiences as they unfold thereby minimizing the problem of missing important details.

Keywords: *Autoethnography, lived experience, migrant researcher, qualitative approach, real-time autoethnography*

Introduction: Autoethnography, a method of hindsight writing

"Nothing can last forever. There isn't any memory, no matter how intense, that doesn't fade out at last." — Juan Rulfo.

In recent years, positivist-oriented research methodologies, as normative forms of knowledge production, have been critiqued by non-positivist social science scholars who maintain that interpretivist or constructivist paradigms and research approaches such as autoethnography equally produce valid knowledges about the lived experience (Denzin & Lincolnc 2000; 2010; Ellis & Bochner 2000; Méndez 2013).

The interpretivist turn appeared as a lens of representing the voices and lived experiences of everyday people and positioning their subjectivities and perspectives as valid knowledge (Anderson 2006; Chang 2008; Méndez 2013). Within the interpretivist framework, such as autoethnography, scholars argue that the principles guiding objectivist research do not adequately capture the messy and complex concrete experiences, world views and perceptions of everyday social actors (Ellis & Bochner 2006; Méndez 2013; Wall 2008).

Autoethnography emerged as a qualitative approach to document the lived experiences and perspectives of authors or researchers (Ellis et al. 2010; Méndez 2013). The term 'auto' refers to the self while 'ethnography' denotes the study of a social phenomenon within a social system (Ellis et al. 2010). Using autoethnography as a qualitative methodological perspective, an author attempts to reflect on their past lived experiences and present those individual experiences as forming part of broader social and cultural patterns within which the experiences are located (Holman 2005; Méndez 2013). Author's everyday experiences are conceptualized as a slice of broader socio-cultural patterns (Ellis & Bochner 2006). Schroeder (2017) defines autoethnography as 'people starting their research with themselves and their own lived experience, using their lives as their research questions...' (*ibid*: 316), or '...that the self becomes to some extent the subject of the research...' (*ibid*: 317). Autoethnography is conceptualized as bridging or linking the gap between science (analysis) and art (narrative) (Ellis (1999).

Within this paper, 'memory' is defined, not in a reductionist fashion, as a recalling of past experiences or rational recollection of past events, but rather as remembering the feelings (affect) while experiencing the event in the past; and it also includes aspects involving bodily experiences (somatic) (Ellis 1999: 675). Prominent autoethnographers such as Ellis (1999) employ the concept 'emotional recall' to refer to the way in which researchers retroactively visualize being 'back in these scenes emotionally and physically'. In other words, emotions and sensations of the body are largely the focus of autoethnographic recall. As Schroeder (2017) notes, much of auto-ethnography's focus is on using the techniques of emotional and bodily remembering to narrate recollections of past experiences as it pertains to pleasant or painful memories and experiences.

Emotional recall is embedded in sociological introspection, a process accomplished in dialogue with the self and represented in the form of narratives (Ellis 1991) Therefore, autoethnographic research is more about feeling good or bad on an emotional level while the autoethnographer is remembering (Ellis 1999).

In doing autoethnography, the basic requirements and important criteria in judging the value of autoethnography are, as Bochner notes,
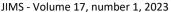
> Copious detail; a temporal structure revolving between past and present; emotional integrity of the author, reflecting deeply on one's actions; a plausible journey of transition from 'who I was to who I am'; ethical awareness for others and a reader moved by the story" (Bochner 2000: 270).

Autoethnography is broadly divided into two general categories, namely evocative autoethnography and analytic autoethnography. While evocative autoethnography is focused on presenting past experiences of emotional and bodily significance which trigger affective responses, analytic autoethnography on the other hand is focused on constructing theoretical explanations of larger cultural or social contexts through the lens of recalling of past experiences (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 445).

According to Ellis et al. (2010, par. 5), in conducting an autoethnographic study, 'an author *retroactively* and *selectively* writes about past experiences.' For Ellis et al. (2010, par. 5), the use of 'hindsight' or memory is central in documenting past experiences of the author. Within the framework of 'hindsight', autoethnographers write about 'epiphanies 'or remembered moments (Ellis et al. 2010: par. 6). In doing autoethnography, self-reflection is treated as the core focus of analytics) and touches on topics such as personal crisis or suffering and adversity through self-reflective narrative (Ellis 1999; Schroeder 2017).

Other proponents of autoethnography such as Wall (2008: 45) also argue that 'headnotes are more important than field notes.' In regard to the benefits of autoethnography, Méndez (2013: 282) writes, 'another advantage [of authethnography] is the ease of access to data since the researcher calls on his or her own experiences as the source from which to investigate a particular phenomenon.' Therefore, autoethnographic studies rely on remembered past events and important' moments which draw on memory to document past lived experiences (Holman 2005; Méndez 2013; Wall 2008).

