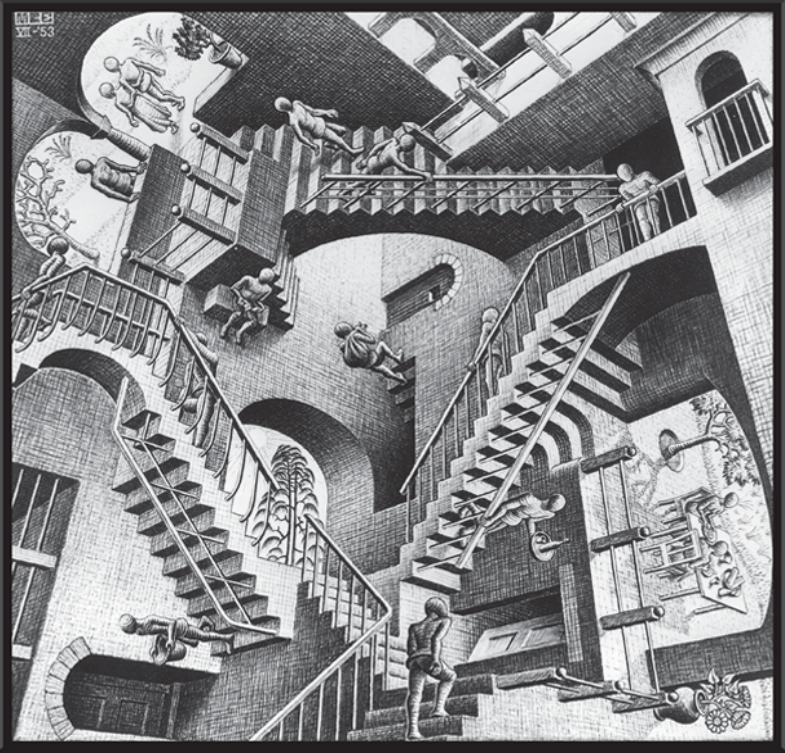
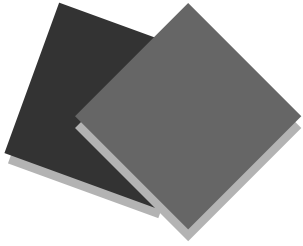


AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD

HEEWON CHANG



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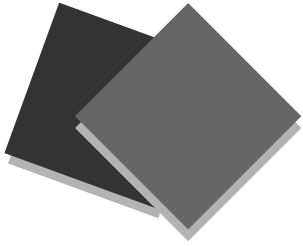


AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD

Heewon Chang

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2008 by Left Coast Press, Inc.

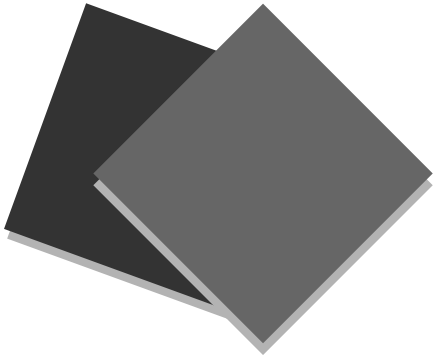
Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Chang, Heewon, 1959-
Autoethnography as method/Heewon Chang.
p. cm. — (Developing qualitative inquiry)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-59874-122-3 (hardback : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-59874-123-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Ethnology—Biographical methods. 2. Autobiography. 3. Ethnology—Authorship. 4. Ethnology—Field work. I. Title.
GN346.6.C53 2008 305.8—dc22 2007044268

ISBN 978-1-59874-122-3 hardcover
ISBN 978-1-59874-123-0 paperback



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To the many “edgewalkers” in my life,
Especially Klaus, Hannah, and Peter,
Who are always willing to take a risk of embracing novelty

To my *Doktorvater*, mentor, friend, and colleague
Harry
Who has believed in me

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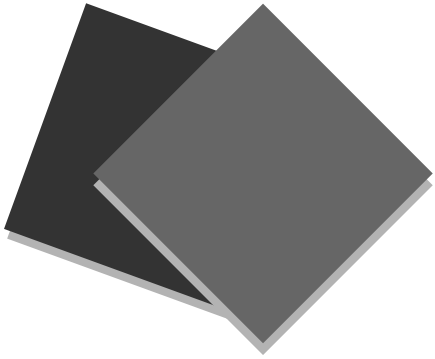


PREFACE

Over a delicious, yet simple, meal served by nuns in Säben, a cloister located in Northern Italy, my German sister-in-law asked what I had been up to lately. My answer, "I'm writing a book," obviously piqued her curiosity. Instead of taunting me for working during a mini-family reunion at that peaceful locale, she immediately tossed her second question at me, "What is it about?"

