Making Sense of My Creativity: Reflecting On Digital Autoethnography

Abstract

By examining specific data-sets used in my research into my own career as a musician, this paper presents an argument for the use of digital data-trails in the construction of creative career-based autoethnographies. The paper is driven by a desire to assist researchers, notably students but practitioner academics too, interested in using their own creative lives as an object of research by reflecting on my own experiences of conducting a four-year research project which traced my artistic career from unknown rapper to a songwriter signed to Sony/EMI/ATV. It doing so, I hope to offer educators working in the creative arts a helping starting point for our research students. It is suggested that key to the autoethnographic approach is the *generation of data*, and that for contemporary musicians – and others in creative fields – the way our careers are digitally self-documented online presents interesting possibilities for reconsidering data sources. This paper critically considers the practice of autoethnography, contributing towards literature which both evaluates this methodology and seeks to offer a perspective which might help other researchers interested in the suitability and applicability of autoethnography to investigate their own creative careers and experiences.

Keywords: autoethnography, music, creativity, research methods, qualitative

1. Introduction

The use of ones own personal experiences as the basis for academic research in the study of music and the creative arts more broadly, notably the use of the autoethnographic method, is a burgeoning methodological approach. Much of the autoethnographic literature which has focused on musicians to date has looked at the practice of music making (Bartleet and Ellis, 2009), or of musical performance (Davidson and Correia, 2001; Dogantan-Dack, 2012). This paper however is interested more in the use of autoethnography to document creative *careers* - as per other notable works in this area (Cottrell, 2004; Williams, 2005; Smith, 2013) - and in particular, how often inadvertent practices of digital self documentation present opportunities as data sources for academics who are also practicioners – what some have called pracademics (Posner, 2009) – or students seeking to conduct research projects based on their own creative practice.

Anecdotally, I am struck each academic year at the number of students in both my undergraduate cohort studying Arts Management, as well as my postgraduate Music Business Management students, who wish to use the experiences of their own creative lives in informing the direction of their thesis'. In response to these demands, as well as given the aforementioned relative lack of autoethnographic literature on creative *careers* as opposed to creative *practice*, this paper seeks to act as a starting point for students and others thinking about using their own experiences in research projects. It is also a personal reflection of the relative strengths and weaknesses of my own autoethnographic research conducted between 2010 and 2014, which sought to explore the behavioural and psychological implications of competitiveness by drawing my own creative career, releasing six songs over the period, as a rapper in the United Kingdom. I began the research project as a relatively unknown musician, and concluded the project by signing with the biggest music publisher in the world – Sony/ATV/EMI – and achieving national support for my music. This paper will consider how my research experiences might help other practitioner researchers.

By re-examining the autoethnographic methods employed in my own research, notably processes of self-documentation, I will seek to present an argument for the use of digital data-trails in the construction of creative career-based autoethnographies. By exploring self-generated digital data-sets – a process recently explored by Akemu and Abdelnour (2018) as 'digital as archive' – I will also seek to reconceptualise how one might conduct the classic ethnographic staples of 'observations' and 'interviews/field notes' using one's own musical career-based experiences. In doing so, I will evaluate their potential usefulness and applicability to other research projects in similar areas, and thus hope to both expand the methodological possibilities within the autoethnographic tradition and offer some ideas to other scholars thinking of using the approach.

This paper is, then, a reflection on the process of autoethnography and in particular of a specific kind of digital, data-led autoethnography. It will be suggested that as the lives of musicians and other creative artists are led online, often (although not always) in very public facing ways, this presents exciting new opportunities to consider how the digitalisation of creative careers impacts on autoethnographic methods of data generation. In this sense, a form of reflective, digital autoethnography can allow creative researchers to examine their own practice in novel ways, and to generate new

forms of data for analysis. I argue that this process can not only be intellectually rewarding in the act of undertaking research, but also creatively illuminating too, allowing creatives to obtain a new perspective on their own work. Ultimately, the ensuing research process can act as an additional form of creative expression too.

