Autoethnographic Disability-Related Research in Hospitality and Tourism Journals: Empowering Marginalized Identity Scholars’ Voices

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Abstract
Autoethnography, an essential research approach, interweaves personal experiences with introspective insights from distinct communities. Despite its methodological significance, autoethnography remains inadequately represented in hospitality and tourism research discourse. This paper seeks to challenge this status quo by advocating for social model strength-based paradigms in understanding disability and by addressing the structural and attitudinal obstacles that hinder the acceptance of autoethnographic research in high-ranking journals within hospitality and tourism. This conceptual note emphasizes the empowerment of marginalized voices, including those with disabilities, and their intersecting identities. It also highlights the hurdles faced by autoethnographers when submitting their work to prestigious journals and provides recommendations for fostering the recognition and inclusion of autoethnography within the field.

Keywords
disability, autoethnography, hospitality, tourism, inclusivity

Introduction
Autoethnography is an essential qualitative research method that combines personal lived experiences and self-reflection to explore cultural, social, and psychological aspects of a specific group or community (Ellis et al., 2011; Kasnitz, 2020). In recent years, autoethnography has gained recognition as a valuable method for researchers in various fields, including hospitality and tourism. However, the results of reviewing papers (Doan et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2023; Qiao et al., 2022; Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021; Shelton & Tucker, 2005; Singh et al., 2023) show that the number of autoethnographic disability-related papers published in top hospitality and tourism journals is extremely rare even though the evidence suggests that these published studies provided significant insights into the phenomena being studied contextually, theoretically, methodologically, ontologically, and epistemologically. To reconfirm these results, we conducted a scoping review search (key words: disability, disabled, autoethnography), where there was only one methodological paper using autoethnographic research regarding authors’ experience in doing research with participants with disability. In this paper, we, two scholars with disability aim to challenge the current situation to discuss social model strength-based approaches to conceptualize disability, structural and attitudinal constraints, and barriers, and provide suggestions to journal editors in the hospitality and tourism sectors for creating a more inclusive scholarly environment with those with lived experience of disability in the Academy. Firstly, this conceptual note aims to re-signify the strengths of autoethnography in empowering the voices of researchers with disability (Schweinsberg & Darcy, 2022; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Secondly, it discusses the structural and attitudinal barriers faced by autoethnographic researchers when submitting their disability-related work to high-ranking journals. Finally, suggestions are provided to encourage the inclusion and recognition of autoethnographic disability-related research in the field.

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**Strengths of Autoethnography in Empowering Voices of People With Disabilities**

**Amplifying Marginalized Perspectives**

Autoethnography provides a platform for researchers from marginalized groups, including people with disability, to share their perspectives, challenges, and triumphs through their lived experiences. Championed through 1980s postmodernism, the “crisis of confidence” in social science research methods, autoethnographic approaches offered a way to provide new approaches to reframe the voice of individuals across research design in the social sciences (Forber-Pratt, 2015). As Ellis et al. (2011, p. 273) suggest “Scholars became increasingly troubled by social science’s ontological, epistemological, and axiological limitations.” By centering their voices, autoethnography helps challenge dominant narratives and offers alternative perspectives in hospitality and tourism research. This is particularly important for groups such as people with disability, First Nation’s peoples, LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities, those from non-English speaking countries, and the intersectionality of those identities (Benjamin & Laughter, 2022; Darcy et al., 2022; Schweinsberg & Darcy, 2022; Smith & Sparkes, 2008) who often face limited representation in scholarly discussions.

Autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist. (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274)

