

# Qualitative Methods to Capture the Nuance of Realities: My Journey to Explore Their Stories, Our Stories and My Own Stories

## Abstract

This study reflects on my research journey with qualitative methodologies—specifically narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and duoethnography—as ways to capture the nuanced and complex realities embedded in diverse contexts. Through revisiting four distinct studies, I demonstrate how these approaches offer rich possibilities for novice and early-career researchers seeking to engage deeply with lived experience.

My doctoral research employed narrative inquiry to foreground *their stories*—the lived experiences of participants shaped and expressed through personal narratives. Building upon this foundation, I turned to autoethnography to explore *my stories* in relation to theirs, acknowledging the entangled nature of researcher and participant narratives and the emergence of *our stories*. Most recently, duoethnography has enabled collaborative meaning-making, where *your stories* and *my stories* intersect, challenge, and evolve together.

Across these methodological explorations, I highlight the importance of reflection, reflexivity, retrospection, and iteration as central practices within qualitative inquiry. These elements not only support the construction and co-construction of realities but also foster deeper understanding of complexity and context. By critically positioning ourselves in relation to the stories we study, co-create, and share, researchers can cultivate spaces for ethical engagement, transformative insight, and relational accountability.

## Introduction

### Qualitative research

Human interactions are inherently complex and difficult to capture using quantitative methods. Standardized measures often fall short of reflecting the nuanced realities of human behaviour, which are shaped by multiple, layered social contexts. Qualitative research therefore emerged to address the need for understanding rich, contextual, and complex social phenomena. This perspective highlights that social interactions are dynamic and constantly evolving, which aligns closely with the philosophical foundations of social constructionism, as discussed below.

### Social constructionism

Social constructionism provides a framework for understanding people within the context of social interactions (Burr, 2003; Lee, 2016; Lock & Strong, 2010). It emphasizes that knowledge is co-constructed through these interactions, highlighting the collaborative and relational nature of meaning-making (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009). Importantly, the nature of social interactions can shift depending on the specific social, cultural, and temporal context in which they occur (Lock & Strong, 2010; Gergen, 2009). Additionally, social constructionism draws attention to the power dynamics and

hierarchical relations embedded in interactions, recognizing that social processes are never neutral but are influenced by issues of authority, control, and privilege (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009).

Those elements of social constructionism are best linked to qualitative methods such as Narrative inquiry and narratives in ethnography.

## Research methods Utilised

This paper, I will present the qualitative research methods employed in my study, including narrative inquiry, ethnography, autoethnography, and duoethnography. For each method, I will explain why it was selected for the particular study and how it was applied throughout the research process. Finally, I will discuss how each method contributed to generating meaningful and insightful outcomes.

### Their Stories: Narrative Inquiry

#### *Background*

My PhD research investigated how Asian women migrants negotiate their language learner identities in the context of New Zealand. This work sought not only to trace the dynamic and evolving nature of their identity trajectories, but also to examine the range of social, cultural, and personal factors that shaped these shifts over time. By doing so, the study aimed to provide deeper insight into how language learning intersects with migration experiences, influencing both self-perception and broader processes of belonging and integration. This aim may also reflect my personal desire to construct a stronger and more grounded sense of identity as a migrant in a new home.

#### *Narrative inquiry*

Grounded in social constructionism, a narrative approach offers valuable insights into identity and language learning (Norton & Early, 2011; Lee, 2016). Narrative inquiry examines how people experience the world (Moen, 2006) and often involves the telling of past experiences (Labov, 2006). Beyond its temporal dimension, narrative also has a spatial aspect, as it is socially constructed in interaction: a storyteller chooses what to share with an audience, shaping meaning through this exchange (Lee, 2016).

In this way, narrative studies reveal how individuals navigate the social world under the influence of both local and global forces (Riessman, 2008). Such an approach also highlights the interplay between social structures and individual agency, showing how identities are shaped and reshaped within specific contexts (Ahearn, 2001; Giddens, 1984).

#### *Research design*

The research design incorporated initial interviews, post-recount interviews, and reflective interviews. Each participant first completed an initial interview, which introduced the research objectives and clarified their potential involvement. If they agreed to participate, they shared their migrant journey during this stage. Following the initial interview, participants received their transcripts and were invited to confirm the accuracy of the record while also providing further reflections, either via email or phone conversations. Based on this process, subsequent in-depth interviews were scheduled collaboratively. Each participant engaged in six additional prompted recounts, guided by the previous interview, and in-depth interviews. After completing seven iterative interviews in total, the researcher

began analysing the participants' identity trajectories. A final reflective interview with each participant was then conducted, drawing on the analysed data.

Throughout the data generation process, the researcher also shared aspects of her own story when returning transcripts to participants, fostering reciprocity in the research relationship. In parallel, she maintained reflective memos, which were not shared with participants but served to deepen her analytical process.

## Their Narratives and My stories

### *Background*

My PhD research design included elements of my own stories, yet the findings lacked a strong personal voice. In narrative inquiry, my voice became secondary rather than central. It resurfaced only when I revisited a manuscript written before my PhD.