As epiphanies or significant remembered moments or events form part of the tenets of autoethnography, writers attempt to reconstruct, shape, assemble, organize and capture past occurrences by accessing their memory data and usually written diaries to recall those details (Andersonc2006; Chang 2008; Couser 1997; Holman 2005; Wall 2008). Therefore, the basis on which autoethnographic research conducted draws on recall in the recording of past lived experiences drawn from one's mental records and sometimes written resources.

It is argued that relying on past lived experiences can only be partially represented and that capturing the messy and nuanced details, features, particularities, attributes and characteristics of the immediate context based on recall within which past experience is framed becomes a challenge. For complex and nuanced past lived experiences of authors to be adequately represented, the standard autoethnography approach needs to be complemented by real-time autoethnography which enables capturing and documenting lived experience as it unfolds. The objective of this paper is to outline the limitations of standard autoethnographic approach and suggest an alternative autoethnography, which I designate 'real time autoethnography'. Through real time autoethnographic methodological framework, the complexities and nuances of past lived experiences can effectively be recorded rather than relying on mental records to capture past experiences.

The next section discusses the nature and scope of autoethnography, then I outline the limitations of the hindsight-based autoethnographic approach through the perspective of 'memory bias' theory. I then share my experiences of how I struggled to fully memorize and document my past experiences with racial classification and xenophobia in South Africa. Following that, I discuss the alternative approach of 'real time' autoethnography that qualitative researchers can use to capture their lived experiences. The last section concludes the article by outlining the scholarly contributions of the paper.

Hindsight based Autoethnographic approach in migration research

Many migrant researchers have used hindsight-based autoethnographic methodological perspective to document and share their own past lived experiences as refugees or immigrants in host societies (e.g.,, Assil 2021; García-Iglesias 2020; Hauber-Özer 2019; Mario 2020; Muhamed 2022; Run 2012; Vidal-Ortiz 2004; Wake 2018).

Assil (2021), an Afghan refugee in the United States, chronicled his past everyday experiences of adapting and acculturating to the US cultural and educational system by using an autoethnographic qualitative approach based on mental recollection. Hauber-Özer (2019), an American immigrant in Turkey, employed autoethnography to share and report on her struggles with integrating into the host country's socio-cultural life using her recollections of her experiences.

A second-generation female Italian immigrant in Australia, Wake (2018) utilized autoethnography to write about her lived experiences with identificational and cultural adaptation in the host society recalling how social integration was experienced in the past. Fernando (2020), a Sri Lankan non-White migrant in Australia, shared his past lived experiences with the challenges and dynamics of fitting into the Australian socio-cultural identity categories and how he navigated experiences of discrimination and stigmatization by remembering key moments.

In Muhamed and Ahmed's (2022) research article, Muhamed employed autoethnography to reflect on his past lived experiences with educational training at a refugee gap in Ethiopia in which Muhamed recalled how his social category as a non-citizen refugee positioned him to receive inferior education compared to the citizens in the host society.

A non-White Sudanese refugee in Australia, Run (2012), employed a hind-sight based autoethnographic narrative to document his everyday encounters with prejudice, discrimination and racism in a White-dominant Australian society due to mainstream media's portrayal of African refugees as criminals. García-Iglesias (2020), a Guatemalan immigrant in the US, shared his autoethnographic perspective to report on how he navigated the American dream in his daily lived experiences drawing on his recollections as qualitative data.

Alatrash (2018), a female Canadian of Syrian origin, used hindsight reflection to share her everyday lived experiences with racialized stigmatization and discrimination due to her immigrant background despite her formal Canadian citizenship. Vidal-Ortiz (2004), a Puerto Rican immigrant in the US, also employed autoethnography to reflect on his past everyday lived experiences with prejudice and discrimination by the White dominant host society owing to his accent and country of origin.

The above studies employed recall or hindsight memory to retroactively write about their various respective past everyday lived experiences in their respective host societies. Even though autoethnographic approach was useful for the migrant writers to reflect on their past experiences, their accounts and stories might not capture the full range of their past experiences as they all relied on their memories and mental recollections to narrate past lived experiences. The next section discusses the theory of 'memory bias'. to suggest how relying on memory produces a narrative characterized by partial recollections, possible altered or reshaped details, incompleteness and selectivity.

