



Title: **Women in powerful conversation: collaborative autoethnography and academia**

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Women in powerful conversation: collaborative autoethnography and academia

Abstract

Working as women in academia may still be regarded as “complex and fraught with myths, gross generalisations and mixed emotions” (Barakat, 2014:1). In this paper we articulate the collaborative autoethnographic process in which we have been engaged over some time and through which we have challenged generalisations, explored emotions and illuminated further our complex identities as women in academia. Sharing and making visible our collaborative autoethnographic conversations and writing to other readers is risky and exposes us to possible censure. We realise that we are susceptible to being disparaged for being self-indulgent – a common criticism of autoethnography – yet we contend that our conversations and writing are both self and socially luminous as we connect our ‘selves’ with the UK higher education context. The paper’s main focus is the collaborative autoethnographic *process* in which we have been engaged. Examples from our conversations and writing are included in order to demonstrate the power of this process and its potential and wider relevance for research,

Prologue

In a first floor office in a UK university building, one woman sits at a desk, writing thoughtfully on her laptop. She is alone, the door is shut and there is total silence apart from the tapping of her fingers on the keyboard. She glances at the clock on the wall and notes that the 15 minutes allotted are almost over. At the same time in a house about 100 miles away, two other women are also engaged in writing, separately in different rooms. One is writing reflections on paper and the other is speaking, making her separate notes, onto an iPad. The writing trio has met again for one of their many conversations that have led to this paper. Following their 15 minutes of writing, they read it aloud to each other, via Skype, and reflect together on their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

Introduction

The experiences of women academics continue to be much discussed, described even within the last few years as “complex and fraught with myths, gross generalisations and mixed emotions” (Barakat, 2014, p.1).

Writing about the work that led to Bostock’s book, *The Meaning of Success: Insights from women at Cambridge*, Barakat states that there is “rich evidence that women are not all the same - their experiences are not the same, the value they bring to the university is not the same and their paths to success are very different” (op cit, 2014).

Bostock’s study, which initially used questionnaires with 126 women, presents interviews with 26 who reflect a “range of perspectives, ages, backgrounds, levels of seniority and views on their working lives” but are also “viewed by their colleagues as being successful women”.

Taking inspiration from both Barakat and Bostock, since May 2015 we, the authors, have been engaging in autoethnographic conversations via Skype; conversations that are loosely based on the collective biography model developed originally by Frida Haug in 1987 and extended by, in particular, Davies and Gannon (2006). When we embarked on this process, our aim was to build on prior work by offering our own perspectives from what we would describe as three different forms of “the university”, thus articulating how the discourses of those different UK universities might impact on the experiences of women academics. One of us works in a Russell group institution, one in a well-established Post ’92 university, and the third in a university that had college status until 2013. In the UK in 1992, “the divide between universities and polytechnics was dismantled to create a ...unitary system of higher education” and then a year later, the “self-proclaimed “leading” institutions” i.e. those that were more research intensive, formed themselves into the Russell Group” (Boliver, V. 2015: 608). In spite of such labels being disputed, we might be expected to reflect something of the differences between our institutions in our conversations but, overall we have much in common. We all balance teaching, research and leadership responsibilities in our respective institutions. We are all in the later stages of our careers. We share the same ethnic origins. When we came together initially as a trio at the invitation of the first author, our similarities provided a helpful foundation from which to start to develop our research into our experiences. As the conversations progressed however, we realised that there were differences as well as similarities in our experiences.

Our interest in women in academia not only builds on the work of Barakat and Bostock but is reflected elsewhere (see, for example, Pritchard, 2007; Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010; Silander, Haake & Lindberg, 2013). It seems that there is still a keen interest in 'women in academia' and we considered that sharing our experiences would not only add to the existing literature but would offer an autobiographical approach with which other women might want to experiment. The first time the three of us met in the same room was immediately before presenting our work at the annual Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) conference in December 2015, when we were both delighted and somewhat surprised by the extent of interest in our combined experiences as academics, and the degree of resonance felt and expressed by many of those attending. From the questions posed at the end of our presentation, it was also evident that there was significant interest in our methodology and how we had approached our autobiographical collaboration.

Although our research has focused on our experiences as women in academia, there is potential for the approach that we have used to have much wider relevance and application. For example, we each have lengthy individual associations with professional women's groups and networks, both within and outside of academia, where collective autobiography or collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013) has facilitated powerful conversations and generated rich data in other areas of work. Our approach also aligns well with participatory research in that everyone involved engages together "in democratic dialogue as co-researchers and co-subjects" (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 283).