My move toward qualitative research stemmed from my mixed-methods master's thesis, which led to a small ethnographic study with international students living with me during my early years in New Zealand. That 2009 study on Korean students' settlement experiences was set aside for years.

In 2024, I returned to it with a new perspective—no longer a migrant, but a New Zealander with citizenship. Revisiting the work brought closure to a 16-year journey. I now feel more comfortable with my Asian identity and accented English. The manuscript also gained new relevance in the post-pandemic era as international student mobility resumed after years of restrictions.

### *Ethnography*

Lee (2024) explains that an ethnographic approach was used to explore the settlement experiences of Korean international students in New Zealand. According to Reeves et al. (2008), ethnography involves studying the interactions, behaviours, and perceptions within social groups and communities. This method is particularly effective for producing detailed accounts of everyday life, often described as "thick description" (Hoey, 2014). Hoey (2014) also notes that ethnography represents both the process of conducting research and the outcomes it generates. In this study, the approach enabled the researcher to consider the shifting context shared by both researcher and participants. Specifically, the research took place within a pastoral care environment for international students, where the researcher acted simultaneously as a supporter and pastoral carer while the students were engaged in English language learning.

### *Research process*

Lee (2024) describes recruiting participants through convenience sampling (Glesne, 1999), all from the same cultural and geographical background. The study began with two adult Korean women, and because they lived with the researcher, interviews blended naturally into daily life—often informal discussions after dinner. Other household members later joined with informed consent. All participants were from the Republic of Korea, living in the same home, and studying English. Sharing a common language and culture enabled effective communication and deeper understanding of the participants' challenges (Sillitoe, Webb, & Zhang, 2005). Also, conducting interviews in Korean allowed them to express emotions and abstract ideas more freely.

Over four months, data were triangulated through daily observation, interviews, informal talks, and journal and field note analysis. The researcher developed “dialoguing skills” to foster mutual knowledge-building (Gonzalez-Mena, 2005). Narratives became the main means of representing cross-cultural experiences and ensuring participants’ voices were valued (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Looking back in 2024, Lee situates this early project within her broader journey as an Asian migrant, language learner, mother, and academic in New Zealand. What began as a small study evolved into a meaningful project built on participant trust, forming the foundation of her PhD (completed in 2016) and later academic career. Her shifting position from insider to outsider reflects a common ethnographic tension in the research-participant dynamics (Gregory & Ruby, 2011). Through reflexivity, she aims to amplify marginalized voices and represent participants’ stories ethically (Dodgson, 2019).

## My narrative and their stories: Autoethnography

### *Background*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand became far more visible in the public eye. This visibility often carried negative connotations, as Asian migrants were framed through racialised stereotypes and scapegoating narratives. Such portrayals reinforced a stronger sense of otherness among Asian people during this period (Kim et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023). This contrasted with the pre-pandemic context, where racialisation was present but tended to be more subtle or situational. The pandemic shifted this dynamic by directly linking Asian identities to global fear and blame around public health. These experiences support Verkuyten’s (2016) argument that ethnic and racial identities are not fixed but instead shaped by context.

### *Autoethnography*

Lee (2025) used the autoethnography method to unpack the researcher’s lived experiences of feeling of otherness and sense of belonging as a Korean woman migrant in New Zealand during the global pandemic. My autoethnography draws on Verkuyten’s (2016) framework to examine how these forces shaped my life as an Asian woman migrant during heightened scrutiny. Instead of fitting into simple categories of “successful settlement” or “failed integration,” I present a self-determined narrative of belonging, that is ongoing and complex. This approach challenges reductive views, reclaims agency, and affirms the multiplicity of migrant identities in Aotearoa New Zealand’s cultural landscape. They reveal how individuals continuously negotiate their identities in response to changing social and political environments.

### *Research process*

The research (Lee, 2025) drew on Said’s (1987) concept of orientalism and Smith’s (2021) decolonising methodologies to question how mainstream society defines “the other” within existing power structures. Minority groups are often represented through the dominant voice, which carries inherent limitations. Such portrayals tend to reflect imagined understandings rather than the lived realities of these communities. Recognising this imbalance, the research seeks to amplify minority voices by providing a platform for their narratives. In doing so, it challenges colonial notions of division and the binary of “us versus them.”

To address this, I adopt narrative autoethnography, which values both my personal experiences and the collective stories of Asian women migrants. Berger (2001) describes narrative autoethnography as

the researcher's account of their own experiences with a particular group during fieldwork. Using this approach, my experiences as an Asian woman migrant are interwoven with those of my participants from my doctoral research. This method acknowledges researcher subjectivity, treating personal and participant narratives as part of a shared subjectivity (Angrosino, 1998, as cited in Berger, 2001). In this way, narrative autoethnography highlights the fluidity of selfhood and situates lived experiences within broader social and cultural contexts (Coia & Taylor, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2008).