Without hesitation I replied, "It's about autoethnography." She then wondered aloud if I was too young to write an autobiography. She obviously caught the "auto" portion in my answer. I could tell that she was assuming that autoethnography had something to do with autobiography. Her reasoning is acceptable, provided that a life is still forming for a person of my age and that no complete personal history could ever be written so early. Although she was partially correct in her assumption, I felt compelled to clarify further. I explained that my book is not about my autobiography per se, but about a research method that utilizes the researchers' autobiographical data to analyze and interpret their cultural assumptions. This explanation was lofty and abstract. Instead of pursuing it further, my sister-in-law dropped the subject and moved on to a more engaging topic for conversation. How could I have described the book better to my sister-in-law?

Now I face the same challenge of describing my book, this time, to a different audience—experienced and novice researchers who may or may not be convinced that personal stories can mix well with scholarship. Fortunately, I am not a lone voice in the wilderness, who

proclaims there is a way of integrating the personal into academics. Others such as Anderson (2006), Ellis and Bochner (2000), Nash (2004), Reed-Danahay (1997), and Tompkins (1996) have already plowed through the wilderness to make a path, and many have followed them. Yet, I still smell fresh-cut grass along the trail and have felt an urge to show my students and interested others one more way of utilizing personal stories for scholarly purposes. So I have decided to write a book grounded in the anthropological tradition of ethnography and a hands-on approach to instruction in research methods.

These three distinctive characteristics—anthropological, methodological, and practical—are embedded in both the structure and the content of the book. This book is divided into three parts and presents six appendices. Part I presents three conceptual chapters that address in turn the concepts of culture, the tradition of self-narratives, and the development of autoethnography. In this part, the concept of culture is discussed from an anthropological perspective, and autoethnography is affirmed as an ethnographic research method that focuses on cultural analysis and interpretation.

Part II contains one introductory chapter and three methodology chapters to guide data collection in autoethnographic "fieldwork." Chapter 4 introduces the very first step of research—"getting ready" with research topics, research design, and ethical consideration. Focusing on personal memory data, self-observational and self-reflective data, and external data, Chapters 5 through 7 introduce practical data collection strategies and writing exercises to aid data collection. The writing exercises and corresponding writing samples of mine are compiled in Appendix A. You may adopt them to stimulate your data collection process. However, I encourage you to expand them to fit your research purpose.

Part III presents additional methodological chapters. These three chapters suggest a variety of practical strategies of data management, data analysis and interpretation, and autoethnographic writing. The chapters in Part III are critical in the autoethnographic process because the activities suggested will ultimately shape data into autoethnography and give an ethnographic flavor to this research inquiry. Please note that I will adopt a more academic writing style in Part I and a more informal one in Parts II and III. Through this informal style, I hope to bring research to a comfortable level for all readers.

Every piece of writing reflects the disposition of its author. This book is not an exception; it subtly and explicitly reveals who I am and what I value. It represents my professional interest in anthropology, education, multicultural education, ethnography, and self-narratives.

Intermingled with these is my personal fascination with self-reflection, introspection, intrapersonal intelligence, and self-analysis. My faith—particularly focusing on "hospitality for strangers" (Pohl, 1999) and love of neighbors—has also laid groundwork for my thinking. These professional and personal interests of mine are likely to be building blocks of this book. They may show up in my suggested writing exercises; strategies of data collection, analysis, and interpretation; and writing samples.

None of these exercises is intended as the authoritative and prescriptive way of completing an autoethnography. Rather, they should be seen as suggestions coming from a person who has been experimenting with this relatively new ethnographic method for a while. Thus, I invite you to look into the world of my biases and experiences, take whatever is useful, and discard what does not fit your needs.

Authors are not solitary creators of their work; rather, their works are products of caring, nurturing, and supportive communities of constructive critiques. I am deeply indebted to many colleagues, mentors, and authors as well as family members and friends who have opened doors to their hearts and minds throughout my life. It is impossible to name them all here. With a deep sense of inadequacy in acknowledging all by name, I have to be content with some who have been instrumental in shaping this book.

I am immensely grateful to Dr. Harry Wolcott, my *Doktorvater* (a German word for a doctoral advisor who often becomes a lifelong mentor like a parent) from the University of Oregon, who has continued to serve as a mentor for a quarter of a century; Dr. Linda Stine, my friendly neighbor and personal editor, whose encouragement and support are bottomless; Dr. Mitch Allen and Dr. Janice Morse, my publisher and my editor from Left Coast Press, who have believed in my work; Dr. Geoffrey Walford, whose encouragement to publish an article on autoethnography affirmed my thinking and accelerated the progress of this book; Dr. Letty Lincoln, my colleague from the University of Oregon, who has always rendered supportive and constructive critiques; Dr. Soon Yong Park, Dr. Kum Yong Whang, Dr. Sang Jin Kang, and Dr. Myung Kun Lee, colleagues from Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea, who generously embraced the idea of a workshop on autoethnography and made it happen on their campus in the summer of 2006; and Dr. Jaime J. Romo and the University of North Carolina Press for allowing me to reprint his autoethnography in Appendix F.