In this article, we therefore focus on our methodology and offer insights into our particular process. We include excerpts from our collective writing in a central section with the intention of illuminating both our account of our process and the power of looking "inward ... back and forth, inside and out" (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015).

Setting out the Process

Collective biography is a form of research methodology – and a method of collaborative writing - that encompasses collaborative data collection and analysis. Collective biography can “make visible, palpable and hearable the constitutive effect of dominant discourses...and open both ourselves and discourse to the possibility of change” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p.5). Similarly, autoethnography is a methodological approach that connects “self with others, self with the social, and self with the context” (Njunjuri et al. 2010, p.3). It is an approach with much potential for investigating women’s experiences in academia and elsewhere, yet one that is rarely used in higher education research, particularly in a collaborative manner. This may be because of a reluctance, for legitimate reasons, to “lay bare our innermost thoughts and concerns” (Armstrong, 2008, no page number) or it may be because many academics share Delamont’s (2009) contention that the responsibility of an academic researcher is to investigate others’ lives.

Grounded in postmodern philosophy, autoethnography enables non-traditional and diverse ways of knowing (Wall, 2016). It has been criticised for being unscientific and without theory or concepts (Denzin, 2014), yet it can challenge or trouble established ways of thinking about academic (or other) identities, illuminating how those individual identities are connected, inextricably, with the social, cultural, cross-cultural and historical landscapes of, in our case, higher education. Thus, in examining the self and investigating our own lives, we are inevitably connecting with the lives of others and the cultural landscape in which we find ourselves (Chang, 2008); our work is not, therefore, atheoretical. Unlike some other forms of social and educational research, we are not looking in from the outside, but looking out from the inside, which we suggest offers a uniquely informed perspective.

There is still much to learn about autoethnography as a research methodology and as Wall (2016) observes, its advocates tend to polarise towards either an analytical approach or an evocative approach. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that autoethnographic methodologies have “tremendous potential for building sociological knowledge” (op cit p.7) and facilitate the “collaborative creation of sense-making” (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, p.433). In our work we have attempted to adopt the middle ground or “moderate and balanced” approach suggested by Wall (2016, p.1), combining elements of both analytical and evocative autoethnography to allow a range of voices

to be represented in qualitative research that is also rigorous and sustains confidence in its quality and usefulness.

Critics of autoethnography argue that “a single case only tells one story” (Denzin, 2014, p.70). Collaborative autoethnography brings together a number of stories and can “have effects, produce realignments, shake things up” (Grosz, 1995, pp. 126 -127 cited in Davies & Gannon, 2006, p.5). In our own work, we accept that separating the personal from the professional is no longer useful in academic life; we need to be aware of our own values and beliefs and where they might be challenged by alternative ones, if we are to function effectively in our complex, multi-layered environments (see, for example, Author 3, 2015).

Our experiences of collaborative autoethnography echo the words of Hayler (2011, p.1) that “valuable insights into the work and identity... can be gained by examining our own memories and beliefs and the narrative discourses through which we understand ourselves and our work are a source of rich description and insight”. Scrutinising and rendering visible to others how we construct our identities as university academics is, however, risky, not only because it is not that common, but also because it renders us vulnerable and susceptible to being disparaged for being self-indulgent – another common criticism of autoethnography (Denzin, 2014). Yet, by engaging in collaborative autoethnographic conversations about our experiences as female academics, we contend that rather than being self-indulgent, we are being ‘self-luminous’. “The portraitist’s reference to her own life story does not reduce the reader’s trust - it enhances it. It does not distort the responsibility of the researcher and the authenticity of the work; it gives them clarity” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p.96, cited in Feuerverger, 2012 p.363). Thus, through connecting our ‘selves’ with the context, with the ‘social’ and with ‘others’, we offer a transparent articulation of our worlds. This, in turn, may move ‘others’ to reflect critically on their own similar experiences. In this paper, we also invite others to consider the usefulness of our methodology to facilitate their own reflective research.

In our work we have conceptualised collective biography and collaborative autoethnography in a similar way: as an approach to research that involves a team of

people adopting an iterative, reflective process which necessarily includes data analysis. As Ngunjiri et al (2010) observe, collaborative autoethnographers work together in different ways, sometimes collaborating fully throughout the research process and at other times combining collaboration with individual work. In our endeavour, we have mostly used a collaborative approach but have undertaken some tasks as individuals, as will become apparent.

