Autoethnography

What is autoethnography?

In recent years, certain leading ethnographic researchers have placed an increasingly strong emphasis on highly personal, experiential and often emotionally evocative narratives. Typically using short stories, drama, poetry and other evocative modes of literary and artistic expression (Denzin, 2003; Humphreys, 2005; Spry, 2001; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012), the narratives produced seek to encourage empathy and identification in readers (Adams and Holman Jones, 2011; Bochner, 2001). By seeking to 'change the world by writing from the heart' (Denzin, 2006: 422), this mode of enquiry sets aside conventional social scientific preoccupations (with validity, reliability, generalizability and so on) in favour of factors like personal meaning and empathetic connection. Indeed, to conduct such autoethnography, in the words of Denzin (2010: 38), is to 'focus on epiphanies, on the intersection of biography, history, culture and politics, turning point moments in people's lives.'

What is perhaps especially distinctive about this relatively new genre is its autobiographical nature. Researchers typically make their own life and experience the "focus of the [ethnographic] story, [it is, therefore, the author who is both] the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed" (Ellis, 2009, p. 13). For its proponents, then, the principal contribution of such writing is that it offers:

> methodological alternatives to what one typically finds in academic scholarship … to put on display a researcher who, instead of hiding behind the illusion of objectivity, brings himself forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study … [an important consideration because] too often … claims of truth try to triumph over compassion, try to crush alternative possibilities, and try to silence minority voices. (Pelias, 2004, p. 1)

We think that the following narrative, drawn from a widely cited journal article, gives a flavour both of the literary style and the evocative, highly personal accounts that many in this mode of ethnography are attempting. The paper's narrator, Jim, "presents a story about the embodied struggles" (Sparkes, 2007, p. 521) he believes his job as a university academic involves. And in this excerpt, we join him by the copying machine in the midst of a chance encounter with Louise, a PhD student:

> Look Jim, I know you are busy. I know how stressed you are. You're always busy and stressed. But I'm also busy and stressed. And you are my supervisor and I have got to get my PhD on time. That's not going to happen if I can't get to you when I need to. And I need to right now. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today! I shouldn't have to feel guilty about asking for your time should I?
>
> Jim simply nodded in agreement. She was right on all counts. Bright, intelligent, dynamic and passionate about her research, she also worked four nights a week and some weekends in a restaurant to help fund her studies. Louise had every right to expect Jim to be readily available as her supervisor and guide her along the way. She should not have to feel guilty about asking for his time. But guilt was the feeling that washed over Jim as the photocopier continued to churn out the multiple copies of student notes for his lecture in 10 minutes' time. He felt guilty about the lack of concentrated time he could give any of his PhD students. He felt guilty about hastily skim reading their drafts of chapters and embryonic analyses. He felt guilty that he could not keep up with the reading he needed to do to push their ideas forward and support their thinking. He felt guilty because he was selling them short. He hated this feeling being associated with an aspect of the job he loved. But, even in this domain, the manic pressures of saturated time, the sheer busy-ness at UWA thwarted his desire to be the kind of supervisor he wanted to be and the kind of supervisor his doctoral students had the right to expect him to be.
>
> Standing there, Jim felt slightly disorientated. His emotions had swung from intense hostility to intense guilt in the space of a few moments. And now raw anger was seeping into the corporeal mix. Anger with a system that made him feel these

> emotions so often in his daily life. Each in their own way drained him, diminished him, eroded him, dehumanized him. (Sparkes, 2007, p. 533, emphasis in original.)

This is a highly evocative vignette of academic life. Perhaps unsurprisingly though, critics of this kind of writing have been far from slow to point to its apparent avant-garde distance from – perhaps even outright diametric opposition to – the received aims and norms of social science. After all, as Behar puts it:

> No-one objects to autobiography, as such, as a genre in its own right. What bothers critics is the insertion of personal stories into what we have been taught to think of as the analysis of impersonal social facts. Throughout most of the twentieth century, in scholarly fields ranging from literary criticism to anthropology to law, the reigning paradigms have traditionally called for distance, objectivity and abstraction. The worst sin was to be too personal. (1996, pp. 12–13).