The limits of 'hindsight' in recalling autoethnographic experiences: Memory bias theory

In order to make sense of the ways in which recall- or hindsight-based autoethnographic approach harbours limitations due to its reliance on selective recollections, I employ 'memory bias' theory to highlight such problematic. 'Memory bias', as a psychological and socio-psychological concept refers to cognitive bias where memory becomes selective, incomplete, altered and at times misrepresented (Krans 2017; Ross and Wing 2018; Watkins, Martin and Stern 2000).

Scholars and researchers examining the phenomenon of human memory concede that in recalling past experiences, individuals tend to experience memory bias due to the passage of time between the occurrence of an event, action or process and the mind's activity to recall those past experiences (Barry and Wing 2018). This is because, they argue, in recalling past events, the mind might leave out, alter, reform and at times re-configure long-passed occurrences and the details, nuances, structure and complexities of those past occurrences fade or lose their integrity (Du, Zhang, Wang, Luo and Lu 2015; Ross and Wing 2018; Watkins, Martin and Stern 2000).

Psychological, cognitive science and socio-psychological theories of memory bias assert that due to the myriad of informational data which the mind captures and processes, the details, nuances, complexities, accuracies and dimensions of past happenings tend to be affected during moments of recall and reconstruction of those events (Ross and Wing 2018; Watkins, Martin and Stern 2000). Due to such mental interferences and obstacles, recalled events become incomplete and selective (Ross and Wing 2018).

By employing the analytical concept and theoretical perspective of 'memory bias', I highlight the limitations of autoethnographic approach in capturing and documenting past lived experiences by using recall as a technique of collecting past experiential qualitative data. Below, I share my experiences, as an African refugee, of how I struggled to clearly and fully recall or remember my past everyday lived experiences with racial classification and xenophobia in South Africa.

My struggles with recalling my felt-lived experiences with racial classification and xenophobia in South Africa

Struggling to recall how I felt when I was racially classified

Before I arrived in South Africa as a refugee, I did not have a racial identity and instead my self-identification was based on my cultural, ethnic, neighbourhood and national identities. My physical characteristics such as hair texture, eye colour, nose type, skin pigmentation and facial features did not carry any racial meaning. After I arrived in South Africa, a society with high race-consciousness, I started experiencing racial classification in my everyday social interactions. Some South Africans would ask me if I was Coloured[1] due to my physical appearance. At other times, people classified me as Indian[2] South African. In most cases, South African Coloured people spoke to me in Afrikaans, a South African language generally spoken by Whites and Coloured people, thinking that I was Coloured.

For example, sometime last year, a Coloured woman mistook me for Coloured and spoke to me in Afrikaans but she later realized that I was a non-South African foreigner. I do not exactly remember the details of this particular experience. What I can recall from the interaction was that I was mistaken for a South African Coloured person and the lady afterwards spoke to me in English. I also recall that I felt confused about my supposed racial identity at the moment. Had I captured the actual interaction between the woman and myself I would have a nuanced and complete detail of the conversation and the context of the experiences so that the actual experience of my racial classification could be clearly wholly reported For example, the Coloured woman asked me something regarding my racial identity but the memory of the interaction has long faded that I can now only recall glimpses and generalities of the selective details of the particular experience.

On another occasion, I was waiting for a bus when a Coloured South African man said something in Afrikaans and since I was unable to understand what he was actually saying, I replied to him in English. Hearing my English accent, the young man said to me that he thought or assumed I was Coloured. We talked about race afterwards until my bus arrived but I cannot actually remember the complete details of what we were discussing about race classification in South Africa and identity categories in my country of origin. We spoke and argued for some minutes about race and racial categories in South Africa. I also remember that did not feel

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[1] The racial category 'Coloured' generally refers to individuals understood as having mixed racial ancestry, for example White and Black.

2 The racial label 'Indian' refers to individuals whose ancestries originate from the Indian sub-continent.

comfortable being ascribed a racial category that was not created for me in the first place. However, I now can only remember parts of the interaction and interpersonal conversations and could not capture all the nuances and details of our conversations about racial classification and the emotional rollercoaster I felt about my racial identity.

A 'Black' South African woman one day told me that she had never dated Indian men in the past thinking that I was Indian South African. When I told her that I was not Indian South African but a non-South African foreigner, she told me that her first impression about my racial identity was Indian due to my looks. I recall being confused about this ascribed racial identity. I can only remember, however, only my being racialized as Indian by the woman and the bewilderment I felt. There were other issues of race and racial classification we spoke about but I can hardly remember what the detailed content of our conversations and the different feelings and emotions I experienced at the moment due to the passage of time.