Since early 2015, we have 'met' every 6 weeks or so. The two of us who live and work most closely to each other have met in one room and then have used two adjoining rooms to reflect and write. The third person, who lives and works in another county – has joined us via Skype. We have talked about whatever has been uppermost, initially in our professional lives but very quickly also in our personal lives, where each impacted on the other. During each of our conversations, we have taken 15 minutes to write individually and in the first person about the self (generating data) before then reading what we have written aloud to each other, then talking about what we have written. Following our meetings, we have taken turns to revisit the individual writing prior to the subsequent meeting, to amalgamate new contributions into a growing piece of work (what may be termed data analysis). This updated summary has been circulated between us and, on some occasions, has provided the starting point for our next conversation.

In revisiting the initial written work, we have identified common or powerful themes, 'cutting and pasting' from our individually-written pieces and distributing the content under a series of headings that resonate with all of us. What emerges from this process is autoethnographical writing that brings together our experiences to such an extent that we can all identify with what has been written, without always being able to identify – or wanting to identify - our individual contributions to the writing. This has been an important part of the process. As our conversations and our writing progressed, we began to realise that the similarities between our experiences outweighed the differences and the 'I' shifted to the 'we'. This in itself has been a powerful experience.

We have found that reading the writing aloud is one of the most compelling dimensions of this process and this was echoed in comments received from those attending our

session at the SRHE conference. In an effort to share, with authenticity, as much of our research process as possible at that event, we read aloud pieces of new writing that we had not previously shared with each other. Whilst we are clearly unable to repeat that approach here, what follows are excerpts from our collaborative autoethnographical writing (in italics) supported by additional commentary, both of which are intended to provide the reader with additional insights into the powerful nature of collaborative autoethnography.

Powerful Images

Left in a corner to gather dust

I like that image but I don't like the feeling.

My head is buzzing at the moment

With words and phrases

Like 'value', 'threat'

And particularly 'gathering dust in the corner'

And 'being blanked'.

Is the experience

Of being 'left to gather dust in the corner',

A statement that presents a really powerful image to me,

Gender related?

The issue of shelf life

In particular resonated with me

But I think

I haven't thought it all through yet.

This poem brings together what we saw as powerful images in our individually written pieces following one of us sharing that she was facing retirement. The use of both 'I' and 'we' in our writing has enabled us to combine individual and shared experiences. The following extracts from our collaborative writing are grouped together under headings that resonate with all three of us.

Early impressions

The methodological approach underneath our writing and the conversations that we have may leave us spinning but always wanting more: there is a hunger for something that the work for this project has stimulated and fed. Already we have found that the project has potential to reduce the feeling of isolation that we (and we suspect many others) experience working in HE. Through our conversations, we have come to acknowledge that something that we see in HE and which we dislike intensely is people at all levels not being sufficiently respected; meanwhile some play the game arguably more effectively and win at the expense of others. That is a status quo that we wish to challenge. If working together in the way that this project allows and getting something published within the constraints of the current climate is one way to further the discussion - then we are willing to continue to put energy and time into it. On a personal level, we are also aware that it will and already does actually help us feel better about the respective jobs that we do in HE.

Talking together without restrictions, sharing aspects of our working lives; when we then hear that it resonates with another, is a mystery but a truth that somehow makes us feel a little better. On one level it affirms our own experience. On another, it might be something about the enjoyment of sharing with another human being when, as academics, we do so much work alone. It is definitely important for each of us to be heard. Much is made these days of listening but is it not actually more about hearing? So, if someone were to ask what the point of this project is, we would say that talking together, and sharing experience, offers the chance to do more than we can always achieve individually and separately - and if something of our experience encourages or supports another to keep going in an increasingly difficult landscape then that feels very worthwhile. We feel a certain amount of reassurance in this: it feels like an affirmation to us and confirmation of what we have long suspected - that we are rarely, if ever, alone in our experiences and our reactions to those experiences. We sometimes just think that we are, perhaps when we perceive ourselves to be sitting on that shelf, gathering dust in the corner.

Newcomers and old stagers: rocking the boat

New people coming into each of our respective institutions at certain points appear to have had a significant impact on our own experience of being involved, consulted or

feeling valued. New Vice Chancellors presenting new strategic direction for any university can open up (or otherwise) opportunities for individuals but perhaps always the initial image is of the boat being rocked.

That may not be bad of course. However, is there a danger that the newcomer will not recognise, understand or value the diverse experiences and knowledge of existing staff and that might lead to us feeling dismissed, touching something deeper?