Autoethnography emerges as a sophisticated qualitative methodology, distinct from its precursor, traditional ethnography, commonly utilized by anthropologists and sociologists in social research. Unlike the conventional ethnographic approach, which revolves around fieldwork to investigate human social phenomena, autoethnography uniquely incorporates personal reflections, emotions, narratives, and observations into the knowledge construction process (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Ellis & Adams, 2014). This departure from the traditional binary epistemology, where the primary interaction is confined to the researcher and the researched, marks a pivotal shift in research methodology (Chang, 2016). Autoethnographers, by intertwining their reflective accounts with research, offer a nuanced resolution to the challenges inherent in the binary approach. This methodology becomes particularly potent in mitigating discrepancies between researchers and research participants when interpreting complex phenomena (Ellis & Adams, 2014). In the realm of disability-related studies, where the intricacies of the concept of disability and associated social issues demand a multifaceted exploration, autoethnography emerges as a powerful tool for researchers with an insider’s perspective (Polezyk, 2012). Researchers with disabilities, employing autoethnography, can adeptly navigate the complexities and dynamics of this population through their lived experience and immersion in the complexity of the social ecological context (Darcy et al., 2023; Doan et al., 2021). By leveraging their own lived experiences, autoethnographers bring a unique and insightful perspective to disability-related research, thereby offering a more authentic and comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Through the lens of autoethnography, the researcher becomes an active participant, contributing to a richer and more inclusive dialog that extends beyond the confines of traditional research paradigms. In essence, autoethnography legitimizes itself as a methodological powerhouse in tourism and hospitality research, transcending the limitations of traditional approaches of the researcher as an objective observer of the phenomena and providing a pathway to a deeper, more authentic exploration of complex social phenomena.

**Bridging Cross-Cultural and Cross-Sectional Perspectives**

Autoethnographic research allows researchers to explore the cultural nuances and differences that shape hospitality and tourism experiences across diverse contexts. It helps develop a deeper understanding of cultural practices, norms, and values, enhancing cross-cultural communication and fostering accessible and inclusive practices in the industry. Based on narrative data, autoethnography offers alternatives for researchers to suit their research aims, including analytical (Anderson, 2006) and evocative approach (Ellis & Adams, 2014). The analytical approach allows autoethnographers to be a part of research of communities, inform researcher’s self and use analytical reflexivity to contribute to theoretical propositions, while the evocative approach draws the line that distances autoethnographers from research settings and focus on storytelling in an in-depth and enriched description to deal with intrapersonally intimate, taboo, or sensitive subjects. For example, using an analytical approach to viewing the co-creation of well-being through a cultural interaction lens, Vesperstad (2022) provided enriched insights and suggestions of an untapped potential for babymoon tourism from her lifetime travel experience. In another study, Shepherd et al. (2020) used evocative collaborative autoethnography to contemplate the relational and personal differences of contested heritage space in the context of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Additionally, autoethnography enables researchers to explore various dimensions of identity as identified...
previously, and including race, gender, First Nations, ethnicity, social class, and socio-economic disadvantage that have been the focus of most tourism related research to date, offering insights into how these intersecting identities with disability shape individuals’ experiences in hospitality and tourism (Buzinde, 2020; Ruttenberg, 2023). Even though we have not found any study in the hospitality and tourism literature that a researcher with disability used autoethnography to explore the interplay between disability and other social-cultural perspectives, studies in other sectors prove the popularity, validity and appropriateness of this methodology in investigating complex and intersectional social issues (e.g., Hernández-Saca et al., 2018; Parks, 2021).

**Addressing Gaps in Knowledge**

Autoethnography is particularly valuable when researching disability-related phenomenon, as it reduces the challenges of accessing research participants from these groups (Dwertmann, 2016; Stack & McDonald, 2014). Traditional research methods often struggle to include marginalized populations (people with disabilities, First Nation peoples, LGBTQ+ , ethnic minorities, those from non-English speaking countries) due to various barriers, including ethical requirements, accessibility, language barriers, attitudes, stigmatization, and lack of trust (Darcy & Buhalas, 2011). An excellent study by Cai and McKenna (2023) used collaborative autoethnography in analyzing embodied self-transformation through the experience of digital free travel. Autoethnography enables researchers to capture first-hand experiences, providing valuable insights into the lives of individuals from these marginalized groups. Another example, an in-depth analysis of emotional labor and self-reflective employee well-being from the longitudinal autoethnographic of He and Hao (2022) as Walt Disney employees provided authentic implications to the literature. As a result, it helps fill gaps in knowledge and contributes to more comprehensive, accessible, and inclusive research in the field by utilizing the strength of autoethnographic methodology. The review studies by Doan et al. (2021); Liu et al. (2023); Qiao et al. (2022); Singh et al. (2023) concluded that many disability-related studies are from the perspectives of “outsiders” instead of the voices of the “insider” (people with disabilities). Even when participants with disabilities were included in fewer studies, there is a limitation of being a “research subject” which means their insights can be misunderstood, alienated, and modified radically (Kitchin, 2000). Therefore, the encouragement of employing autoethnography among researchers with disabilities can empower the direct engagement of self-research and balance to being researched.