Ever since I arrived in South Africa, over ten years ago, I had experienced racial classification by South Africans on numerous occasions as Coloured, Indian South African and even occasionally Black South African. The everyday day lived experiences of imposed racial classification occurred in random social encounters with South Africans on the streets, in the malls, on trains, taxis, buses, cafes and other settings. However, except for a very few interactions, I cannot exactly remember the details and contexts of those several experiences of racial classifications by everyday ordinary South Africans and how I felt in those moments.

Struggling to recall how I felt during xenophobic episodes

As a non-South African Black African refugee who has been living among Black South African citizens for over a decade, I have experienced both xenophobic attitudes, prejudice and overt violence. This is not to say that every South African I came into contact with harbors a xenophobic attitude or is violent towards foreigners. I have come across many South Africans who exhibited friendly and welcoming attitude towards me as well. Here, I am focused on incidents of xenophobic comments and behavior exhibited by South Africans in my everyday lived interactions with them in the past.

On numerous occasions, I have encountered anti-foreigner and xenophobic comments by ordinary South Africans that it made me uncomfortable, unwanted and excluded; however, my recollections of such xenophobic dispositions by some South
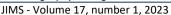
Africans are selective and partial rather than complete, detailed and nuanced. Even though I often come across some South Africans who openly exhibited their xenophobic attitudes, I could not be able to record the full detail of the xenophobic experiences because I did not document the experience in real time. Even though my experiences with xenophobic comments were numerous, I can now only remember or recall, in hindsight, a few occasions. I now only have unclear memories of the fear, terror and uncertainty I felt whenever xenophobic episodes occurred. I can only remember such felt-emotional experiences through partial 'emotional recall' due the lapse of much time.

I recall an occasion in a public taxi when a South African man asked me when I would go back to my country of origin because South Africa was overpopulated with foreigners. I can also remember that he alluded to 'criminal' foreigners increasing the crime rate in South Africa and bribing officials to obtain residence papers. However, I cannot remember how the conversation started or within which context such a conversation emerged. I do not also recall how I felt and reacted or how I replied to his comments: the memory of this incident has become unclear and unspecific because it occurred long time ago.

In addition to the above encounter, I also was met by a South African woman who told me that South Africa did not need professionals or educated people because there were enough South Africans who could do the same job that foreigners were doing in the country. I can only recall some of the details of the interaction with the woman where she talked about educated foreigners not being welcome or needed in South Africa. Apart from this recollection, I can hardly remember each detail of the interaction, the context of the conversation and how it made me feel

From many ordinary South Africans, I often encountered xenophobic comments such as 'When will you go back to your country?', 'Why are you here?', 'Foreigners are criminals,' and so on but I cannot recall where, when, how, and why such comments surfaced. Much time has passed between the time when I experienced xenophobic comments and the present day and that due to the lapse of time, I can hardly remember the complexities and nuances of those remembered negative interactions and how they made me feel. Even though I was fully aware of the little details and contexts of the past xenophobic experiences when they occurred, presently and after the incidents have passed, I can only capture and document a few experiences of xenophobia and they are partial and selective at that.

Making sense of recalling my past experiences

I found it difficult to fully capture and document my past lived experiences with racial classification and xenophobia in South Africa due to the time gap between when my experiences occurred and the time I attempted to recall or remember them, a problem captured by memory bias theory (Du, Zhang et al. 2015; Ross and Wing 2018; Watkins et al. 2000). The theoretical perspective of memory bias notes that individuals find it difficult to remember the full details of past events, actions and processes long after they have occurred due to time lapse (Lalande and Bonanno 2011; Ross and Wing 2018). Seeing through memory bias theory, my past experiences with racial classification and xenophobia in South Africa could only be partially and selectively remembered and documented (Ross and Wing 2018).

Reliance on memory or recollection to reconstruct events and occurrences that happened in the past is problematic and difficult as minute details and contextual nitty-gritties of past experiences tend to disappear or unremembered due to the passage of time and the flood of informational data which crowd out the mind and its cognitive functions (Du et al. 2015; Ross and Wing 2018). Even though I attempted to recall the contextual and conversational details of my past experiences with racial classification and xenophobia, I found it difficult to piece together everyday detail of my past experiences thereof (Ross and Wing 2018).