But one measure of how influential this intellectual current is becoming, nevertheless, is that it has acquired an increasingly widely recognised label: autoethnography. The term was appropriated from a somewhat older anthropological tradition with which it shares little, at least in terms of method; even so, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the popularity and influence of this newer version of autoethnography has started to take off.

The aim of our chapter is to set out some of the background to the debates about autoethography before sharing examples of our own preferred approach to it – vignettes of some of our own experiences of organizational life. We feel that although autoethnography is far from a panacea for researchers in organization studies who want to take a more radical approach to ethnography than has been traditionally the case, it nevertheless has plenty of potential. In order to do this, we'll need to deal with some of the key conceptual debates – and our own personal takes on them. But before proceeding we want to share with you the reasons that we have used autoethnography ourselves.

Mike's Story: Why I Use Autoethnography

I finished my PhD aged 52 in 1999 with a background of 27 years as a science teacher. At that stage, I was uncomfortable with the notion of an authorial presence in any academic text and my thesis was largely written in a detached third person voice. However as I wrote I gradually realised that during the PhD and perhaps because of it, my life had changed. Reflecting on this and the difficulties I faced over the four years of the study I realised that I needed to insert myself somewhere into this rather dry detached academic text. The way I did it was to invent (or so I thought!) the idea of autoethnographic vignettes. I wrote four of these in the thesis separating them from the main text in shaded boxes along with a set of what I called at the time 'jazz notes' where I used my lifelong interest in jazz as an interpretive tool in theorising some of my experience. It wasn't until sometime later when writing an article for *Qualitative Inquiry* that I found out that there was a literature on autoethnography and many authors had used vignettes as a useful device. I'd re-invented the wheel yet again. Nevertheless, ever since, I have been drawn towards autoethnography as an interesting way of presenting research narratives.

Mark's Story: Why I Use Autoethnography

In the early years of this century, I found myself in a business school after doing a PhD in health care management. I'd ended up in a business school simply because business schools were (and still are) where most of the jobs were; at least for people with my kind of background. Like Mike, I'd also had quite a long career beforehand – as an administrator in the UK's National Health Service. Especially when I first started working in a business school, I felt like a bit of a misfit. While the mantra was clear – "as long as you publish (in the right journals) we don't really care what you publish" – I wasn't particularly comfortable with the kinds of research most people seemed to be doing. I certainly wasn't going to do the supposedly disinterested "scientific" analyses, ostensibly of use to top executives that many

of my colleagues attempted. Looking back, I wonder whether I was attracted to autoethnography, in part, as a kind of antidote to the dominant research traditions that so many others were using. That said, I've always been interested in the humanities – I like reading novels and watching film and so on; so autoethnography also gave me the opportunity to read the kinds of stuff I read as a hobby – as part of my job.

What About the Conceptual Side?

The currency and intensity of the conceptual debates about autoethnography are well illustrated by a 2006 special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* – a debate that has continued until today (Fernando et al, 2019). This special issue is devoted entirely to discussing the proposals of the first essay: Anderson's (2006: 392) elaboration of what he calls analytic autoethnography, which he offered out of a concern for 'reclaiming and refining autoethnography as part of the analytic ethnographic tradition'. Indeed, because of autoethnography's concern with the self, one of the central debates is around the possible relationship(s) between theories of self and identity, and methods for representing the self.

For Anderson, the dominant mode of autoethnography (which he refers to as evocative autoethnography) is problematic, in that it typically refrains from – indeed, refuses engagement with – conventional sociological analysis (even though it is often associated with scholars who are institutionally located within sociology departments). He cites the well-known work of Ellis and Bochner, who assert that 'the mode of story-telling [in autoethnography] is akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature ... the narrative text [of autoethnography] refuses to abstract and explain' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; in Anderson 2006: 377). In part, Anderson objects to evocative autoethnography on grounds that it is modelled more upon novelistic lines than upon the received conventions of social science writing: as Denzin

(2006: 422) puts it, evocative autoeth-nographers ‘want to change the world by writing from the heart’. It seems to us, then, that evocative autoethnographers typically reject the inclusion of formal analysis, because they believe that to do so would compromise their autoethnographic stories’ power to evoke – evocation being their key contribution.