**Weakness of Conducting Autoethnographic Study for Researchers With Disabilities**

Conducting an autoethnographic study presents unique challenges for researchers with disabilities, necessitating a heightened awareness of the complexities surrounding reflexivity. Reflexivity, the process of critically examining one’s own biases and assumptions, becomes particularly intricate when the researcher is navigating the intersectionality of their disability and the research context (Chang, 2016). Researchers must constantly grapple with the intricacies of how their lived experiences and perspectives, shaped by their disability, may influence the interpretation and analysis of data. A well-known autoethnographer with disability, Sheldon (2017, p. 988) claimed that “as a researcher, I must resist the temptation to merely think that because I identify as disabled, I therefore have some special insight into disability and therefore no longer need to deconstruct my own identity.” Disability is a multifaceted and complex concept that includes disability type or dimension of access (e.g., mobility, vision, hearing, cognitive, autism spectrum, mental health etc.) and the severity or level of support needs (independent, low, moderate, severe, and profound) that interact with the result of very different requirements for access and inclusion (Darcy & Buhalas, 2011; Darcy et al., 2022). Striking a balance between embracing subjectivity and maintaining methodological rigor is challenging, as researchers with disability navigate the fine line between authentically expressing their lived experiences and ensuring the study’s validity or trustworthiness.

Moreover, the issue of validity or trustworthiness takes on added significance in autoethnographic studies for researchers with disabilities. Despite autoethnographers recognizing the agency and responsibility of representing their community as “key informants,” their lived experiences and perspectives are partially contextual of what they perceived (Ellis & Adams, 2014). In the case of disability-related research, the societal tendency to view disability through a lens of deficit or limitation can introduce external biases that may compromise the perceived credibility of the research. Researchers must confront the preconceived notions and stereotypes associated with disability, striving to establish the validity or trustworthiness of their narratives in a way that transcends misconceptions (Sheldon, 2017; Stack & McDonald, 2014). Additionally, there is the risk of tokenization, where the researcher’s disability becomes the focal point rather than an integral aspect of a broader narrative. Balancing authenticity with the need to communicate the universality of experiences poses a formidable challenge in maintaining the study’s validity for researchers with disabilities engaged in autoethnographic inquiry.

Finally, the issue of disclosure emerges as a crucial consideration for researchers with disabilities engaged in
autoethnographic studies. Deciding how much personal information to divulge, and when, demands careful negotiation between transparency and privacy (Polczyk, 2012). While disclosure enhances the richness of the narrative and fosters a deeper connection with the audience, it also exposes researchers to potential vulnerabilities and may break the anonymous principle of the reviewing process (Sheldon, 2017). Striking a balance between openness and safeguarding one’s personal boundaries is an intricate process that requires constant reflection throughout the research journey (Singal, 2010). The challenge lies in determining when and how to disclose aspects of one’s disability to maintain ethical integrity without jeopardizing the researcher’s well-being. Disclosure may also transcend the research article with repercussions for the researcher within their host university and broader academic networks where ableist practices have been noted by a growing group of academics across disciplines (e.g., Dolmage, 2017).

**Structural and Attitudinal Barriers Faced by Autoethnographic Researchers**

Despite the strengths of autoethnography, researchers often encounter structural and attitudinal barriers when attempting to publish their work in high-ranking hospitality and tourism journals. When measuring tourism-related social capital, McGehee et al. (2010, p. 491) included the statement “There is a strong voice for sometimes excluded people and groups that exist within the tourism industry.” Overlooking, omission, “othering,” exclusion or direct or indirect discrimination of seldom encountered voices undoubtedly occurs, but it is very difficult to ascertain the reasons that explain the absence of these voices (Giliovic et al., 2018; Shiraani & Carr, 2022). These structural and attitudinal barriers can impede the recognition and acceptance of autoethnographic research. Some of the key challenges include reviewer’s methodological knowledge, stereotypes and preconceived notions, and silence bias.

