

The autoethnography masturbation outcry strikes a chord in music

The wider issues raised by the scandal can be particularly acute in the work of academic practitioners in cultural fields, says Ian Pace

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In disciplinary areas that deal with culture, ethnography and autoethnography are now widespread. However, engagement with more difficult methodological and ethical questions is rare. Critics have claimed that such laxness is what permitted the publication of the now-infamous article by PhD student Karl Andersson about masturbating to paedophilic material as a form of autoethnography. Whilst no case in music studies is this serious, some of the wider concerns are mirrored here..

The “postmodern turn” in ethnography followed critiques in the early 1980s of “ethnographic realism”, which involved a limited presence for the ethnographer and a focus on extrapolation of data and everyday experience. A range of writers – especially [James Clifford](#) – argued instead for a diversity of idioms and long quotations from informants, as well as more experimental approaches to ethnographic writing.

Others soon began to sound a more sceptical note. [Martyn Hammersley](#) detected a tendency to elide the distinctions between perception and reality, fetishization of novelty of subject or presentation, overt political advocacy, selective descriptions to bolster existing theories, and withdrawal of ethnographers from wider public scholarly dialogue. And in 1990 [Harry F. Wolcott](#) coined the term “haphazard descriptiveness” to describe ethnography’s increasing habit of simple listing of pieces of information without further interpretation.

Many ethnographers evoke Clifford Geertz’s concept of “[thick description](#)”, but Geertz’s concept certainly encompassed interpretation and theoretical ideas. Other critics emphasised idealisation of fieldwork, eschewal of fact-checking and contextual knowledge, or the use of unreliable witnesses.

And so we come to Andersson. In an important article published last week on Times Higher Education’s website, (“[Masturbation paper exposes deep problems in research](#)”), William Matthews asks whether his project (which has a [non-paedophilic precedent](#)) is the inevitable outcome of a scholarly approach that has abandoned the idea of objective knowledge, rarely allows for replication of studies or other forms of scrutiny, and is focused on the subjectivity of the author.

In music, ethnography is especially associated with *ethnomusicology*, which focuses on the role of music within a culture or society. Traditionally, ethnomusicologists

studied folk, vernacular and non-Western musical practices, but in recent decades it has also examined Western art music.

There is undoubtedly important work in this domain and value in the employment of new sources of data. But it is a deeply ideological and territorial field, often characterised by studious ignoring of relevant data and scholarship generated by other means, which sometimes leads to repetition of long-established findings. Work can be agenda-driven, making selective use of fieldwork data, and in some cases lacking the wider contextual knowledge that might enable proper interpretation of statements from sources.

Ethnomusicologists engaging with the developing world were sometimes reluctant to challenge their subjects, aware that the unequal dynamic could be associated with colonialism. But when applied to Western contexts, such an approach can result in hagiography, as in some studies of composers packed with laudatory testimonies. Elsewhere, “haphazard descriptiveness” aptly describes writings padded with quotations in place of wider analysis.

Two influential studies of conservatoires, by [Henry Kingsbury](#) and [Bruno Nettl](#), resemble scandal-ridden journalistic accounts of such places, albeit in less racy language. A broader and much-used survey of many of the world’s musics, Kay Kaufman Shelemay’s [Soundscapes](#), is not easy to distinguish from a *Rough Guide* of the same. Not all musical ethnographies take these approaches, but the prominence of those that do raises questions about what differentiates scholarly writing from other types.

The problem is even more pronounced in cultural autoethnography, fuelled by the growth of *practice-research* that is now a primary qualification for practitioners seeking academic research positions. At best, autoethnography employed in such a context involves clear critical questioning and contextualisation of one’s own practices and assumptions, leading to the generation of new knowledge with wider application. However, in music, it often amounts to productions of long and unremarkable “practice diaries” or extended accounts of “collaborative processes”, replete with impressionistic material about train journeys undertaken and coffee drunk and invariably showing that the collaborators disagreed on some things but arrived at compromises. Simple descriptions of elaborate compositional processes are made “research-like” by the liberal interjection of concepts from philosophy and science, sometimes only vaguely understood.

Having listened to many presentations of this type, including at more broadly focused conferences, I discern some fundamental differences in sensibility between these types of practitioners and other scholars. The former frequently operate in economies external to academia, in which the priority is to win support for their work. Correspondingly, their autoethnographic presentations can have a promotional quality that contrasts sharply with critical scholarship.

This sensibility is also problematic when applied to wider research and teaching. A view of some artistic history that places the work of a practitioner and their circle centre-stage, or even as the *telos* of such a history, is at odds with many concerns of experienced historians.

I do not wish to dismiss cultural ethnography, autoethnography or practice-research. But the standards to which these are held need wider scrutiny, with input from a broader range of scholars. Only this will ensure such work can claim parity with other scholarly approaches.

Without such a reckoning, these fields might descend further into shallow reportage, promotional writing and the kind of narcissistic, hyper-subjective approaches of which Andersson's paper is a particularly egregious example.

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