Robert Murphy's (1987) wonderful autoethnographic work 'The Body Silent' was: "conceived in the realisation that my long illness with a disease of the spinal cord has been *a kind of extended anthropological field trip*, for through it I have sojourned in a social world no less strange to me at first than those of the Amazon forests" (Murphy 1987, xi, emphasis added). This quote wonderfully encapsulates the benefits of these kind of 'insider' insights which an autoethnographer conducting anthropology 'at home' (Messerschmidt, 1981) might yield. In much the same way, my years spent as an unsigned urban music artist in the UK were akin to 'a kind of extended anthropological field trip', and indeed my career continues to be so. It allows me to have an insight into the operation of a sometimes strange, and to many, wholly impenetrable world. The questions for career-based autoethnographers are; how can we demonstrate this knowledge, evidence this knowledge, and communicate this knowledge?

2. Autoethnographic 'Data': Digital Autoethnography

The ethnographic method, in seeking to understand and represent experience (O'Reilly, 2012:3), is of course a multifaceted methodology encompassing, typically, participant observation of cultural practices, note-taking, and participant interviews, triangulated with an analysis of both primary and secondary sources and texts, all undertaken within the context of the daily lives of those under inquiry (see Cohen, 1993). The challenge for *auto*ethnographers is how to perform these methodological techniques on oneself – to observe oneself, to interview oneself, to take notes about ones own experiences, to analyse ones own cultural productions. It is proposed herein that how we understand these classic 'staples' of ethnographic fieldwork – observations, interviews, making sense of what the culture under enquiry produces – can, in a digital context, be reconceptualised.

Central to the autoethnographic method outlined in this paper is the generation of data. It is important when employing this method that sources of ones own experience are just that; *sources*. Autoethnography is not simply the declaration of comment, the passing of judgement, or the offering of thoughts. Evidential source material of practice is required. I, as many artists living their creative lives within a digital environment, have been involved in a relentless and inadvertent process of self-documentation throughout my creative career. Every time I emailed an agent or a DJ, every time my song was played on the radio or blogged, every time I vented my frustrations on Twitter, every time I wrote a new song lyric in my phone, every time I was interviewed by a website or newspaper; these are all digital footprints of my experience of being an artist. In this sense, a crucial methodological technique for conducting an autoethnography of a creative career, is to live it – what Thompson (2010) calls 'cultural absorption'. That is to say, by *being an artist* in the digital age – and enjoying 'complete member status' (Anderson, 2006) – by, in my case at least, writing songs, releasing them, and living a creative existence as naturally as I understand it, which crucially entails endless and thorough self-documentation, one of

the main forms of research and quantitative and qualitative data-generation for my research was being inadvertently conducted (Okely, 1992:3).

The argument I will advance below is that the relentless self-documentation I undertook as an artist, and which other artists similarly undertake, represent detailed, longitudinal observations, interviews and fieldwork notes. Furthermore, in producing these sources, I produced secondary sources of data in the form of song lyrics and press interviews as these songs gained acclaim. Anthropologists in the field will, as researchers, keep journals or logs of observations, notes, feelings, thoughts, experiences, etc. However, I was recording every detail of my creative life, unconsciously, for several years. It is this data which I will now explore and evaluate. The data sources I used in my research were: (1) observable public releases, (2) email mining, (3) secondary sources such as financial information as well as press interviews, (4) social media usage, and finally, (5) lyrics. These sources will now be examined in two sections each reconsidering forms of ethnographic research; the first reconsidering observation, and the second reconsidering interviews and field notes.

2.1. Reconsidering 'Observation' for Digital Autoethnography

Given the extent to which artists' lives occur online, we might reconceptualise notions of localised, in-person observation such as those conducted in the classical musical ethnographic work of Cohen (1991) and Finnegan (1989), which were largely reflective and indicative of the epoch during which they were conducted; that is to say, historically necessitated. Instead, today, artists are engaged in a number of self-documenting processes allowing for their behaviour to largely be observed online, thus reconstituting observation methods and allowing researchers to reconsider the necessity for observations to take place physically. In this sense, there are a number of observable public displays of artistry which can be drawn upon to assist in answering certain research questions – when songs are released, which songs are released, what content is shared online, how that content is shared, who engages with that content, and so on. This was my starting point when seeking to make sense of the cultural landscape within which I was operating. This might involve which songs were uploaded to YouTube and when, streaming data to see which songs performed well on Spotify or other services, methods of promotion, content being shared on websites etc. Over the time period of my research, I released six songs, and therefore explored how these were released as a basic starting point.