**Reviewer Lack of Knowledge**

The lack of reviewer knowledge is likely to be multifaceted and being rooted in a general unfamiliarity with marginalized identities is likely to be a core issue even before the methodological unfamiliarity with autoethnography arises. For example, even in the largest marginalized identity by proportion of the population, the women’s movement has identified for decades gender bias with studies examining the academic context (Easterly & Ricard, 2011) and tourism specifically (Nunkoo et al., 2020). As a reasonably recent methodological development in the tourism and hospitality field, reviewers may not have sufficient understanding of autoethnography as a research method. This lack of familiarity can lead to misinterpretations, bias, and a failure to recognize the scholarly rigor and value of autoethnographic research (Merga et al., 2018). Consequently, this results in desk rejection (editor bias), rejections or requests for substantial revisions that may undermine the integrity of the study. For example, this paper was desk rejected without feedback from one journal, after discussion with a second journal’s editor the paper was submitted and then passed on to a sub editor who desk rejected the paper with feedback to say that they could “not see the originality of the paper,” before submitting to this journal and receiving constructive criticism from reviewers and support from the editor in addressing two rounds of review. We are the first to acknowledge the substantial strengthening of the paper through the review process. In presenting this example, we recognize the subjectivity in all review processes as well as each journal having its own areas of scope.

**Stereotypes and Preconceived Notions**

Autoethnography challenges traditional notions of objectivity and detachment, which are deeply ingrained in the academic “scientific” publishing process. Some reviewers may hold preconceived notions that autoethnographic research is subjective, anecdotal, or lacks academic rigor (Ellis et al., 2011). These biases can undermine the credibility and acceptance of autoethnographic work. Similarly, the experiences of one of the authors of this paper as an early career researcher deliberately focused on objective rather than subjective studies due to reviewers’ critical feedback when self-identifying as an academic with disability. One example of such ableist attitudes occurred when a reviewer had questioned the author’s likelihood of completing a fellowship even though, “His track record is very commendable, especially when viewed in light of his disability, which invariably will make high productivity more of a challenge than for most other people.”

**Silence Bias**

Autoethnographic research often explores sensitive topics or experiences that are overlooked or silenced in mainstream research. This can make reviewers uncomfortable or unfamiliar with addressing such issues. As a result, autoethnographic studies may be met with silence or avoidance, making it difficult for researchers to receive constructive feedback or support (Merga et al., 2018). Desk rejection by journals also plays a critical role, particularly where autoethnographic studies are not regarded as rigorous or criticized for small sample size when drawing upon new and evolving areas of disability conceptualization (e.g., neurodiversity).
Suggestions for Overcoming Structural Barriers

To encourage the recognition and inclusion of autoethnographic research in hospitality and tourism journals, the following suggestions are proposed.

Special Issues and Sections

Journals should consider dedicating special issues or sections to autoethnographic research. This would provide a dedicated space for researchers to publish their work and increase the visibility and recognition of autoethnography as a legitimate research approach in the field (Vasconcelos, 2023). Another strategy used by academics is also to broach new or developing areas of research in fledging journals. While this is counter-productive to part of the purpose of this article to challenge high-ranking journals to engage with autoethnography, this strategy can promote methods/areas to develop a critical mass of scholarship in a shorter time than developing a critical mass in high-ranking journals that could take years or decades to do.