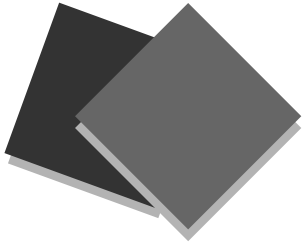
Assistance from Eastern University came in many ways. Without the university's gift of time and financial support during my

sabbatical year in 2005–2006, I would not have been able to carve out a chunk of time to sit down and write. I also want to acknowledge my former Dean, Dr. Vivian Nix-Early, who champions faculty causes, and colleagues from the Education Department—Dr. Helen Loeb, Dr. Dorothy Hurley, Dr. William Yerger, Dr. Jean Landis, Dr. Kathy-Ann Hernandez, Ms. Sue Seltzer, Ms. Sue Shaw, Ms. Adele Ressler, and Mr. Jim Osborne—who carried on with multiple responsibilities to cover for me during my absence. In addition, a special mention is due to Judy Ha and Reeja Koshy, confident graduate students from Eastern University, who helped compile the bibliography of self-narratives and thoroughly checked the accuracy of references, respectively.

Families of authors are often shortchanged during book making. My husband, Klaus Volpert, has been a constant supporter who understands the pressure in academia so well, who applauds my success before anyone, and who created time and space for me to write even during our family vacation. Blessed with the patient understanding of my two children, Hannah and Peter, I'm really a lucky parent. I also extend my deepest gratitude to my parents Chin-Ho Chang and Eui-Sook Cho, who have instilled in me the love of learning, believing, and caring; my parents-in-law Helmut and Waltraud Volpert, who have modeled cross-cultural and cross-religious acceptance; and to my sisters and sisters-in-law, Hee-Young, Hee-Eun, Hee-Bong, Ulrike, Maria, and Elisabeth, who have affirmed the strength of girl power for me.

All these individuals have helped me become who I am and, in turn, have contributed to this book in both big and small ways. Yet, I must assume sole responsibility for the content of the book, as a painter does for her painting. Others have inspired me, provided for me, critiqued my work, and sometimes suggested better brush strokes. All these helpers have made the book a better product. Now it is about time for me to put my signature on the painting and claim responsibility as its creator.

May 2007
Wayne, PA
USA

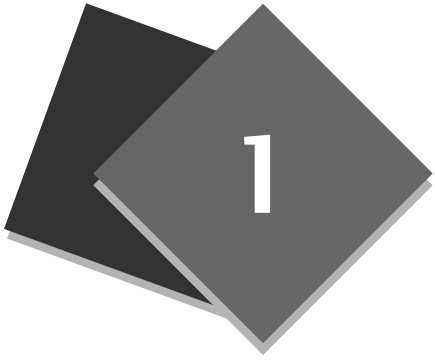


PART I
Conceptual Framework

Consisting of three chapters, Part I lays out the conceptual framework of the book, which is grounded on four assumptions: (1) culture is a group-oriented concept by which self is always connected with others; (2) the reading and writing of self-narratives provides a window through which self and others can be examined and understood; (3) telling one's story does not automatically result in the *cultural* understanding of self and others, which only grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation; and (4) autoethnography is an excellent instructional tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners—such as teachers, medical personnel, counselors, and human services workers—gain profound understanding of self and others and function more effectively with others from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Chapter 1 elaborates on the concept of culture as a web of self and others. In this chapter, three elements—culture, self, and others—are explored in depth. Following the introduction of multiple perspectives on culture, the concepts of self and others are discussed. In Chapter 2, given the heightened interest in self-narratives in the social sciences, I argue that self-narratives can be used as cultural texts through which the cultural understanding of self and others can be gained. A variety of self-narratives are introduced and discussed in terms of genre, authorship, thematic focus, and writing style. Finally, in Chapter 3, autoethnography is singled out from among the many self-narrative varieties and compared and contrasted with other types of self-narratives. Readers will learn about the benefits of this research method as well as pitfalls to avoid when they adopt auto-

ethnography as a research method. Readers who prefer to delve immediately into methodology may skip Part I and go directly to Part II.



