

## Conference Paper

# Autoethnography as Writing Representation in Cultural Sport Psychology

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**ORCID ID**Kurniati Rahayuni: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0413-2046>**Abstract.**

Cultural sport psychology (CSP) focuses on the interplay between culture and sport, which often discuss marginalised topics or sports practice in a specific population. This article suggests using autoethnography as a means of representing CSP research in the field. This article will explore what autoethnography is, why it is suitable for CSP, guidance on how to conduct autoethnography in the field of sport, exercise, health and related fields, and ethical considerations to be made when writing an autoethnography.

**Keywords:** culture, autoethnography, qualitative, sport and exercise psychology

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## 1. Introduction

Researching the interplay between culture, psychology, and sport is complicated. Every culture and subgroup may have different meanings toward the sport and its concrete practice to living those meanings. A sports practice in a particular culture would have a unique meaning to the member of that culture, which opens possibilities of a distinct meaning to be discussed in the area of sport and exercise psychology. For instance, in Ghana and Sub-saharan countries, a belief in superstitious forces and souls of the departed requires them to practice superstitious rituals before the game, which could be risky to athletes (1). Their pre-game rituals could include risky behaviours such as travelling to a distant place to get an elder's blessing, drinking herbs with unclear ingredients or completing rigorous, dangerous physical work in nature (i.e. climbing a steep hill (1)). Their practice might be interpreted as unnecessary from the Western paradigm, but it shows an example of how sport generates different meanings to every culture, which determines how an athlete from a particular culture plans their pre-game rituals.

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Inevitably, the dialogue between culture and sport and exercise would open a new discourse of sport psychology, varying the dominant culture of western, English-spoken language culture. The stream of research which focuses on studying the interplay of culture, sport and exercise (also physical activities) is then called cultural sport psychology (CSP). CSP has been introduced in Ryba and Wright's (2005) paper titled *From Mental Game to Cultural Praxis: A Cultural Studies Model's Implications for the Future of Sport Psychology*. Ryba and Wright (2005) argued that sport psychology should evolve from an individual-focused, quantitative and neutral to more inclusive of cultural differences, accepting a qualitative approach and being sensitive to social justice (2). To achieve it, CSP researchers must be able to accommodate interdisciplinary praxis, including accepting sociology, cultural studies, and psychology approaches, as well as innovative qualitative methods and dissemination (2–4).

CSP work then started to proliferate and publications addressing the genre occur in many impact factor journals, books and book chapters. Multichapter books about sports psychology started to include a dedicated chapter about the understanding of culture or CSP (5–9), and books that discuss CSP have been circulated (10–12). A particular issue journal focused on CSP has been peer-reviewed and discusses variable issues related to sport (4,13–15). Empirical research, which involves an interdisciplinary approach, also gained publication. For instance, acculturation in Canadian indigenous and immigrant athletes (16–18), career transition in athletes, which is highly connected with the country's sporting systems, demographic and sociological factors (19–21), sports participation related to gender in a particular cultural context (16,22,23), risk culture of injury (23,24) and exploration of the psychosocial aspect of the sport in a particular culture (25–27). Of all published CSP works, the topic is unique, distinctive and marginalised, often sensitive to culture (28). Roper (2016) argued that the CSP works revolved around three patterns assigning the resemblance of cultural studies in sports: power, privilege and praxis (9). Further, assigning the mission of CSP to bring social justice to marginalised voices within a particular sport system, Shchinke and McGannon (2014) stated that CSP intends to explore the "dark side of sports and bring them to the surface" (28).

Aside from the unique research topic located in a specific culture, CSP offers many chances and opportunities to develop sport psychology to be more friendly to athletes, more culturally inclusive, and an opening to more effective treatment to athletes tailored to the specific culture (29). Understanding specific cultures would add more practicalities and easiness to sport psychology consultation (30). The ability to understand the interplays between sport and culture is often called "cultural praxis", and the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) addresses this as an essential competency for sports

psychologist (29,31). Cultural praxis is needed to ensure that sport psychology practice synchronises with the individual's specific cultural values (29), resulting in more relevant results of the study or appropriate treatments of mental training (29).

The uniqueness of any nature of culture could make CSP researchers look for a detour to conduct research in CSP. Because culture is often culturally sensitive to be spoken, accepted as normalisation before it gets challenged through extensive work of CSP. Hence, in CSP, innovative methodologies, creative, analytical practice, and artistic writing representations could be used to conduct and communicate research to be more engaging and resonating with the audience (32). One artistic writing representation that has the potential to explore CSP is autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a writing methodology under the umbrella of qualitative research. It captures the personal lived experience of the culture/sub-culture of which the author identified themselves as a member (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography portrays a phenomenon through the junction of personal lens and culture and results in thick descriptions of compelling narratives which potentially evoke, engage and generate valuable insights for the reader (33,34). Autoethnography contains the ruminations between culture and practice and the personal embodiment of a particular experience. In this writing, the author breaks the boundaries of culture so it can be visible to others.

