

Autoethnography as a Research Method in Happiness Studies

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Abstract: The pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal that has been studied by philosophers, theologians, and scientists for centuries. Despite its universal importance, the definition and means of achieving happiness vary greatly across cultures and individual experiences (Uchida, Norasakkunkit and Kitayama, 2004). Cultures have different beliefs, values, and customs that shape their understanding of happiness. For example, some cultures may place a higher value on material wealth and success, while others may prioritize spiritual fulfilment or strong relationships (Joshnloo and Weijers, 2014). In this autoethnographic paper, I reflect on my own personal journey towards happiness during a one-year travel across 22 countries within southern Africa, southeast Asia, and south America, focusing on the first part of the trip – southern Africa. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that involves the researcher reflecting on their personal experiences and cultural positionality in order to understand and analyse cultural phenomena (Bunyan, 2021). It combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, as the researcher uses their own experiences as a way to explore and understand the cultural context in which they participate (Hamilton, Smith and Worthington, 2008). Through the use of personal narrative and cultural analysis, I delve into the ways in which my own cultural background and societal expectations shaped my understanding of happiness. I also explore the ways in which immersing myself in a new culture and community impacted my pursuit of happiness and well-being. By reflecting on my own experiences and observations, I aim to shed light on the complexities of the pursuit of happiness and the potential for personal and cultural growth that can result from stepping outside of one's comfort zone. Through this autoethnographic lens, we hope to offer a unique and personal perspective on the pursuit of happiness, and to encourage readers to consider the cultural and individual factors that influence their own pursuit of this universal goal. We also reflect on how innovation and technology, essential to business, may not be as important to achieve happiness in certain contexts. This essay is a call for reflection on what truly matters in life.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Happiness, Well-being, Innovation.

1. Introduction

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that involves the researcher reflecting on their personal experiences and cultural positionality in order to understand and analyze cultural phenomena (Bunyan, 2021). It combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, as the researcher uses their own experiences as a way to explore and understand the cultural context in which they participate (Hamilton, Smith and Worthington, 2008). It involves analyzing and interpreting these experiences, while also making connections between the author's insights and their own cultural identity, communication practices, traditions, symbols, emotions, values, and broader social, cultural, and political issues (Poulos, 2021). Essentially, autoethnography seeks to contextualize the personal within the broader social and cultural frameworks that shape our lives (Gant *et al.*, 2019).

The purpose of autoethnography is to provide a detailed and reflexive account of one's own experiences, while also exploring the social and cultural context that shaped those experiences. One of the key features of autoethnography is its emphasis on reflexivity. This means that the researcher reflects on their own positionality and how it influences their research. By acknowledging the researcher's own biases and subjectivity, autoethnography aims to produce a more transparent and honest account of the research experience.

Another important feature of autoethnography is its use of personal narrative. Autoethnography is often based on personal stories, which can be used to explore broader social and cultural issues. These stories are not only used to illustrate the researcher's own experiences, but also to shed light on the experiences of others who share similar backgrounds.

Critics of autoethnography argue that it is too subjective and lacks scientific rigor. They also argue that the use of personal narrative can be seen as narcissistic and self-indulgent (Stephens-Griffin and Griffin, 2019). However,

proponents of autoethnography argue that the use of personal narrative allows for a more nuanced understanding of complex social and cultural issues (Allen-Collinson, 2012), and that reflexivity and transparency can mitigate concerns about subjectivity.

Autoethnography has been used in various research settings, namely in business research, particularly in the fields of management (Sambrook, 2021), organizational studies (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012), and entrepreneurship (Fletcher, 2011). One of the key contributions of autoethnography in business research is its ability to provide an insider's perspective on organizational culture, decision-making processes, and leadership styles.

Although, autoethnography has not been much applied in the field of happiness studies, which explores the factors that contribute to well-being and life satisfaction. In this sense, the present paper aims to bring a new perspective in this field, by exploring how cultural, social, and personal factors shape individual definitions and experiences of happiness through the researcher's personal experiences.