Methodological Seminars and Editing Services

Journals can organize seminars and workshops to educate reviewers and editors about the principles and methodologies of autoethnography. This would help improve their understanding and appreciation of the method, reducing biases and misconceptions. The visual ethnographical work of Scarles (2010) promotes a “sharing of speech” challenging the “sounds of silence” by shining a light on work previously omitted, overlooked, “othered” or directly discriminated against to uncover new embodied understandings of place and space from a management sense that can be applied to tourism and hospitality (Dwertmann, 2016). The challenges are multifaced, including the lack of experience in participating in research, the fear of disclosing and safety, the hesitation of relating carers and guardians, the availability of interested populations. This leads to limited first-hand knowledge relating disability issues on top of the complexity of topic. Especially when considering the access to education and research resources in less developed areas such as Global South, the scarcity of published works in academic journals entails the misunderstanding and biased attitude toward people with disabilities. In hand with stereotypes of disability and the location of non-English speaking areas, the quality of manuscripts can be misjudged by the English writing proficiency. Therefore, journals can offer editing services specifically tailored to autoethnographic manuscripts to ensure clarity and coherence. The other approach is that disciplinary communities or industry orientated inter/multi/transdisciplinary groups could provide seeding grants to assist those researchers using autoethnography.

Mentoring Programs

Establishing mentoring programs that pair experienced autoethnographic researchers with early-career researchers/scholars (ECRS) with disabilities can foster guidance, support, and knowledge sharing. Merga et al. (2018, p. 386) highlighted the experience of ECRS that “Good editors endeavour to ensure ‘that reviewers’ edits and comments are not biased but rather provide the author with a detailed report of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper.” The constructive feedback and comments are helpful but to enforce the inclusivity of the journal, a mentoring program will be a powerful initiative. The impacts of harsh decisions can result in mental health issues and self-doubt consequences in ECRS in marginalized groups. Mentors can offer insights into the publishing process and provide feedback on autoethnographic research, thereby empowering and strengthening the capabilities of researchers with disability. To optimize mentoring programs, it is essential to develop a comprehensive plan for selecting, matching, facilitating mentorship and monitoring, and evaluating and recognizing (Lindsay et al., 2016). We trust that Journal of Travel Research, as a leading journal in the field, can implement the mentoring initiative through expertise and financial arrangements to bring multiple stakeholders, including publishers, autoethnographic experts, institutions, and researchers with disabilities into this program.

Improving Reviewing Process

Journals should develop inclusive guidelines and criteria for evaluating autoethnographic research to ensure consistent and fair reviews. In a paper on the challenge of publishing a paper, Vasconcelos (2023, p. 77) perceived that “the majority of the reviewers/editors showed a harsh view about the author’s work or even a lack of interest to ponder his arguments and difficulties to carry out that study.” These guidelines should emphasize the importance of reflectivity, rigorous analysis, and ethical considerations while respecting the unique characteristics of autoethnography. As McGehee et al. (2023) stated on the note of “On Being a Conscious Reviewer,” the practices of “Conscious Reviewing” should consider beyond the dominant thinking of ableism and unconscious bias and requesting to be open and encouraging the contribution to knowledge through diverse perspectives from autoethnographic researchers with disabilities.

Diverse Reviewer Panels

Journals should strive to include researchers with disabilities in their reviewer panels. In this sense, researchers with disabilities not only can publish their works for their job performance assessment but also be a significant part of
academic community for their expertise. Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) identify that the aim of developing inclusive tourism would need to empower the underrepresented voices in decision making as well as knowledge sharing. Despite the call for diversity and inclusivity, the colonial narratives remain in the reviewing and publishing process where diverse perspectives are not recognized as novelty (Doucette et al., 2021). By incorporating diverse perspectives, reviewers will have a deeper understanding and appreciation of autoethnographic research, reducing the likelihood of bias, stereotypes, and direct discrimination. More importantly, researchers with disability can participate in editorial boards and gain recognition which broaden their understanding and career development (full-time employment/tenure-track/promotion).

Conclusion

Autoethnography holds great promise in empowering the voices of researchers from marginalized groups within the field of hospitality and tourism. By highlighting the strengths of this method and addressing the structural and attitudinal barriers faced, the field can become more inclusive, diverse, and enriched with knowledge (Dwertmann, 2016). Journals play a crucial role in this process, and by implementing the suggested strategies, they can encourage and support autoethnographic research, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences within academia and the industry. This paper has provided a series of strategies with which to promote and develop autoethnographic methods in tourism and hospitality related research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. People with disability is being used in this paper as an affirmation of person first language as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) except when referencing authors who use other phrasology like “disabled people,” which aligns with UK social model of disability language conventions.

References


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