Of course, there is an aesthetic element to this debate: which style of writing is most compelling? But Anderson’s objections also have epistemological and political implications. We ourselves would temper Anderson’s (2006: 378) exhortation to be ‘consistent within traditional symbolic interactionist epistemological assumptions and goals’, but we feel it is important, nevertheless, to retain his ‘commitment to theoretical analysis’. For us, one of the major reasons to be committed to analysis is that an insistence on stories being allowed to speak for themselves can dim the ethnographer’s appreciation of the multiple ways in which their stories might ‘speak’. We think that the following story, which comes right at the end of *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, is a good illustration of such dangers. It concerns the author, Ellis, talking with her partner, Art, about celebrating the near-completion of her book:

> ‘I think I’m ready to buy that new car now,’ I say, referring to the silver SLK-320 Mercedes sports car we’ve looked at and test driven several times.
>
> ‘That would be wonderful,’ Art says. ‘What made you decide?’
>
> ‘Mom’s dying,’ I respond. ‘... Mom loved new cars. It would be a tribute to her.’...
>
> Art nods. ‘Why do you think she loved new cars so much?’
>
> ‘They symbolized freedom and independence, adventure and escape, frivolity and treating oneself ...’
>
> ‘Okay, tomorrow let’s go get it,’ I say. ...
>
> We toast the decision with our champagne....

> The talk finished for now, feelings and bodies take over. We bask in the warmth of our love for each other, and finally, the immediacy of the relational moment. (Ellis, 2004: 349)

For some, this story may well evoke the emotions surrounding the events of that occasion. However, in its (apparently unexamined) celebration of conspicuous wealth, personal freedom and traditional family values, the story also seems to us to naturalize some of the ideologies associated with the American political Right. And though attempts at formal analysis do not guarantee that stories will lose their capacity to be read in divergent ways, we submit that had there been a concern to link this text with social theory, the author may have become more aware of its possible ideological dimensions. After all, if her story is open to the kind of political reading we have offered, the Left-leaning objectives often claimed for evocative autoethnography – which Denzin and Giardina (2005: xv) see as an important challenge to what they call 'Bush science' – risk being damaged.

On the other hand, however, an over-riding concern with analysis might risk the opposite problem – losing the evocative power of autoeth-nography. Denzin (2006: 419) illustrates how this could occur, with a juxtaposition of Anderson's ambitions for analytic autoethnography against a statement from Neumann, a leading proponent of the evocative tradition:

> Autoethnographic texts ...
> Democratize the representational sphere
> of culture by locating the particular experiences of
> individuals in tension with dominant expressions of
> discursive power. ([Neumann] 1996, 189)
>
> [compared with Anderson's:]

> Analytic autoethnography has five key features. It is ethnographic work in which the researcher (a) is a full member in a research group or setting; (b) uses analytic reflexivity; (c) has a visible narrative presence in the written text; (c) [sic] engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self; (d) is committed to an analytical research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. (Anderson, 2006: 375)

Thus, while a refusal to abstract and explain may be politically dangerous, we ourselves would still seek to retain those aspects of evocative autoethnography which represent a powerful means (albeit among other means) to 'move ethnography away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation' (Ellis and Bochner, 2006: 433–434). Perhaps this stance is better explained by looking relatively briefly at the historical dimensions of the debate.