Culture: A Web of Self and Others

The concept of culture fundamentally affects how we conduct a cultural study. It shapes our research questions, our sources of data, our analysis/interpretation, and our writing. So it is appropriate to begin this research guidebook with a discussion of the concept of culture. Since anthropologists invented the notion of culture, innumerable definitions and concepts have entered the literature of anthropology. My intention in this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive list of definitions, but to focus on concepts of culture that address people as interactive agents. After introducing various perspectives on the locus of culture—where culture resides—I shift my focus of discussion to "self," and then "others," both vital agents and participants in culture.

The Concepts of Culture

"I'm a typical American just like everyone else in this room," a student of mine proclaimed with an air of certainty in her voice. Without flinching, another student declared that her "individual culture"

represents who she is. These are common statements that I hear from students of multicultural education when they are asked to define themselves culturally. Whether these statements accurately convey the meaning of "culture" will be discussed later. These statements represent two perspectives on culture. The first student's view associates culture with a group of people, in this case, Americans. Her statement implies that there is a definable American culture that she shares with other "Americans" who are identified by clear boundaries. Typical assumed boundaries for culture include nationality, ethnicity, language, and geography. In this case, she selected nationality and geographic boundaries to define her own people as "everyone else in this [American college class] room."

On the other hand, the second student considers culture from an individual's point of view. To her, the definition of culture begins with her. Her belief, behaviors, and perspective define who she is. She does not articulate how her "individual culture" overlaps with others and how different her individual culture is from others. Despite her lack of attention to relationships with others in the society, her focus on individuals draws our attention to the fact that people are neither blind followers of a predefined set of social norms, cultural clones of their previous generations, nor copycats of their cultural contemporaries. Rather, her perspective implies that individuals have autonomy to interpret and alter cultural knowledge and skills acquired from others and to develop their own version of culture while staying in touch with social expectations.

These two different perspectives of culture pursue answers to the same question that anthropologists have asked for over a century: "Where is culture located?" De Munck (2000) expands the question: Is culture located "out there, in the public world" or "in here, in the private sphere of the self"? The question of cultural locus may inadvertently associate culture with something tangible to locate. This association is not intended at all. Although defining culture is a tricky business in our contemporary, complex society, as Agar (2006) agonizes, I do not relegate culture to the physical realm of cultural artifacts. Before delving into what I mean by culture, however, I will discuss how anthropologists have tried to answer this locus question because their answers have important implications for the later discussion of autoethnography.

Symbiosis of Culture and People

First, I need to establish a nonnegotiable premise: the concept of culture is inherently group-oriented, because culture results from

human interactions with each other. The notion of "individual culture" does not, and should not, imply that culture is about the psychological workings of an isolated individual; rather, it refers to individual versions of group cultures that are formed, shared, retained, altered, and sometimes shed through human interactions. These interactions may take place in "local communities of practice" in which "what particular persons do [is] in mutual influence upon one another as they associate regularly together" (Erickson, 2004, p. 38). Gajjala (2004) would argue that face-to-face interactions are not a prerequisite to the creation of culture in a highly globalized digital age when interactions can be facilitated by digital means of communication—such as e-mail, telephone, and the Internet. Her cyber-ethnographic study of listservs for South Asian professional women demonstrates that a cyber cultural community can be formed and undergo a transformation into something that is similar to a local cultural community. Whether interactions are conventional or alternative, the fundamental premise that culture has something to do with human interactions within a group is not challenged.

De Munck (2000) expresses the symbiotic relationship between culture and people as follows:

> Obviously, one does not exist as a psyche—a self—outside of culture; nor does culture exist independently of its bearers. . . . Culture would cease to exist without the individuals who make it up. . . . Culture requires our presence as individuals. With this symbiosis, self and culture together make each other up and, in that process, make meaning. (pp. 1–2)

Resonating with this perspective, Rosaldo (1984) declares that we "are not individuals first but social persons" (p. 151).

Although the premise that culture and people are intertwined may be indisputable, it does not produce an equally unequivocal answer to the question: "Where is culture located?" This question has been entertained since the beginning of anthropology as an academic discipline, and answers are divided into two groups: one argues that culture is located outside of individuals, and the other that culture is located inside people's minds. These two different orientations produce different implications as to how we treat the concept of culture.