The pursuit of happiness (often spurned by a certain dissatisfaction with the *status quo*) is a fundamental human goal that has been studied by philosophers, theologians, and scientists for centuries. Despite its universal importance, the definition and means of achieving happiness vary greatly across cultures and individual experiences (Uchida, Norasakkunkit and Kitayama, 2004). For example, some cultures may place a higher value on material wealth and success, while others may prioritize spiritual fulfilment or strong relationships. Additionally, cultural norms and expectations can also impact what people consider to be the sources of happiness in their lives (Joshanloo and Weijers, 2014).

In the pursuit of happiness, researchers have long debated its definition and how to achieve it. Bochner (2012) argues that happiness cannot be understood without considering its ties to narrative and moral judgments about the goodness of life. This understanding of happiness suggests that autoethnography, a qualitative research method that explores personal experiences and cultural context, could be a valuable approach for happiness studies.

In this autoethnographic paper, I reflect on my own journey towards happiness during a year-long travel across 22 countries within southern Africa, southeast Asia, and South America, focusing on the first part of the trip - southern Africa.

Through the use of personal narrative and cultural analysis, I delve into the ways in which my own cultural background and societal expectations shaped my understanding of happiness. I also explore the ways in which immersing myself in a new culture and community impacted my pursuit of happiness and well-being. By reflecting on my own experiences and observations, I aim to shed light on the complexities of the pursuit of happiness and the potential for personal and cultural growth that can result from stepping outside of one's comfort zone.

Through this autoethnographic lens, I hope to offer a unique and personal perspective on the pursuit of happiness, and to encourage readers to consider the cultural and individual factors that influence their own pursuit of this universal goal.

This essay is an autoethnographic exploration of the pursuit of happiness and its connection business and economics. I reflect on the cultural and individual factors that influence our quest for happiness, highlighting the idea that, despite the importance of material things, they may not necessarily bring happiness. This essay also raises questions about our motivations for work and the role of wealth in achieving happiness. Ultimately, the essay is a call for reflection on what truly matters in life.

In the following section I present four different autoethnographic narratives, before presenting the final conclusions.

2. Autoethnographic narratives

2.1 Story 1: A brief introduction to my own pursuit of happiness

I used to work as a dentist in France after studying in Portugal. I decided to move abroad because job opportunities in Portugal were scarce and poorly paid. I chose France because there is a high demand for dentists, and they are well respected (and well paid) in the country.

While I was studying to become a dentist, I understood that I couldn't be doing that for the rest of my life, but I was already there, and I didn't want to disappoint my parents, so I kept going. I was a good student and became a good dentist. But I didn't love my job. Actually, I didn't like it at all. It made me anxious, caused back pain, and the more I worked, the less I enjoyed it.

I began to consider other options... Society often frowns upon those who leave their careers. But society is more concerned with status, consumerism, and economic growth, than with personal happiness. It can be difficult to break free from these expectations and leave a job without feeling like others are judging you. How can one escape this trap and pursue their own happiness without feeling like a failure in the eyes of society?

In my culture, the Portuguese culture, I felt that I needed to prove my value, and that I was only worth if I had a proper well-paid job, and with a good status. Had it always been like this alongside history? Is this the feeling in other cultures? I didn't think so. I needed more than the "rat race". I needed more than a high paying job. After four years and a half in France, an experience that I don't regret at all, I decided to quit! Six months after quitting I moved back to Portugal, to depart again after one month, for my dream trip! The plan was travelling for a year, clean my mind, broad my vision of society, and maybe get some answers, or even more questions!

It was the second-best decision that I took in my life (the first one was marrying my husband)! What a travel!!! We started in Kenya, did all the southern African countries, then Southeast Asia, and at last, South America. After one year of travels, my mind was not clearer, but I learned so much, that I still cannot put it into words. I felt totally free, and that I could do whatever I wished. Living as a traveler is liberating!