When analysing my own creative practice, a principal method of analysis was that of email-mining. This was able to generate incredibly rich data demonstrating the nature of my engagement with cultural intermediaries within the musical sector during the release of these six songs. This was a method by which I was largely able to 'self-observe'. For every song released between 2010 and 2014, I would load up two windows on my computer during my data analysis period, one showing my inbox and one showing my outbox, and worked historically backwards seeking to inductively uncover patterns of engagement with intermediaries, expressions of emotion, and constructing a diary of my creative career; who had I contacted, when, what did I tell them, why, how did I feel, and what was the outcome? This was inspired by literature from the field of organisational ethnography which employs the use of email mining as a form of participant observation (Akemu and Abdelnour, 2018); the difference was simply I did this for my own emails. This was able to generate an account of how

I had been securing press support for my music via a kind of feedback loop of, in Bourdieusian terms, compounding cultural capital acquisition via the exploitation of social capital reserves, which I had been doing unconsciously for a number of years, and highlighted the role that intermediaries can play in the lives of artists in a hypercompetitive environment (see Musgrave (2017 [hidden for peer review] for how the autoethnographic method outlined herein produced qualitative data to demonstrate this phenomenon). Focussing analysis on archived, personal written electronic communication was particularly apt given that this was in many respects my sole method of interaction with many of the key players in the UK music industry; I rarely met any of them in person given my geographical distance living as I did several hundred miles away from London where many of them were based.

Alongside this, it may be possible for artists to yield interesting insights, depending on the nature of ones research question, relating to economic expenditure for the releases in question, producing quantitative metrics alongside the more qualitative data outlined above. Again, for the same six songs over the research period, all expenditure could be tracked largely via internet banking but also from receipts which were all digital. I made simple balance sheets for each project over the period, as well as creating balance sheets for my live performances over this period too. This quantitative economic data would allow me to comment on the role of economic capital in contemporary creative practice as per my research question. The financial costs of each project (recording, mastering, video production, etc.) were compared to the profits from each project, with data primarily taken from PRS (Performing Right Society) Royalty Statements, all of which were available digitally. I also undertook this same quantitative analysis to illustrate the economic sustainability of my creative practice with reference to each of my live performances over this research period, which included large festivals such as Reading, Leeds and Wireless Festival, as well as smaller gigs. My specific research interest was on Bourdieu-defined (1986) forms of capital in the competitive experience, and so, where the artist-intermediary relationship uncovered via email mining and public observation highlighted the relationship between social and cultural capital, so this numerical data explored the processes of transubstantiation vis-à-vis economic capital.

Finally, for the same six songs, I was able to obtain secondary data sources in the form of press interviews I had conducted with various media outlets over this period. In my role as a musician, I was frequently interviewed by media outlets – beginning with smaller blogs at the beginning of the project and building up to MTV or other national media outlets. Certainly this may not be possible for all creative artists, particularly those who may be less interested in securing press exposure for their work, or those at very early stages of their careers. However, whether it is a gallery review for a painter or a critic writing about a dancer's performance, in the course of living their creative lives artists are written and spoken about by others. In the case of my press interviews, this presented interview data in which I shared my emotions and feelings in an environment free from the influence of any research questions, which meant I could then empirically point to a particular feeling at a particular point in time and present this as data.

For just six songs then released over a four year period, a great deal of data was generated simply by me releasing them; public observations, emails, financial records

and press interviews. All of these acted as digital observations i.e. data-sets which could then be analysed to inform my autoethnographic practice.