## A new narrative of us: Duoethnography

### *Background*

As part of my Korean Culture course, I invited a special guest speaker who has visited North Korea several times and possesses extensive experiential knowledge about both North Korea and the division of Korea. During the lecture, I noticed that students—and the general public—had limited understanding of North Korea. This observation motivated me to organize a workshop on the topic, with the guest speaker identified as the ideal person to lead it. While planning the workshop, I recalled a previously unfinished duoethnographic research project I had begun a few years earlier. Organizing this workshop thus provided an opportunity to actualize that research idea.

### *Duoethnography*

Lee & Richard (In preparation) “Duoethnography aligns with the sociological aim of ethnographic inquiry focusing on critical examination of personal beliefs, challenges assumptions, and questions taken-for-granted ideas to generate new, often surprising, insights (Lowe & Lawrence, 2020). It involves revealing and exploring these reflections through a series of dialogues with another person, ideally someone with differing life experiences or perspectives.”

In duoethnography, the researchers and the stories they share during these conversations serve as the site of the research, but not its topic (Lowe & Lawrence, 2020). This site becomes "an archaeological examination of the formation of our beliefs, values, and ways of knowing" (Wilson & Oberg, 2002), which are revisited and reconceptualized through dialogue about a chosen topic (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). The topic should be relevant and complex to both partners' work as educators or researchers, enabling them to identify ways to effect change in their own practices or within their profession or institution (Brown, 2015).

### *Research process*

The participants in this study varied in gender, age, and ethnic or national origin, comprising a university lecturer and a subject-matter expert on North Korea. This diversity in personal and professional backgrounds provided multiple perspectives that informed the collaborative process.

The primary aim of the project was to develop the content of a workshop designed to enhance understanding of North Korea and North Koreans. The process consisted of four structured meetings: three meetings were devoted to the development of the workshop programme, followed by one reflective meeting that served as a debriefing session to critically evaluate the outcomes of the workshop. The four meetings were analysed to answer the questions like: Does identifying as ethnically Korean inherently confer authority over North Korean culture and related issues? And How are tensions between experiential knowledge and academic knowledge negotiated in shaping workshop content?

## Methodological contributions

The four research papers, which employed qualitative methods, enabled the capture of nuanced realities, unpacked complex and layered social contexts, and illustrated the interplay of power and individual agency. The following aspects of each method contributed to the richness of the qualitative findings.

### 1) Capturing the process through iteration

The PhD research involved repeated interviews conducted over a 12-month period. Each participant took part in seven iterative interviews, spaced approximately one month apart, including a final reflective interview during the eleventh or twelfth month of their participation. This iterative approach created space for participants to share their stories in depth, revealing narratives that were sometimes complex, contradictory, and at other times affirming. Similarly, a rather small-scale research using duoethnography demonstrated how two participants negotiated the “in” and “out” aspects of reality while constructing a workshop, as explored through four consecutive interviews.

### 2) Co-construction of reality through reflection

The PhD research was designed to enable processes of story sharing. Ethnography and autoethnography further illustrated this dynamic by revisiting participants’ narratives in relation to the researcher’s own accounts, and vice versa. This process highlighted the role of reflection in fostering learning and deepening understanding of one’s stories and also others’ stories.

### 3) Navigating power through telling and retelling

The qualitative research recognised the significance of inherent power imbalances between the researcher and participants. To address this, the study was carefully designed to mitigate such disparities (Lee, Hunter & Franken, 2014). This was particularly evident in the duoethnographic research, which illustrated how power was negotiated between the two participants throughout the process of telling and retelling.

### 4) Displaying agency through reflexivity

Emerging from social interactions and the negotiation of power is the development of individual agency. Participants in the PhD and ethnographic research exercised their agency by negotiating their identities within the context of their power and circumstances. Similarly, the autoethnography illustrates how the researcher navigated challenges and created a safe space for herself, including in the process of publication.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Across these methodological explorations, I highlight the importance of reflection, reflexivity, retrospection, and iteration as central practices within qualitative inquiry. These elements not only support the construction and co-construction of realities but also foster a deeper understanding of complexity, context, and the nuanced dynamics that shape human experience. Reflection encourages researchers to continuously examine their assumptions, positionalities, and the ethical implications of their work, while reflexivity foregrounds the interplay between researcher and participant, illuminating how power, perspective, and context influence knowledge production. Retrospection

allows for revisiting and reinterpreting data in light of new insights, and iterative processes ensure that inquiry remains responsive, adaptive, and attuned to emerging patterns and contradictions. Together, these practices create a methodological stance that is both rigorous and sensitive to the lived realities under study.

Moreover, by critically positioning ourselves in relation to the stories we study, co-create, and share, researchers can cultivate spaces for ethical engagement, transformative insight, and relational accountability. This positioning emphasises the relational nature of qualitative research, where knowledge is not simply extracted but collaboratively negotiated, contextualized, and meaningfully interpreted. Such an approach fosters the capacity to recognize and address complexity of realities, encourages ongoing dialogue with participants, and supports the development of findings that are not only academically robust but socially and ethically resonant. Ultimately, integrating these practices strengthens the researcher's ability to contribute to a reflective, accountable, and impactful qualitative inquiry that honours both the process and the people at its heart.

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