The Rise (And Rise) of Autoethnography

> The more one looks for the origins of autoethnography, the more they recede into the misty beginnings of the discipline now routinely censured for denying the possibility of autoethnography by silencing the native voice. One may even find oneself slipping far back beyond that, all the way back to the Socratic injunction "know thyself" which Malinowski was fond of quoting in his seminars. (Buzard, 2003, p. 66)

In order to contextualise the debate, it's worth reminding ourselves that the classic fieldwork studies of twentieth-century anthropologists, sociologists (and, of course, organisational ethnographers) typically constructed narratives in which the participant-observer enters into an alien culture, gets a view of that culture from within and then, as it were, escapes from that culture to present a vision of it unavailable to those inside. Early versions of autoethnography seem almost exactly to reverse this process: they concern looking at one's own culture from without, writing about it, then returning to that culture. Indeed, the earliest published work to use the term "auto-ethnography" for an approach to qualitative research discusses it as the

anthropological analysis of one's "own people" (Hayano, 1979, p. 99). Instead of studying "a distinctly different group than their own" (1979, p. 100) – the standard practice in anthropology – Hayano's version of auto-ethnography envisages ethnographers who "possess the qualities of often permanent self-identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognized both by themselves and the people of whom they are a part" (1979, p. 100). In a subsequently published monograph, Hayano provides an extended example of this version of auto-ethnography, analysing a group to which he himself had long belonged: Poker's (that is, the card game) loose network of nocturnal devotees (Hayano, 1982; see Van Maanen, 1988, pp. 106–7 for a contemporaneous commentary).

It is clear, therefore, that the way Hayano originally envisaged auto-ethnography differs significantly from today's dominant "evocative" version. The latter after all seeks to fuse intimate and embodied autobiography with ethnography. Indeed, Hayano proposes what now seem fairly conventional methods and foci. In particular, Hayano's version of auto-ethnography remains intent upon the observation and analysis of others (albeit others who share membership of the same group as the ethnographer). Unlike evocative autoethnography, Hayano is relatively uninterested in the details of the researcher's own autobiography, and does not trouble the conventional ethnographic distinction between the observer and the observed – a distinction that evocative autoethnography seeks at least to deconstruct; perhaps to dissolve entirely.

Nevertheless, there are still elements of Hayano's work that are shared with today's evocative autoethnography. Hayano questions the taken for granted benefits of an ethnographer's status as an objective outsider; he also makes pertinent his own biography, at least in the sense that explicit analytical use is made of his (previous and ongoing) personal relations with the group studied. So, while injecting into his own definition a stress on autobiographical detail not found in Hayano's work, Norman Denzin, a leading proponent of today's evocative

autoethnography, seems to have been influenced by Hayano's arguments in this, his own early formulation of auto-ethnography (note, for instance, their shared hyphen that Denzin is soon to drop):

> An auto-ethnography is an ethnographic statement which writes the ethnographer into the text in an autobiographical manner ... This is an important variant in the traditional ethnographic account which positions the writer as an objective outsider in the texts that are written about the culture, group or person in question ... A fully grounded biographical study would be auto-ethnographic and contain elements of the writer's own biography and personal history. (1989, p. 34, emphasis in original)

Another early definition of autoethnography as "insider account", which, like Hayano's comes from a cultural anthropological tradition, is rather more self-conscious than Hayano about the power relations inherent in representing "the other":

> "autoethnography" or "autoethnographic expression" ... refers to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations. ... Autoethnographic texts differ [therefore] from what are thought of as "authentic" or autochthonous forms of self-representation ... [because autoethnography] involves partly collaborating with and appropriating the idioms of the conqueror ... [and] are usually addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker's own social group. (Pratt, 1992, p. 9, emphasis in original)

Pratt's version of autoethnography shares Hayano's focus on insiders' accounts of themselves (rather than outsider-ethnographers' accounts of the other), but it is much more explicit about the power asymmetries involved in rendering to the other an account of one's own self or group. For Pratt, autoethnography always emerges from the receiving (or resisting) end of ethnographic work. She argues that subjugated groups, should they wish to speak of themselves in ways intelligible to their oppressors (and thereby producing her version of an

autoethnographic account), are obliged to appropriate certain of their oppressor's intellectual resources. Indeed, her main example is a 1200-page account of the history and culture of the Inca. Dated 1613, and addressed to King Philip III of Spain, the account was written in a mixture of Spanish and Quechua by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala as a response to Spanish misrepresentations of the conquered people's way of life.