Culture Outside Individuals

The first orientation—culture outside individuals—considers culture as a bounded whole, with which a group of people is defined and

characterized. Individual differences are minimized at the expense of a coherent picture for the whole, and culture is seen to be observable and presentable as a public façade of a group. This view stems from the initial anthropological interest of studying other cultures by looking in from outside and is integrated into Kroeber and Kluckhohn's classic definition of culture originally published in 1952. The added italics accentuate this perspective of culture:

> Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior, acquired and transmitted by symbols constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, *including their embodiment in artifacts*; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; *culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action*, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (1966, p. 357)

This "looking-in-from-outside" perspective assumes that other cultures are observable. It creates the distance between anthropologists and local natives and, in turn, engenders the acute sense of difference and of clear boundaries between these two parties. As a result, anthropologists end up developing a sometimes essentialist and often exotic profile of culture to describe a bounded group of people, focusing on observable differences in custom, social structure, language, religion, art, and other material and nonmaterial characteristics. The oft-cited definition by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), who is characterized as "the founder of academic anthropology in the English-speaking world and the author of the first general anthropology textbook" (Harris, 1975, p. 144), also presents culture as a "complex whole" binding a group of people:

> Culture . . . taken in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor, p. 1)

Tylor's definition illustrates the very point of this perspective, associating culture with an entire group of people.

De Munck (2000) identifies three versions of this culture-outside-individuals perspective: (1) "Culture is superorganic," (2) "Culture is public," and (3) "The size, position, and strength of social networks" affect the culture of a group (pp. 8–17). The first perspective,

superorganic culture, still popular nowadays, postulates that a set group of people is identified with a culture and that culture has a life of its own, dictating, regulating, and controlling people to maintain inner-group "homogeneity." This perspective is illustrated by Benedict's two renowned works. In *Patterns of Culture* (1934) she classified cultures by two types—the orderly and calm "Apollonian" type and the emotional and passionate "Dionysian" type—and characterized Pueblo cultures of the American Southwest as the former and the Native American cultures of the Great Plains as the latter. Her notion of culture as a representation of a whole group also came through clearly in her discussion of Japanese "national culture" in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946). My first student's notion of "American" culture is not far from this perspective of superorganic culture. So is Spring's notion of the U.S. "general" culture that is expected to consist of "behaviors, beliefs, and experiences common to most citizens" (2004, p. 4).

The second version of the culture-outside-individuals perspective is argued by Geertz, who sees culture forming in the process of people's interactive communication and meaning-making. Geertz (1973) holds that "culture is public because meaning is. . . . [C]ulture consists of socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do such things as signal conspiracies and join them or perceive insults and answer them. . ." (pp. 12–13). For him, a person's behaviors cannot be appropriately understood and responded to unless these behaviors are publicly exhibited and others correctly interpret their meanings using the standards familiar to both parties.

The third version of the culture-outside-individuals perspective is apparent in Thompson's work, according to De Munck (2000). Thompson argues that "ensembles" of social relations, created by "social roles, statuses, and norms," affect the culture within a social organization (p. 12). This perspective postulates that culture is associated with the structure transcending individual distinctiveness. The "structure of any entity," including a society, refers to "the more-or-less enduring relationships among its parts" (Kaplan & Manners, 1972, p. 101) and "the continuing arrangement of persons in relationships defined or controlled by institutions" in Radcliffe-Brown's words (1958, p. 177). This social structure "contains" culture according to this view of culture outside individuals.

When this perspective of culture outside individuals swings to the extreme, it is in danger of presenting culture in a form of a lifeless, rigid mannequin—exaggerated, oversimplified, inflexible, and simply

artificial—without reflecting real people associated with it or in a form of a self-propelled entity independent of people. In these cases the concept of culture intends to represent something, yet actually says little about people because it is so distanced from them.

Culture in People's Minds

In contrast to the first perspective, the second perspective locates culture in people's minds. In this case, human beings are regarded not only as bearers of culture but also as active agents who create, transmit, transform, and sometimes discard certain cultural traits. According to De Munck (2000), three versions constitute this perspective: (1) the "psychoanalytic and 'human nature' thesis of culture," (2) "personal and public symbols," and (3) cognitively distributed culture.

The first version is supported by Spiro, who rejects cultural determinism—the claim that a societal culture determines the personality of its members and shapes national personality. Instead, he argues that psychological similarities and differences between members of a culture also exist in other cultures. For him, "cultures are systems that function to meet the psychological and biological requirements of human beings as members of society" (De Munck, 2000, p. 19). Since basic human psychology and biology are similar as well as different from society to society, Spiro's observation that "the surface variations in cultures mask underlying similarities" puts this perspective in diametric opposition to the "superorganic culture" perspective that postulates distinctive cultural differences between groups. Erickson's classification of culture "as motive and emotion" is also aligned with this perspective of culture in that people's emotions and motives in their minds are driving forces in their social customs and actions (2004, p. 36).