I feel that I have gained more memories from that sole year, than the rest of my life, but that's another story. Here, I want to focus in my pursuit of happiness. How can someone have everything and not be happy, and how can someone have nothing and be happy? It seems like a paradox, but it is not. The question is: "what is everything"? If our sole focus is on acquiring material possessions, then our lives will be filled with unhappiness. That is why I saw so much joy in countries, such as Quenia and Malawi where the vast majority of the population lived very poorly!

2.2 Story 2: The first safari

I must state that I have a special feeling about Africa. I don't know if it is because my mother was born in Mozambique, or because Africa is the birthplace of *homo sapiens*, or even maybe because I found that it is the most untouched continent of all the continents that I've visited. I started the African journey in Kenya's frenetic capital: Nairobi, which has a population of over 5 million. It is a cultural shock, to say the least, and despite the chaos of the city, people are generally nice. But we wanted to see the natural parks, and the wildlife, so we hurried to book our first safari, at the Masai Mara National Reserve.

Going on a safari in Africa, besides being a unique and unforgettable adventure, is also a way to remember childhood and see "The Lion King" come to life. There is no music more fitting for a safari than "The Lion Sleeps Tonight". When the first chords start playing, everyone gets ready to sing along!

Going on a safari means realizing that Simba, the cute little lion who made us cry as children, means "lion" in Swahili, and that Rafiki means friend. Learning that "Hakuna Matata" really means "no worries." In Africa, I felt that that was really the motto. We bring a thousand and one problems from our Western lives, and we realize that, after all, "hakuna matata". The rhythm in Africa is different. It is really about living in the moment, looking at the landscape, and marveling at nature.

Going on a safari means spotting a group of warthogs and our guide saying, "There's Pumbaa!" and everyone looking delighted at those comical animals, and what came to my mind was Pumbaa eating insects clinging to the underside of a rock. And then realizing that the guide had never seen "The Lion King" but already knew the names of the characters just by hearing tourists talking about them during safaris.



Figure 1 - Two Warthogs in Massai Mara National Reserve. The photo was taken by the first author.

Seeing all the wild animals on the savanna, makes us realize that nature is truly perfect. There is something for everyone, from the smallest herbivores to the largest carnivores. And that makes us understand even better why we need to take good care of our planet.

While we were in the Masai National Reserve we visited a Masai village (*Figure 2*). People there live very simply, they rely on cattle for their subsistence, and their houses are traditional, made with clay and straw. Surprisingly, they have access to cellphones, that they charge with one small solar panel. The Masai showed their houses, their traditional way of life, and we could see the happiness on their faces. Although the living conditions of these people are much worse than ours, compared to the standards of developed countries, they are happy, welcoming people who smile and wave at strangers. It is interesting how one can live so simply and yet be happy.



Figure 2 - The Masai making fire in the traditional way. The photo was taken by the first author.

And all of this makes me think about what is really important. It makes me think that priorities are upside down in the western culture. We are all like little sheep running back and forth without being able to stop for a moment, always thinking about our own problems. We are living far above the possibilities of our planet, and we know that this is making it sick. We continue to walk blindly down a path that is often empty, doing jobs that do not excite us, and forgetting to enjoy the moment.

We need to know how to say "Hakuna Matata"!

We need to look more at what is happening around.

We need to look inside ourselves to find out our purpose. What we want to leave in the world.

We need to stop looking at clocks and bank accounts.

That's why I love traveling so much. Because I am amazed by what I have around me and because I see other cultures. Because all of this makes me stop in time. It makes me question. It makes me think.

So, you, who are reading this text, stop for a moment and think about how lucky you are. "Hakuna Matata!"



Figure 3 - The Masai Mara National Reserve and its iconic acacia tree. The photo was taken by the first author.