Thus, while Pratt's version of autoethnography is again rather different from evocative autoethnography, it seems to us that Pratt shares with evocative autoethnographers important debts to similar intellectual traditions. For instance both versions were borne, at least in part, out of a concern to be responsive to the problematic nature of ethnographic authority. Both are sensitive, in other words, to the question: How can one speak about or on behalf of the other? Indeed, Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 735) chart the development "of reflexive, evocative, autobiographical and vulnerable texts" within an intellectual framework indebted to major poststructuralist and feminist thinkers, one that encourages the uncovering of:

> multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, plural voices, and local and illegitimate meanings that transgress against the claims of a unitary body of theory … [as well as] exposing how the complex contingencies of race, class, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity are woven into the fabric of concrete personal lived experiences. (2000, p. 735, emphasis omitted)

There is a sense then in which today's evocative autoethnography can be seen as one of a number of the more radical ethnographic responses to emerge for ethnographers from the crisis of representation in the 1980s and 1990s. It might be useful, therefore to move next to a potential strategy for autoethnography that we have used. One which tries to respect some of the major insights of evocative autoethnography and which shares some of its methods, while at the same time leaving room for traditional theorisation. We have called our approach autoethnographic vignettes.

Autoethnographic Vignettes in Organizational Research

Vignettes have been variously defined as: "short scenarios in written or pictorial form, intended to elicit responses" (Hill, 1997, p. 177); "concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can offer comment or opinion (Hazel, 1995, p. 2); "stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes (Hughes, 1998, p. 381). Such vignettes have been used in the study of attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and norms across a wide and diverse range of social research topics including, for example, violence between children in residential care homes (Barter and Renold, 2000), drug injectors' perceptions of HIV risk and safer behaviour (Hughes, 1998) and social work ethics (Wilks, 2004). These vignettes, often generated from ethnographic research, are constructed as plausible, vivid examples of situations with which the different groups can identify and are intended to be effective in generating conversations, ideas, group discussion. Thus, as a qualitative research tool vignettes appear accepted, quite commonly used and effective not only as a vehicle for empirical social science research but also a training resource.

However, we would like to examine and, indeed advocate, a more controversial use of vignettes in research, specifically their use in autoethnographic texts where they may be used as an evocative "representational strategy of authorial voice and narrative form" (Jeffcutt, 1994, p. 242). Sparkes's tale of academic life previously cited is a good example of such a vignette, which in Spry's terms "reveal[s] the fractures, sutures and seams of self-interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience" (2001, p. 712). We suggest that the combination of vignettes and autoethnography presents an opportunity for synergy especially between academics and management practitioners by giving voice to both the researcher and the researched. As Jarzabkowski et al. (2014, p. 280) put it, "The evidentiary

power of such vignettes lies in their plausible, vivid, and authentic insights into the life-world of the participants, which enables readers to experience the field, at least partially."

Many members of faculty in business schools have had relatively lengthy industrial experience prior to joining academia. Mark, for instance, the first author of this chapter, worked for 17 years in the UK National Health Service (NHS) before his PhD. Similarly, Mike worked in technical and further education colleges for 25 years before his PhD. Indeed, according to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data (employee statistics for UK universities), the average business PhD student graduates at 31 years of age – implying that many business PhDs have had careers prior to academia – while there is also a large cohort of DBA and executive MBA students who continue working as managers in the course of pursuing practice-orientated degrees. Indeed, a potentially rich well of data exists among business academics and students concerning their own personal, insider accounts – vignettes of working life. However, this well of experience remains relatively untapped, in part because there are few outlets to publish work based on one's own personal accounts.