Autoethnography has been accepted as a creative, analytical practice genre in qualitative sport, exercise and health research (35). Guidance on utilising autoethnography in sport and exercise has been published, and publications exemplify the genre. Steady guidance of writing meaningful experiences in sport in the form of autoethnography has been meticulously written by Allen Collinson (36) and other book chapters (32,37). Several works of autoethnography in sports also have been circulated. For instance, in the field of competitive culture of rowing (38), women's golf experience (39), challenges of work in sports coaching (40), sports injury and illness (41,42); and also a sensitive topics such as the revelation of sexual harassment in youth sport (43) and experience of sexual orientation marginalisation in sport (44). A critical perspective of reviewing autoethnographic work also has been published (45).

Autoethnography offers opportunities to communicate the study of CSP due to its strength in allowing the researcher to write his/her rich personal juncture of social nuances, situations, and sports. Although it has been judged as highly subjective, it allows us to bring the personal embodiment of sports practice, meaning, in a particular culture. Autoethnography should be written to serve a purpose, creating a new insight (32), and CSP's mission is voicing marginalised topics at the edge of sport psychology, often from the unique cultural point of view, using autoethnography to communicate

CSP studies is plausible. However, explicit articles addressing this topic are still dearth. The opportunities of autoethnography to present CSP research hence will be explored in this article.

## 2. Method

The method employed in this article is a pure literature study with cultural praxis. Literature study is a profound work of finding published texts connected to the topics of publications and one of the profound, fundamental works in qualitative research (35).

## 3. Result and Discussion

### 3.1. Arguments of why Autoethnography suitable for CSP research

Conducting research in the field of CSP is challenging due to its complexities, which often require interdisciplinary perspectives, innovative methodology and practice, cultural competence and cultural praxis (2,29,31,46). Moreover, culture changes dynamically and could be bound in a specific period (2,11). In other words, culture is a multilevel phenomenon. Therefore cultural praxis, or the tacit knowledge of a specific culture, is needed to conduct high-quality CSP research that engages, details, and fulfils CSP social justice missions (47). CSP researchers must adopt an interdisciplinary perspective because of the complexity of the research site. According to the country's historical trajectories, its phenomenon could be a complex juncture of culture, sport, and time (14). For instance, Tibbert, Andersen and Morris (2015) investigated the acculturation process of Joe, a young athlete, to adjust to the subculture of resiliency and hypermasculinity in a male team. They found that the male team's risky culture included ignoring injury, denying emotions, and sacrificing individuality to be accepted within the team (23). Obviously, when Joe is involved in the team, the team adopts a specific environment, leading to the proneness of injury, stress, recovery imbalance and overtraining (23). The trajectory of stories contributes to the understanding of injury and the ignorance of injury, which is expected to be found among athletes (24). In this article, the crystallisation of data analysis in the form of stories of Joe is approached using qualitative methodology and then represented using realist writing.

In CSP, specific behaviours, concepts or constructs are analysed by considering the cultural context and the cultural upbringings of the actors involved. A CSP researcher has to be reflexive and aware of their own culture and identity in the power relations of

the particular culture where the participant came from. The researcher's attributes might have a specific location within a complex relational power in one's social context, thus impacting the relationship between researcher and participant (48). Researchers need to be fully aware of how these impact participants, which can be achieved through the reflexive process along the research. Here, autoethnography could set the background of specific cultures and periods where research has been done.

Autoethnography could serve CSP aims based on three arguments. First, autoethnography serves as a background researcher's past trajectories where the main CSP research questions came. Hence, autoethnography provides an early background to bring the reader to understand the full context of culture, time, and personal and situational aspects in a vivid, precise description. Through retelling the researcher's past, the social message of justice could be informed and delivered to gain attention.

Second, autoethnography could serve as the cultural background of a CSP research project to explain why the author chose a particular method and analysis chose reflexive thematic analysis (49). Using sport psychology theories in the coding process and engaging and combining the analytical process with the social and cultural meaning of the researcher's experience could gain more attention. Here, autoethnography took the position as a confessional tales approach which informs the cultural and social meaning of sport (Schinke et al. 2012).

Third, a qualitative approach requires an emic perspective (50) and reflexivity (18). Emic perspective is the texture of experience which develops as a dynamic process over time (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), while reflexivity is a critical process of the researcher in positioning themselves toward others in the research process (48). The researcher could inform his/her critical stance could be communicated thoroughly in the autoethnography.

Autoethnography might contain layers of meaning that reflect a specified culture of the sport. Researchers' voices, views, and dilemmas towards standard social practices within a particular culture are celebrated through autoethnography.