2.3 Story 3: Travelling in southern Africa

After this first safari experience, we departed from Nairobi to one of the most thrilling experiences of the whole trip: an overland tour, which means travelling by land, in a truck (*Figure 4*), with a group of adventurous people, from everywhere around the globe. We were around 20 travelers, plus one cook, one driver and one guide. Each time we arrived in one place, we needed to put the tent up, unpack our things, and in the next morning, pack everything again in the truck. It was tiring but allowed me to be in touch with many different African cultures and see the beauty of African nature.



Figure 4 - Our overland truck in Namibia. The photo was taken by the author.

After Kenya, we went to Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, where we said goodbye to our overland group and started travelling on our own and did all the south African coast from Cape Town until Durban, and then followed to Mozambique, our last destination in Africa.

During this trip we encountered various humanitarian issues that affected the happiness and well-being of the people we met. For example, in Malawi, one of the poorest countries in the world, we visited a school where 11 teachers were responsible for educating around 1500 students. It was shocking to witness the lack of access to education and resources that children face in these regions, preventing them from reaching their full potential and pursuing their own happiness. The mandatory costs of uniforms and materials for school attendance also served as barriers for many families.

Despite these challenges, the resilience and positivity of the people we encountered was inspiring. Even in the face of extreme poverty, they maintained their smiles and hope for a better future. For too many, life is made with less than one dollar a day. And that made me feel sad because I know that we could live in a much more equal, fairer, and peaceful world.

I've found that, in general, people in Africa live exclusively in the moment. They cannot think long term, because they don't know if they will have their basic needs met tomorrow. So, they only focus on the now, and that is what I felt during the whole year of travels: I was most happy when I was only in the present, and travelling allows us this joy. This may seem very obvious and simple, but it is everything except that. Being in perfect harmony with the 'now' is so difficult! Even more, when we live in a stressed society, attached to high-speed technology, that puts us away from the moment.

2.4 Story 3 – My message to Africa

Africa, for three months I traveled your golden and warm body. By truck, by boat, by car, and on foot. You left me in love!

Africa, don't try to be something you're not. Don't try to become the consumerist society where I come from, where everyone looks out for themselves.

In you, I found a connection to nature.

Some people call you names. Where I come from, they say you're underdeveloped, poor, and full of misery. But I say, you hold the greatest riches within you.

Preserve yourself as you are.

Please don't change.

Your people live on your scorching land in their own way, at their own pace. They are simple people who still live in communion with nature and still look out for others around them.

I wonder about the marks that your colonizers, including my ancestors, left on you. The wounds that are still not healed.

Maybe I am speaking in an unfair tone to those who were born in your body. But I just wish that none of that would change because what I saw was the greatest wealth that my eyes have ever glimpsed.

Seeing the wildlife in Massai Mara, Ngorongoro and Serengeti, South Luangwa, Chobe, Etosha, navigating the Okavango Delta by mokoro, seeing the beaches of Zanzibar, seeing and feeling the impressive Victoria Falls, climbing the dunes in the Namib Desert, descending Table Mountain, sighting majestic whales off the coast of Hermanus, diving in Mozambique and being amazed by the colors of those fish and that sea... and so much more made me happy and made me feel alive, grateful and blessed.

I hope your people can live better, but don't let them lose the roots of their ethnic cultures or their connection to nature. Don't let them lose the smile on their faces.

This is Africa. A sunset beyond words. A night under a starry sky as far as the eye can see on the savannah. The calm of a delta intercut with vegetation. A hot afternoon looking for your greatest riches: giraffes, wildebeests, lions, hippos, zebras, buffalos, crocodiles, impalas... Looking at the silence of the savannah and believing that anything is possible. Seeing the beauty all around us.

Thank you for letting me come to you!

Don't change, Africa!