One particular contribution of scholars' own personal vignettes is potentially to create new windows on "difficult-to-research" areas. Indeed, there are signs of an emergent interest within social sciences to make such writing more acceptable (see, for example, Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012). However, for us, the value of using vignettes is not just to analyse (though analysis is important); it is also to evoke as powerfully as possible some of the personal consequences of being at work. We see potential for this sort of research within a range of current organizational issues including, for example, workplace bullying, work/life balance, home working and coping with the challenges of redundancy or unemployment. Vignettes about such issues, written by people who have directly experienced such thing themselves, should appeal to non-academic audiences – particularly if the evocative element is done well. For academics too, these evocative autobiographical stories can provide a fine grain of detail,

enabling analyses to reveal in new ways some of the contradictions inherent in working life, as well as the connections between one's personal dilemmas and wider social structures. In sum, they have potential to inform policy debates and management action. Here are two examples of these kinds of vignettes we ourselves have written, taken from our own previously published work:

Mike in a Turkish Technical College

The taxi turns right out of the honking traffic through the main gate set within a forbidding, three metre high, spiked wrought iron fence. The taxi driver asks us, in English, whether the fence is there to keep students in, or others out. Students mill about in the yard, between the fence and the dull grey concrete buildings. They are nearly all female, and there seem to be two styles of dress. Some wear short skirts or jeans, sweaters, shirts, boots and long hair. In contrast to this there are some in Islamic dress, their hair and head fully covered by the hijab or scarf and only the skin of the face and hands visible. We enter the main door, and are greeted by the caretakers, all brown-suited middle aged men with moustaches, leaning against, grey unadorned walls. We pass the student common room and tobacco smoke billows from the door. We walk along a tile-floored corridor past a large black bust of Atatürk, a Turkish National flag, tall glass cabinets with examples of costume and embroidery, and continue onto a grimy stone floor, passing hundreds of students along the way. (Humphreys and Watson, 2009, p. 43)

Mark Working in Health Care

As a health care manager I had been tasked with implementing a new ward-based MIS [management information] system. What I had assumed would be minor changes in nurses' work in exchange for substantial gains in terms of the management systems was seen very differently by the nurses themselves. They argued that looking after patients would be seriously compromised, to an extent that far outweighed what they thought were the cosmetic gains in having a slicker administrative system. Whatever the rights and wrongs, it was clear that the political benefits to the top managers in

> being seen as leaders in MIS meant that there was no question of not implementing the new system. During the implementation, I happened to overhear two nurses expressing to one another their strong personal animosity against me because of my involvement. The realization of their hostility left me quite shocked and hurt. I had not anticipated it, and at the time, could not work out why it should have been so vociferous. (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 29)

Mike's vignette is a contextual scene-setting story in the style of Van Maanen (1988, p. 136) who described such vignettes as "personalised accounts of fleeting moments of fieldwork in dramatic form", adding flavour to an account of a difficult consultancy visit and subsequent discussion of culture difference. Mark's vignette is more organisationally focused and formed the basis of an exploration of alternative approaches to organizing practices. We consider that using vignettes of work experience in this way can enhance the theory and practices of both academics and practitioners. This has particular application in published research papers by addressing things like intimacy, insider knowledge and difficult research subjects where ethics might make access difficult. Thus, "vignettes can illustrate the nexus of concepts and relationships, often within a richly conveyed context, which the surrounding text can then tease out" (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014, p. 281). However, while authors' personal involvement in both telling stories and analysing them arguably means that they may be able to bring a greater understanding of the personal issues at stake, there is also a range of problems inherent in providing one's own personal accounts.

Pitfalls and Ideas for Constructing Autoethnographic Vignettes

Problems with the use of autoethnographic vignettes include, for example: (1) memory and forgetting (that is, as opposed to standard ethnography, most autobiographical accounts are necessarily written without diaries or other records); (2) narcissism and methods for the re-

presentation of self (that is, self-stories attract the criticism that they are really just about satisfying researchers' self-regard); (3) the creation of critical distance (that is, the extent to which it is possible, or desirable, to detach oneself from the emotions involved in one's own stories). We have explicitly acknowledged the problems with autoethnographic vignettes in a previously published piece:

> From a methods point of view, it is worth making explicit that these texts of our stories were not derived from any kind of ethnographic field notes – none were taken because the significance of the events only became evident to us later. Thus the tales were constructed, initially from memory, and subsequently evolved through discussions with one another, and also from presentations of proto-versions at various conferences. (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012, p. 115)

Crucially, autoethnographic scholarship requires a literary kind of writing skill, in order to avoid being boring, unimaginative and unreadable. But, practically speaking, how do you start? As autoethnography is about your own lived experience, you do need to have lived and had some experiences and, of course, you also have to recall your lived experiences. In this regard, diaries and other forms of records (email threads, files on previous papers, old CVs, as well as more personal stuff – letters, photographs, scrapbooks and so on) are all invaluable sources for your stories – as is your own imagination and your ability to make sense through theoretical lenses. There is no "blueprint" for autoethnography (fortunately). But it does mean that to write a tale that other people will find interesting you need to have a wide awareness of the almost infinite variety of ways in which stories can be told successfully.

If You Overcome the Pitfalls

In organisation and management studies autoethnography remains on the margins of scholarly endeavour; a marginality that in our view represents a loss, overall, to the discipline. Indeed, while we would hardly wish it to displace the primacy of more

conventional forms of organisational ethnography (Watson, 2011) we nevertheless find much to commend in the best autoethnographies. The emphasis on the personal and evocative, along with autoethnography's often literary and storied nature, seems to us to open up new opportunities for a range of novel contributions to be made – including, importantly, contributions by practitioners. These characteristics of autoethnography can, we believe, also provide illuminating parallels with more established modes of representation within management studies and management practices. Autoethnographic accounts are also enhanced and made more vivid by "vignettes [which] are a particularly useful way to illustrate the messy and entangled interrelationships between concepts as they actually occur within the field" (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014, p. 280). Management practitioners can use their experiences to construct such evocative vignettes that in turn can form the basis for analytical autoethnographic research papers. This could not only improve working relationships between practising managers and academics (thereby enhancing MBA Executive education!) but also, potentially, provide synergistic insights into topical and perhaps difficult organisational issues.

Finally: Some Practical Tips

Not that long ago, it was hard, if not impossible, to get published in a mainstream management journal using autoethnography – especially if that's the label you used. For example, the first draft of a paper by Mark that was eventually published in *Academy of Management Learning & Education* (Learmonth, 2007) had the term "autoethnography" in the title and he'd used the term a number of times in the text. However, the editor instructed that the term had to be removed before it could be published. That was in 2005; we suspect that this sort of thing would be much less likely to happen today. Many of the journals of the Academy of Management have now published articles that use autoethnography. The same is

true for many European journals – at least those that regularly publish qualitative work. While it's still on the margins of our discipline, at least the term is no longer taboo within management and organization studies generally.

Unfortunately, we regularly talk to people who clearly think that autoethnography is a soft option. They seem to believe that it's easier to do than say a regular ethnography basically because you don't have to carry out any fieldwork – you just have to tell a few stories about your experiences. If that is your view, then you're very likely to be rejected by journals – rightly so – and please don't blame bias against autoethnography! In our view, if you just want to get published as quickly and as often as possible in order to further your career, autoethography is probably the worst choice you can make.

A few years ago, we wrote that potentially "anything goes" in terms of how to do autoethnography successfully (Humphreys & Learmonth, 2012: 344). We still believe that there is no formula for success – almost any approach to representing and storying the self thing *could* work. If you believe that your work communicates something of you in the way that you think it should then you need to find the best way to do it. This process will probably take a long time. It will involve lots of redrafting, lots of presenting to friendly (and not so friendly) audiences in conferences and seminars, and doubtless a string of rejections from journals. For example, we started writing what was to become our best known paper using autoethnography (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012) in 2005. We presented proto- versions of it at countless conferences and seminars and earlier versions were rejected from 2 other journals before *Organization* eventually accepted it. Even then it was accepted only after several complex rounds of reviews and almost getting rejected. Mind you, it's perhaps the paper that both of us are most proud of; we'd certainly encourage anyone who's interested in the approach to give it a go.

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