De Munck (2000) associates Obeyesekere with the second version—"personal and public symbols." According to him, Obeyesekere vacillates "between asserting that culture is in or outside the body," like most contemporary psychoanalytical anthropologists (p. 19). In this version, culture is sometimes viewed as a passive set of ideas located inside meaning-makers and other times as an active agent organizing the society outside individuals. This version recognizes the complex dialectical relationship between culture and people. Erickson's classification of culture as "symbol system" is aligned with this view of culture in that culture is considered as "a more limited set of large chunks of knowledge . . . that frame or constitute what is taken

as 'reality' by members of a social group" (2004, p. 36). The members use the knowledge to communicate with each other and regulate each other's behaviors. In this perspective, the knowledge (symbols) exists outside individuals until it is utilized by people; then it enters their minds.

The third version of the culture-in-people's-minds perspective is advocated strongly among cognitive anthropologists who assert that culture consists of cognitive schemas or standards that shape and define people's social experiences and interactions with others. Goodenough (1981) defines culture as "standards for perceiving, evaluating, believing, and doing" (p. 78). When individuals develop their versions of group culture, the individual versions become their "propriospects" in Goodenough's term and "idioverses" in Schwartz's (1978) term.

The view of culture inside people's mind helps people see themselves as active agents of culture. At the same time, when the role of individuals is excessively elevated in culture-making, this perspective is in danger of neglecting the collectivistic nature of "culture." When this happens, the division of psychology and anthropology is likely to be blurred.

A Work-in-Progress Concept of Culture

Acknowledging the potential shortcomings of both perspectives on the locus of culture, here I propose a work-in-progress concept of culture for this book, which is founded on seven premises.

Individuals are cultural agents, but culture is not at all about individuality. Culture is inherently collectivistic, not individualistic. Culture needs the individual "self" as well as others to exist. Therefore, the notion of "individual culture" connoting individual uniqueness defies the core of the concept of culture.

Individuals are not prisoners of culture. Rather, they exercise a certain level of autonomy when acquiring, transmitting, altering, creating, and shedding cultural traits while interacting with others. This individual autonomy is the foundation of inner-group diversity.

Despite inner-group diversity, a certain level of sharedness, common understanding, and/or repeated interactions is needed to bind people together as a group. A formal and official, even intentional, process is not always required to obtain membership of a cultural group. However, a degree of actual and imaginary connection with other members would be needed for them to become part of a collective culture and to claim an identity with the cultural group.

Individuals can become members of multiple social organizations concurrently. In Thompson's terms (1994), some organizations are "egocentric" (with micro-level structures where individuals are more intimately involved) and others "sociocentric" (with macro-level structures such as nations). Some memberships such as race or gender are more likely to be ascribed early in life and others can be achieved later by social or educational affiliations. So, one can be an American citizen, African American, female, graduate of Yale Law School, civil rights activist, and child advocate all at the same time, as in the case of Edelman (1999).

Each membership contributes to the cultural makeup of individuals with varying degrees of influence. Individuals develop varied levels of affinity and identity with different groups of people. The strength of affinity and identity with certain memberships fluctuates, depending on life circumstances. Agar (2006) illustrated this point well with his example of Catholic identity:

> I grew up in a parish with an old Irish priest, so we got that unenlightened 1950s rural-Irish-gloom-and-doom-and-then-off-to-hell-you-go version. By high school, I thought of myself as an ex-Catholic. When I was about 30, I realized I'd never be ex. Nowadays, Mother Church is mostly a source of stories and jokes, except for the days when I feel like a defrocked Jesuit. The way that my religious culture comes and goes and fits or aggravates the flow of the moment changes from year to year, or even from moment to moment.

Other identities also vacillate, depending on the context in which people are placed. Some people have stronger ethnic identity than others; others have a stronger affinity with their primary groups than with nations. Over time, their primary identities—with the strongest sense of affinity—can shift as life circumstances change. For example, Crane's (2000) interview-based research revealed that during Nazi rule in Germany, female children of Christian-Jewish mixed marriages, who had been integrated into the mainstream German society, became much more cognizant of their Jewish roots and voluntarily and involuntarily took on a strong Jewish identity; this newly acquired identity ended up outliving the Nazi era.

Individuals can discard a membership of a cultural group with or without "shedding" their cultural traits. The effect of certain cultural memberships on people's day-to-day operation can be varied even long after they cease to associate intimately with members of cultural

communities. For example, immigrants who change citizenship do not often abandon their native culture and language upon naturalization into their host country. The official abandonment of their original nationality may be refashioned in strict observation of certain cultural practices.