2.2. Reconsidering 'Interviews' and 'Field Notes' for Digital Autoethnography

We might also reconsider the methodological potential for conducting participant 'interviews' given the use of social networking websites by artists, in particular Twitter (see the work of Murthy, 2013; Zimmer and Proferes, 2014; Cheretien et.al, 2015 for more on the use of this social network as a research tool). Twitter can be especially important when seeking to analyse ones own personal emotional responses, and in this sense is important for what it can reveal for autoethnographers. That is to say, researchers can interview participants and ask them directly about how specific instances have made them feel; autoethnographers cannot, of course, interview themselves. However, Twitter constitutes broadcasting to a public domain and is thus typified by a degree of self-surveillance over what is shared (Marwick, 2012:379). This does not necessarily compromise the validity of enquiry into emotional responses to competitiveness however, as for artists they will not seek to conceal sentiment in the same way as an individual hiding information from a 'boss' for example. For artists, they might distinguish between sharing their 'real/home' life, and their 'artistic' life. For instance, I very rarely, if ever, tweeted about my academic work throughout the entire research project. Additionally, both of these forms of textual analysis allow a researcher to map changes over time. Therefore, for questions relating to long-term emotional responses (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011), or the changing nature of particular phenomena, exploring the evolution of responses and behaviours over time can prove most insightful. They furthermore allow the researcher to situate responses within a wider contextual dimension (Henwood and Lang, 2003:49), a particularly important criterion when investigating a social world in a state of flux such as the music industry. Longitudinal data-sources address concerns relating to the potential temporality of a behaviour/emotion. If something is seen to continually occur, then it is a pattern of behaviour, as opposed to an isolated incident. Crucially, Twitter facilitates the exploration of 'self-generated data'; that is, I, as the subject, could complete my 'research diary' in my own time, and address concerns which were important to me at the time of completion.

Certainly, the majority of interactions on Twitter consist of 'daily chatter'; people sharing the everyday details of their lives and what they are currently doing. In this sense, tweets represent individuals conveying their daily experiences and sharing their perceptions of those experiences, providing a rich qualitative data source. For my research project, I downloaded my entire Twitter history and sought to uncover any instances where I shared sentiments expressing how I was emotionally experiencing my career (as opposed to, say, telling everyone what I was having for lunch that day!). Truthfully, the idea for employing the use of tweets occurred to me towards the end of the research project meaning that tweets were wholly naturalistic; that is, they were not guided by my research interests. However, the data generated from tweets was wholly unstructured, meaning that information which could not have been conceived of at the time of the study being undertaken could be observed, and indeed, as an ethnographer, it is crucial to embrace this 'openness' to information generation (Baszanger and Dodier, 1997:9). Thus, tweets represented a publically observable (mitigating ethical concerns) diary-like documentation of daily experiences, representing, it might be argued, something similar to what anthropologists might call

a ‘research log’ or fieldnotes. Twitter essentially constitutes research participants engaging in a longitudinal, qualitative documentation of experience, devoid of any concerns for ensuring their continued motivation which might mar alternative longitudinal qualitative methodologies. Furthermore, this data-set is updated entirely at ones own discretion, which, given the discussed nature of the website, is often with incredible regularity – although this is entirely subject specific. Between signing up for Twitter in February 2009 and signing to EMI in June 2013, for example, I tweeted on average 460 times a month for 4 years (24,397 in total).

The final piece of self-generated data generated over the course of releasing these six songs over the four years were, of course, the songs themselves, and the lyrics within them. Lyrical analysis in music studies/cultural sociological enquiry has been employed as a methodological tool to examine concepts such as diversity (Frith, 1987), and/or suggesting diversity to be representative of an arbitrary conception such as ‘quality’ or ‘innovativeness’ (Peterson and Berger, 1975). Given that my research sought to answer questions relating to how that competition is experienced, my lyrics, as textual forms, represented a form of *primary data*, similar to the answers provided in interviews. Within UK urban music in particular, lyrical texts can act as a window into the artists’ understandings of, and experiences of, the creative marketplace. This is in many respects a highly genre specific argument. I do not necessarily propose that lyrics per se can achieve this insight into environments, but that UK urban music lyrics can given that they are ethnographic in nature, acting as cultural texts communicate the ‘ethnographic imagination’ (Willis, 2000: 6) which can specifically be utilised as primary sources (Barron, 2013:532). Ethnography after all seeks to provide a window into the world of the everyday (Fetterman, 1989:27), something which rap or grime lyrics epitomise. In accordance with Stokes (1997), these lyrics might then be viewed as a ‘dataset’.