### 3.2. How to write autoethnography in CSP research

There have been guides to constructing autoethnography in sports, exercise and physical activity. I drew on the work of Allen-Collinson (36) and Smith (51). The core strategies applied were stated in Smith (p.506):

*"In general, it (autoethnography) refers to a highly personalised form of qualitative research in which researchers tell stories based on their own lived experience and*

*interaction with others within social contexts, relating the personal to the culture in the process and product.”*

Allen-Collison (2012), in her autoethnography relation to injury and rehabilitation, in which the detailed process of writing autoethnography included: 1) collecting concrete descriptions of the phenomenon from the insider's (or researcher's) perspective (in the form of any documentation, i.e. training records, field notes, daily journal or diary, audio tapes, photo albums, videos, memorabilia collections); 2) initial impressionistic readings of the personal log entries to gain a 'feel' for the whole story; 3) in-depth, close re-reading of descriptions as a part of a process of data-immersion, to identify themes and subthemes, identification and analysis of 'essences' or 'core meanings' in experiences; 4) outlining free imaginative alternatives of representation, where the reader could identify fundamental meanings of the phenomenon; and finally, 5) writing the general accounts of experiences, or start writing the autoethnography (36). The process could be a helpful starting point for writing autoethnography for CSP researchers.

Methodological texts emphasise that autoethnography can be combined with other creative representational forms of data (36,51), such as poetry (39), retrospective essay (44), visual presentation, ethnodrama and performance to depict the detail of lived experience within the culture/sub-culture of which the author is a member (33). It can be written in the first-person narrative or third-person narrative (33). The material should be selected carefully because autoethnography combines a personal narrative while being simultaneously constructed rigorously and analytically (36); hence, despite using multiple sources of evidence and material, each piece of evidence or material should be connected, interrelated and woven together to create a compelling meaning for the reader. For instance, documents informing the researcher's philosophy, rooted in a particular indigenous culture, could be included to inform how the cultural values embodied and immersed the researcher's thoughts and actions in sport.

One autoethnographic work related to CSP has been conducted by Rahayuni (2020) in her PhD thesis. Rahayuni (26) opened her PhD thesis about the psychosocial demands of Indonesian elite athletes using autoethnography to clarify her research context, that her works are backgrounded in Indonesian culture, which is different from western or English-spoken context. Her autoethnography depicts the problems of the elite sport in Indonesia, containing a rich juncture between the paternalistic culture of Javanese ethnicity, family relationships, barriers to funding and the demanding task of elite athletes (26). Hence, the analysis, the drawing conclusion of themes toward the data, would mark a distinct conclusion assigning a differentiation of culture (26), which

the reader would find as acceptable since she has told the stories of the cultural context in advance.

Autoethnography, whatever subjective it may seem, is not without risk. The revelation of stories could touch sensitive issues and potentially harm the researcher's reputation and the people mentioned in the autoethnography. Understanding this importance, the following subchapter will discuss writing autoethnography from ethical perspectives.

### 3.3. Ethics in Autoethnography of CSP

Building on previous research that CSP (cultural sport psychology) could engage with culturally sensitive issues and marginalised topics, including tensions, privilege and oppression of powers in a particular culture or country (4), the research topic and results addressed sensitive areas. Hence in constructing the autoethnography, the researcher needed to be critically aware of the context and ethical consequences, mainly if the stories were to be read by the public (51). Accordingly, Smith (51) and Tolich (52), the overall process of constructing the autoethnography involved being critically aware and committed to the research purpose rather than an autobiographical indulgence of one's experience.

To be acutely aware of the research purpose of writing autoethnography, here are several strategies to stay ethical in writing autoethnography: 1) use the research question as the main navigation and keep in mind that the autoethnography is written to resonate with the study results, not as a personal autobiography. The researcher must control their urge to seek personal admittance through autoethnography and commit to the research question; 2) Start writing the autoethnography with a set of consistent patterns, for example, in line with a chronological timeline. The chronological plot could illuminate the understanding of the research topic and make the readers aware that the autoethnography has been executed carefully. 3) the list of documentation and stories should be selected carefully by considering the balance between the richness of the research topic inside a personal data set, with reminders in mind that the potential ethical implications that could lead to harm to people, organisations, and researcher's future career if the story were circulated publicly (51); 4) Always inform the purpose of autoethnography as a writing representation to introduce the reality of the cultural site. Here, the writer seeks control over the reader's interpretation of the story (51).

Overall, writing an autoethnography as a form of writing representation in CSP is a bold move and could not be executed without an act of total courage to communicate what it is genuinely found in research (51). As has been highlighted by Schinke and



colleagues (28), the mission of CSP is to seek social justice by bringing the dark side of sports, and autoethnography holds the potential to communicate those efforts in a more engaging way and more resonating for the audience.

## 4. Conclusion

This article has discussed the argumentation of using autoethnography in cultural sport psychology, the steps of writing autoethnography, and its ethical consideration before using autoethnography as a writing representation. As a creative, analytical practice, autoethnography is still expected to diversify the publication in sport and exercise psychology which has been long dominated by American and European centrism (14).

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