Without securing official memberships in certain cultural groups, obvious traits of membership, or members' approvals, outsiders can acquire cultural traits and claim cultural affiliations with other cultural groups. For example, Olson (1993), a self-ordained Christian missionary, went to Motilone Indian territory in Colombia and Venezuela, learned their language and customs, and became an advocate of the group to the outside world. Without an innate membership, he gained cultural and linguistic knowledge—"languaculture" in Agar's term (2006)—for access to people in the society, which eventually led him to an "affiliate" membership.

The Concepts of Self

Building on these seven premises of culture, I depart from cultural determinism (culture determines group personality) or cultural essentialism (identifiable cultural distinctiveness is relegated to a certain culture). Rather, I see culture as a product of interactions between self and others in a community of practice. In my thinking, an individual becomes a basic unit of culture. From this individual's point of view, self is the starting point for cultural acquisition and transmission. For this reason, scholars of culture pay a great deal of attention to the concept of self. Interestingly, the concept of self varies at different times and in different cultures.

Historical Concepts of Self

Interest in the concept of self has a long history in the Western scholarly tradition. From early Greek philosophers such as Socrates, to early Christian theologians such as St. Augustine (1999, Trans.), to contemporary postmodern scholars such as Gergen (1991), to contemporary psychologists such as Vitz (1977), the discussion of self has been rich and prolific. According to De Munck (2000), the term "self" was not always used in a positive light as it is in contemporary U.S. society. In its first appearance, around the 1300s, it was "used as a noun that packaged sin with the self" (p. 31). So, self was to be denied:

neither to be indulged nor celebrated, but rather to be shunned and ignored. Vitz's notion of "selfism" describes the undesired indulgence of self. This view of self has transformed over time.

Gergen (1991) surveys the changes in the concept of self from the romantic perspective of the 19th century, through the modern one of the 20th century, to the postmodern view of the contemporary era. He characterizes the 19th-century romantic view of self as "one that attributes to each person characteristics of personal depth: passion, soul, creativity, and moral fiber" (p. 6). From this perspective, a person's emotion, feeling, and intuition are considered integral to selfhood. In contrast to the romantic view, modernists deemphasize the affective and intuitive attributes of self and highlight the characteristics of the self residing "in our ability to reason—in our beliefs, opinions, and conscious intentions" (p. 6). With the scientific advances of the 20th century, a person's reason and objectivity are far more valued. However, contemporary postmodernists are skeptics of this modernist sense of a rational, orderly self. Gergen claims, "Selves as possessors of real and identifiable characteristics—such as rationality, emotion, inspiration, and will—are dismantled" in the postmodern view (p. 7). The modern belief in "moral imperatives" and autonomous self (Grenz, 1996; Taylor, 1989) is replaced by the postmodernists' recognition of a "saturated" self that is overcommitted to often divergent pulling forces and demands of surroundings, and a "protean self," in Lifton's term, that constantly adjusts to "turbulent, dislocating, and often violent global forces and conditions" (De Munck, 2000, p. 44).

Although the postmodern view of self might have deprived us of a hope for a self-sufficient, independent, and directional self, it invites us to look at self as a "fragile" and interdependent being. Gergen (1991) articulates the reality of interdependency thus: "[O]ne's sense of individual autonomy gives way to a reality of immersed interdependence, in which it is relationship that constructs the self" (p. 147). The attention to community is another contribution of postmodernism to the scholarship of self: "the continued existence of humankind is dependent on a new attitude of cooperation rather than conquest" *vis-à-vis* community (p. 7). The recognition of self in relation to community is one of the four insights we could gain from the postmodern perspective according to Hjorkbergen (cited in Meneses, 2000).

The postmodern recognition that human beings are not truly independent and autonomous is ironically aligned with the Christian assessment of humanity. While some Christian scholars criticize the postmodern notion of the directionless self lost in moral relativism, they may easily embrace the notion of the fragile self in need of relationships with the Creator and other human beings. As Apostle Paul

reminds us, "so in Christ [the incarnated Creator] we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the other" (Romans 12:5, New International Version). Although Christianity has provided a foundation for Western thought, its notion of self is different from the Western modern secular view of the self-confident, self-reliant, and independent self. Rather, the Christian self, before and after St. Augustine, does not deny its reliance upon others, whether God or other human beings.

Cross-Cultural Concepts of Self

The concept of self has evolved not only historically but also is cross-culturally varied. Gergen's discussion of the romantic, modern, and postmodern self draws upon the Western secular view of self as "a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action. . ." (Geertz, 1984, p. 126). Geertz warns that such a view of self is "a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's culture." Thus it is entirely possible to view self as something other than a unique, separate, and autonomous being to be distinguished from others and to be elevated as the center of the universe above a community. Comparing the Western view of self with that of the Wintu (Lee, 1959) and the Oglala (Lee, 1986), Lee acknowledges that the sense of self in these Native Americans does not rest on the contradiction between self and other; instead, self and other are viewed as mutually inclusive. For Oglala, "the self contains some of the other, participates in the other, and is in part contained within the other. . . . [I]n respecting the other, the self is simultaneously respected" (1986, p. 12). Hoffman (1996) also criticizes the fact that "individual uniqueness" is overemphasized as the tenet of self in the Western scholarship of multicultural education because in many non-Western cultural contexts celebration of the individual self is not always valued and self does not always take precedence over others in the decision-making process.