A key critique of lyrics is that they are illustrative as opposed to evidential; a device to create a feeling as opposed to articulating an experience. Artists then are said to be portraying a character, and the validity of their voice is questioned. However, my argument relating to the usefulness of lyrics is, as suggested, highly genre specific. I suggest that the work of UK urban music is very much concerned with articulating an experience (Barron, 2013); it is in many respects its central premise as a “written representation of culture” (Van Maanen, 1988:1). In this sense, the genre is epitomised by authentic, or ‘real’, depictions of an artists’ lived reality, spoken in their true voice (Zuberi, 2013)

Key when analysing the data from lyrics was thematic analysis. Lyrics were coded according to specific themes, allowing me to focus on passages which specifically related to my research interests, in the same way that I did with my Tweets. In urban music, themes or topics are frequently addressed in bars; chunks of rhyming rhythmical prose. The standard structure of a hip-hop song is three verses of sixteen bars each, with eight bar hooks or choruses in the middle. Within these typical forty-eight bars, a wide range of themes might be addressed ranging from one overarching topic which guides the track, to multiple themes addressed in chunks of two, four, eight or sixteen bars. Data analysis commenced via open coding; grouping the ‘bars’ from each songs into a thematic code (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:62). These themes emerged from the data, and included: braggadocio, family life, music industry, love, politics, money, and upbringing. Selective coding then allowed me to separate key

passages from my discography relating to how I was experiencing my musical career and how I felt about it. Certainly, many songs made no reference to this whatsoever, with some being about love, loss, or many other themes. However, I uncovered many passages within the analysed lyrics, both of the songs I released and those I didn't (I had hundreds of saved 'Notes' in my phone when I had jotted down lyric ideas over the years) which communicated the reality of my life in much the same way that interview data with other musicians may have done.

By both listening to and transcribing all the lyrics written over the research period, and thematically coding them, supplemented by analysis of my social networking history achieved by employing the analysis of tweets described earlier, I produced a rich, qualitative data source which communicated the experiences of being an artist, and acted as an autoethnographic data-set which reconsidered how practitioner researchers might conduct both 'interviews' and 'field notes' using only ones own experiences.

3. Discussion

Autoethnography is commonly understood as narrating ones own life, and is thus akin to a philosophy which privileges the construction of a narrative around ones own life. The method is, therefore, as much a process of self-actualisation as it is a qualitative research methodology. Personally speaking, whilst I found the research to provide intellectually engaging research material which was subsequently published (M Musgrave, 2017- hidden for peer review), and ultimately has informed much of my current and historical research, it was, in addition, hugely artistically and personally therapeutic as well as insightful. In undertaking this research project, I was involved in a wonderful academic journey of course, learning about a subject area in such depth and refining my research craft vis-à-vis synthesising and presenting information. However, I evolved professionally too. That is, I began my research in 2010 as an unsigned, relatively unknown artist, and by the end of the research in 2013, I was signed to the biggest global publisher in the world for a sum of money which many would consider astronomical. Reflexively, autoethnographically evaluating my own creative practices and lived experiences allowed me not only to experience my artistic career in a unique and wholly fascinating way but also allowed my research to continuously evolve. My data relentlessly challenged my assumptions about the nature of creative practice and creative careers and led me to reconsider not only how competitiveness is experienced, but also, *what it means to be an artist today*.

In hindsight, when I began thinking about my research project I was seeking to make sense of my creative career as well as looking to find a way of expressing my artistic reality outside of the sphere of music itself. I wanted to try and untangle the messy lived experience which being an artist is, to make sense of how I had been living my life as a rapper, and to communicate this experience. At the beginning I didn't know what I wanted to say, or how I wanted to say it. I just knew that I, and other artists within my genre, had a story to tell and music alone was an insufficient medium to convey the entirety of that experience. In many respects the autoethnographic method may been insufficient for this task too. How could fully I convey the utter anguish of spending years trying to contact a small number of radio DJs, the pain of driving for 13 hours to a gig to perform for no money only to arrive and find no one had turned

up, or the joy you feel when you see an edit of a music video for the first time? Or the elation of driving home one day and having my oldest friend call me screaming to put BBC Radio 1 on because my music was being played for the first time? Or taking up drinking during the day as battles between my lawyer and Sony/EMI took months and depression stopped me from leaving my bed? To then spending thousands of pounds taking my long-suffering partner to Paris and eating in Michelin starred restaurants after signing my publishing deal? These were facets of *my* experience of competition, and whilst I, via the autoethnographic method, peppered my research project with evocative autobiographical stories of my artistic life (Hesse-Biber and Leavey, 2013:285), perhaps it is an inevitability that any study on creative careers can never fully convey these experiences in their entirety, or in the way that the artist-as-researcher hoped or intended. However, as a researcher, discovering autoethnography and the suitability of it as a methodology, was liberating given the way it was able to synthesis the scientific presentation of sociological processes alongside the expressive, almost literary, presentation of lived experience.