Even though the main proponents of autoethnography approach (e.g., Elis et al. 2010; Méndez 2013; Wall 2008) assert that the methodological perspective is beneficial and significant in allowing researchers and authors to share and document their everyday lived experiences, I found autoethnographic reflection somewhat difficult to actualize as I had difficulty to fully remember, capture and document my past lived experiences with racial classification and xenophobia due to time lapse. I found autoethnographic methodological perspective very useful in allowing me to reflect on how my past experiences with racial classification and xenophobia made me feel, but at the same time, I found the approach challenging as it did not allow me to adequately reconstruct the full details, complexities and contextual basis and nuances of my past lived experiences (Lalande and Bonanno 2011).

Many migration scholars who employed autoethnographic approach have used recall or recollection to document their everyday lived experiences of racism, adaptation, acculturation, stigmatization, prejudice, and so on in their respective host societies (e.g., Alatrash 2018; Assil 2021; García-Iglesias 2020). However, their

recollections of such past experiences were incomplete and partial as they were not captured and documented in real time. As was also illustrated in my struggles to remember my past everyday lived experiences with racial classification and xenophobia, memorizing migration-related experiences through autoethnography was partial, incomplete and somehow generalist.

Towards 'real-time autoethnography' in migration research

My contribution to qualitative approaches through proposing a conceptual tool which I named 'real-time autoethnography' might benefit individual migrant and migration researchers engaged in documenting and reporting their own lived experiences. In capturing past lived experiences, relying on 'remembered moments' (Ellis et al. 2010: par. 6), 'headnotes' (Wall 2008) or 'recalling' one's experience' (Méndez 2013) might miss nuanced details and complexities of a lived experience. This paper suggests that in order to fill this methodological gap in autoethnographic research and address the problematic of 'memory' and 'head notes', lived experiences and their accompanying emotions and feelings need to be recorded as they unfold or moments after their occurrence. This way of recording or documenting various facets of the lived experiences of migrant authors or researchers enables them to capture the nuances and details of their experiences that could only be partially remembered and documented if they relied on hindsight or headnotes which modes are prone to forgetting or partial reconstruction.

'Real time autoethnography', as a complementary methodological framework to standard autoethnography, in which authors document a particular past experience as it unfolds or moments after the experience occurred, is useful in order to compensate for the loss or distortion of past experiential data. Migrant researchers who plan to document their own experiential data may need to capture their experiences as they unfold and in real-time by providing, in more detail, their feelings, emotions, thoughts and bodily sensations while they are experiencing a topic of interest at hand. I argue that autoethnography's problematic reliance on memory or hindsight appears to leave out some rich and nuanced details of past experiential data. Indeed, it would require the auto-ethnographer to write down the various details and contextual complexities of past lived experience as they occur so that the problematic of missing rich experiential data is minimized.

Employing real-time autoethnography, therefore, can be used by migration researchers as an extension to standard autoethnography by recording the

complexities and nuances of lived experiences as they occur rather than relying on memory, thereby minimizing the risk of missing important details of past experience.

To reiterate, for migration researchers or authors to record own experiences as they occur, it is important for them to keep a pen and a notepad or an electronic device so that they can be able to instantly document any relevant experience. By keeping writing devises at all times, migration writers can be able to recognize and capture relevant experiential data (how they are feeling, thinking and their bodily sensations) and contextual factors that created those experiences. As migration authors document the details of relevant experiences as they occur, readers can be able to understand the nuances and contextual dimensions of experiences.

Real time autoethnography is particularly useful if an experience occurs regularly for the migrant author or a researcher. This is because as the regularities of the migrant researcher's experiences become more predictable and frequent, they can readily transform those lived experiences into a written form in real time. I believe the approach of real-time autoethnography strengthens the standard autoethnographic approach by replacing memory-based account of an experience with documenting an experience as it unfolds or moments after its occurrence.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide a methodological tool for migration researchers or authors to document their own past lived experiences in real time as opposed to relying on their memory or mental notes. Migration or migrant authors can, therefore, use real-time autoethnography to capture the nuances and details of their own past lived experiences as they unfold in real time. I employed 'memory bias' theory as an enabling theoretical perspective to highlight the limitations of autoethnographic methodological approach due to its predominant reliance on hindsight memory and proposed an alternative approach to minimize loss of nuanced experiential data. Even though many migration and migrant scholars have used autoethnography to capture and document their lived experiences, such an approach might not have adequate and thorough enough mode of capturing past experiences due to autoethnography's reliance on hindsight memory. Documenting own past experiences in real time can help authors capture rich, detailed, thorough and nuanced experiential data and reduce the probability and tendency to remember past experiences long after they have occurred. Future migration or

migrant researchers can apply real-time autoethnography in documenting and reporting their everyday lived experiences in their host societies.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no potential conflict of interest.

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