Collectivism,[1] illustrated in the aforementioned Native American cultures, is not always a non-Western ethos. Valuing a community over individuals was apparent in the first-century Mediterranean culture that permeates the New Testament writings. Malina (1993) uses the term "dyadism," in lieu of "collectivism," to describe the "strong group orientation," manifested in the New Testament culture, in which "persons always considered themselves as inextricably embedded . . . conceive[d] of themselves as always interrelated with other persons

while occupying a distinct social position both horizontally . . . and vertically" and "live[d] out the expectations of others" (p. 67). In such a culture, selfhood is understood only in relation to others within a community.

Autoethnography benefits greatly from the thought that self is an extension of a community rather than that it is an independent, self-sufficient being, because the possibility of cultural self-analysis rests on an understanding that self is part of a cultural community.

The Concepts of Others

The recognition of varying dynamics between self and others allows us to segue into a discussion of "others." The scholarly interest in "othering" has increased in the society of cultural diversity (Asher, 2001; Canales, 2000; Luke, 1994). Human beings have always developed mental and social mechanisms to differentiate "us" from "them." In the process, they develop criteria for others.

The Typology of Others

The term "others" generally refers to existentially different human beings—those who are other than self. The differences that separate self from others "often shift with time, distance, and perspective" (Canales, 2000, p. 16). Not all existential others pose the same level of strangeness to self. Those who belong to the same community as self are likely to be seen as comrades who share similar standards and values. These are *others of similarity.* On the other hand, others from a different community are likely to be distinguished as strangers who possess and operate by different frames of reference. In identifying others of difference, the perception of difference may play just as powerful a role as actual differences. When differences in behaviors, beliefs, or customs are deemed to be not only irreconcilable but also threatening to the very existence of self and others of similarity, the others are regarded as *others of opposition,* namely "enemies" to their neighborhood, interest group, school, professional organization, or nation. The typology of others—of similarity, difference, and opposition—is helpful in understanding self and its interconnectedness with others, especially as a framework for the autoethnographic data analysis and interpretation that will be discussed in Chapter 9.

Cultural Verstehen of Others

I have already postulated that culture is intertwined with people. This implies that cultural understanding of others begins with genuine encounters with them through which insider perspectives are gained. A genuine relationship develops from an "I–Thou" encounter, as opposed to an "I–It" encounter, according to Martin Buber (Panko, 1976). In this I–Thou encounter, people acknowledge human dignity in each other (Pohl, 1999) and are engaged in genuine dialogue "as a person to a person, as a subject to a subject" (Panko, p. 48). The opposite of the I–Thou interaction is the I–It encounter in which one treats others as objects. Buber does not deny the value of the I–It encounter as a realm in which "we are able to examine all things critically and verify or disapprove what we have experienced" (p. 54), yet he acknowledges that the I–Thou encounter is the only realm where those engaged in dialogue can experience each other's whole being. Neither pretense nor insincerity has a place in this relationship.

In addition to genuine encounters, a true understanding of others also requires empathic understanding—"*verstehen*," in German sociologist-philosopher Max Weber's term. Empathic understanding is an act of putting aside one's own framework and "seeing [others'] experiences within the framework of their own" (Geertz, 1984, p. 126). Although perfect *verstehen* is beyond our human capacity, attempts to empathize can reduce incorrect judgments about others and enhance rich understanding of strangers. This empathic understanding is, in a Malinowskian–Geertzian sense, understanding "from the native's point of view," on which a rich contextual understanding of others' culture is grounded. These steps of understanding are equally helpful in understanding others of both similarity and difference.

Yet understanding others of similarity and difference requires a different course of action on the part of self. To continue the discussion we need to revisit the concept of self as a relational being. This concept of self presupposes the existence of relational partners. In other words, self cannot exist alone in the context of culture. Others from the primary community (e.g., family or religious community) and the secondary community (e.g., professional or interest organization) participate in the production of self in the enculturation or socialization process.[2] Self learns values, norms, and customs from others to become a proper member of the community. Self contributes to the continuity of the community as well. In this give-and-take process, self is invariably bound with others within the cultural group. Consequently, self becomes mirrored in others, and others become an extension of self.

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