Looking back, I suspect that Tweets were a slightly less rich and detailed source of qualitative data than I had anticipated at the outset. The Tweets themselves were crucial as a form of self-generated data, and certainly yielded fascinating insights, most notably in times of high passion/anger/frustration, when the device appeared to be being used as a 'venting mechanism'. However, when analysing the tweets and coding them thematically, a huge number were simply 'chatter', relating to TV shows such as the Eastenders or were political rants. Indeed, I wondered to what extent did my silence on particular matters methodologically speak to their apparent salience or lack thereof in my life at the time. Indeed, this is often the key to providing rigor to the autoethnographic approach as with any other methodology – reflexivity.

4. Conclusion

This paper has reflected on how I, over the course of four years and the release of six songs, generated qualitative and quantitative data in the form of observable public releases, email mining, secondary sources such as financial information as well as press interviews, social media usage, and lyrics. Some of these were specific to myself e.g. I was a regular user of Twitter and being interviewed by mainstream press outlets whilst some might not be, and indeed some of these were specific to urban music, notably the use of lyrical analysis. Key for anyone working in creative fields – artists or otherwise – thinking about how to conduct autoethnographic fieldwork is to consider; what type of data have *I produced*, or am I producing, in *my* creative career? That is, in living my life as naturally as I understand it, what longitudinal, qualitative and quantitative digital data sources will I have generated which might yield the richest insight and 'thickness' (Geertz, 1973)? Crucial is ones ability, as an ethnographer, to *communicate* that data. Certainly, this process is relatively complex vis-à-vis the demarcation of time, requiring the exercising of a degree of analytical reflexivity, and an acknowledgement of ones role within the social world under study, in asking oneself when one is being a researcher, and when one is being an artist (Anderson, 2006:389). Truthfully, the two overlap throughout the research processes to a large degree. In this sense, I suggest that this process is most meaningfully achieved when it is done reflectively i.e. by analysing the data which one has, in ones creative career, generated without a research question in mind necessarily.

The notion that the music that I and my genre-specific contemporaries create is *itself* an anthropological project, representative of an interpretation of experience, presents interesting philosophical questions concerning the research design proposed herein. My own research design was an experiential, 'native', digital (auto)ethnography *of* ethnographic self-representation; a concept analytically grappled with under the definitional guise of transidioethnography (Desai, 2002). Here, as Foster (1999) suggests, we see the artist as ethnographer, and vice versa. Innovatively, within the ethnographic research design, the subjects, the Malinowskian (1922) 'other' – in this case my musical career– constructs their own ethnographic discourse via both the lyrics written and via analysable online self-documentation (Rudolf, 1997), and I then, as a researcher, ethnographically interpret this in a kind of scholastic Escherian Penrose Stairs.

As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:121) suggested more than a decade ago, the social worlds studied by ethnographers have "been largely devoid of written documents other than those produced by the fieldworkers themselves". That is, the ethnographers' voice is privileged over that of, for lack of a better word, participants. However, both the lyrics and the tweets of artists represent documents produced by 'participants' - indeed, as does any piece original research produced using the methods outlined in this paper. Furthermore, this internally, native-produced ethnographic work avoids Foster's (1999) criticism of artists producing ethnographies as 'pseudo-ethnography' as the integration within the culture in question is not an external imposition for the purposes of, say, academic research as per Bennett (1980). Instead it is an organic internal derivation; a naturalistic collaboration. Indeed, perhaps one of the final considerations to raise relates to that of how much of this internal, unique and often highly personal insight personal insight you, as a researcher, want your readership to see. The issue is of boldness of disclosure – how much do you want to share (Behar, 1997)? Autoethnography of this kind invites the researcher to bare all, and the most poignant insights I would argue are achieved only when we are most willing to show that which we so often keep hidden.

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