3. Conclusion

Traveling can be a great source of inspiration and can help stimulate creativity and innovation. When we travel, we are exposed to new cultures, ways of life, and ways of thinking that can challenge our preconceptions and broaden our perspectives. This can help to spark new ideas and inspire us to think creatively. Additionally, travel can provide the opportunity to try new things and take risks, which can also foster creativity and innovation.

One reason that travel may enhance creativity is that it allows us to take a break from our daily routines and habits. This can give our brains a chance to rest and recharge, which can make us more open to new ideas and more likely to think outside the box. Travel can also expose us to new environments, which can help to stimulate our senses and inspire new thoughts and ideas.

Overall, travel can be a powerful tool for fostering creativity and innovation. It allows us to step outside of our comfort zones, learn from different cultures, and be open to new experiences, all of which can help to stimulate our creativity and inspire new ideas.

This travel experience changed me and allowed me to confirm my suspicions that happiness only happens in the now. Happiness is not something that you pursue, it is something that you feel in the present, without being afraid of what can happen in the future! So, in my opinion, cultures that know how to appreciate the present moment, in the same conditions, are happier cultures.

Many people assume that the accumulation of material wealth, access to the latest technology and advancements in innovation will lead to a happier and more fulfilling life. However, I've found that these external factors do not necessarily lead to happiness. While they may bring temporary pleasure and satisfaction, they do not provide a lasting sense of joy or contentment. In fact, excessive materialism and the constant pursuit of more can actually increase feelings of stress, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. Happiness is a state of mind that is not dependent on external factors, but rather, it stems from within. A sense of purpose, meaningful relationships, and self-awareness are more important components of happiness than wealth, technology, or innovation.

Autoethnography can offer a unique and valuable approach to studying happiness, as it recognizes the subjective nature of the experience. Through sharing personal narratives and experiences, the author contributes to the literature by providing a rich and nuanced understanding of happiness that is grounded in lived experiences. By acknowledging the importance of individual perspectives and subjective experiences, autoethnography can shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of happiness, offering insights that are often overlooked in more traditional research methods. Thus, this paper highlights the potential of autoethnography as a valid methodology in happiness studies, paving the way for further exploration of this approach in the field.

On the other hand, in the context of business and management, the importance of happiness cannot be overstated. In particular, the positive inner work life principle or effect [one's positive psychological experience when at work] states that happier, more fulfilled, more intrinsically motivated (Amabile, 1998) individuals are more creative, and even make better colleagues, which in turn makes for a better work environment – so everyone benefits (Amabile, 2017). Especially if the work is seen to be worthwhile and *meaningful*.

Perhaps, in the post-Taylorism period, the greatest challenge is to make work meaningful and to set as an objective to leave room for creativity in daily work tasks... Intensely positive emotions are very good for the organization and for the collaborators involved. It is healthy for all. To deny this is to turn one's back on a reality that award-winning psychologists such as Tversky, Kahneman and Thaler proved to be true – that human beings are highly emotional in everything they do, as opposed to the *homo economicus* view of society – which portrays us as colder, more profit-maximizing decisionmakers – when in fact we are not.

To deny happiness and happy feelings in the workplace is to deny human potential and its essential place in everyday work life. Our research described herein states further that staying in the now [the present] leads to the greatest sense of happiness, and that work should not be too future / goal-oriented or money-oriented but rather creativity-oriented and oriented towards the satisfaction of employees.

In conclusion, the integration of this study with autoethnography theory is natural and seamless. In line with the principles of autoethnography, the author becomes both the subject and researcher, rendering a personal account of happiness rooted in self-reflection and introspection. This study reaffirms the value of personal narratives and experiential knowledge in contributing to broader academic discourses. In particular, the author's traveling experience serves as a lived cultural encounter, where the self becomes a site of learning and data generation, providing a rich, in-depth understanding of the concept of happiness that transcends surface-level interpretations. In this way, autoethnography not only serves as a means to examine happiness in the context of travel and work but also enables the reframing of theoretical understandings and practical applications of happiness in everyday life and organizational settings.

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