To return to the poem and the image of shelf life, perhaps it is less to do with age or becoming or being retired than ongoing mental capacity. Maybe we all have a shelf life, regardless of who we are or where we live out our working lives. That, though, perhaps feeds into the temptation to value only the new and the young. Surely we want to champion the opposite. After all, one positive aspect about HE careers is that they seem to offer real scope for older workers when careers that are more physical would indeed, to use another powerful image, have thrown us onto the 'scrap heap'. To combine those images then, does the new maybe shake things up so that we can find a new impetus or direction, the new seeing possibilities in us that have lain dormant or untapped?

Standing together with our similarities

On many occasions, reflecting on our writing and noting the similarities between all three experiences and feelings, we felt encouraged. Of course, we are a self-selecting group and so this might be expected. However, we were struck by the frequency with which a word or phrase was echoed in each other's writing. To us this indicated a certain degree of resonance in our understanding of both our own and each other's experiences in our respective universities, and of our understanding of the main points exchanged.

What struck us most in today's conversation is that on this occasion, the similarities between our experiences seem to be more prevalent than any differences, despite our different HE settings. That is what we have found ourselves talking about more, and talking more openly about. Is there then some correlation between institutional focus or priorities and collaboration - is there an obvious link between [what is possibly more individualised and more competitive] research and a less collaborative approach? And

a corresponding link between an emphasis on collaborative provision and support in a learning and teaching focused institution or school, and a stronger inclination towards collaboration? And where does gender fit in? Are women academics working in more individualised institutions fighting their own corner by adopting a more adversarial approach? Our questions raise issues that do not pertain only to HE, or only to women.

Perhaps because of the way we are paid or because of the amount of academic work that has gone into getting the qualifications that have led to the jobs we do, there is a pecking order or hierarchy in HE. How much is our experience as experienced women working in HE actually just about how people are as human beings? So, there will always be those who are looking to align themselves with the powerful and the useful and therefore either consciously or otherwise dismissive of others they do not see or appreciate as helpful/useful. How much might the way we position ourselves be somehow influencing others around us into inviting us to be part of things or otherwise? Others may be threatened in some way by the thought of asking for advice and experience to be shared; perhaps, probably wrongly in our opinion, concerned about appearances and that asking for help might somehow weaken their own position. Is the size of the institution or the part of it that we are involved with important? If you know everybody, are you more careful about relationships with colleagues? Can one hide and be less kind or considerate of others in a larger group? How much of this is because of national policy within HE at the moment, requiring intense focus on REF-able(research) outputs? If this was not the case, would it allow for more true collaboration? Teamwork?

We are asking a lot of questions in that paragraph! But, those questions have been important in enabling us to recognise that many of our experiences are similar - that recognition has become, in itself, a source of strength. At the same time, articulating those questions emerging from our collaborative conversations has helped us to acknowledge what we can influence and maybe what we can't.

Questioning collaboration

Thinking back on what we had written, something that we have not explored is an implicit understanding (and agreement) that collaboration and teamwork are 'good'

things and that individualised, more ambitious solitary working in HE may be less 'good', appreciating that the word 'good' is problematic. To dig down further into that point, it isn't that ambitious solitary working is a problem so much as how it may affect others (colleagues?) negatively. So, we may all be thinking at some level that the ambitious solitary colleague may only be able to be successful (to some extent) because they step over or even on others. There are many caveats within this paragraph but this would be something worth exploring further. It is interesting how we keep coming back to the individual nature of the work that we do and the lack of space for collaboration.

Assumptions, expectations, context, power and the interplay between them all seem significant in respect of collaboration and in respect of other elements such as gender. How many of these elements are culturally influenced? How many aren't? Does it matter? Yes, if we want agency. We were surprised that we hadn't really considered the broader 'context' until one of us mentioned working overseas and experiencing a more collective approach adopted by academics there. What we are doing is, of course, taking place in a much wider cultural and historical context and we must not ignore that.

Do others elsewhere collaborate better than we do here in 'the West?' Do people in other spheres in the UK such as schools, research, business or hospital environments respect and value team input more than we see typically in HE? Are we making assumptions about the individualistic nature of academic work? Or are they expectations? If so, when did they begin and how? How much of this is discipline specific – in the sciences would people naturally collaborate together? So we think that, by doing a form of collective biography, we are doing something different and that is challenging the so called status quo of academic work. But is that the status quo? Or is it our imagination? No, it cannot really be our imagination because, that is how academics get rewarded, certainly promoted. We are not sure that people in our institutions are promoted because they are collaborative, no matter how much emphasis is supposed to be placed on academic citizenship.

One of the absolute joys of working in higher education is working with colleagues from varied backgrounds and we include students in that statement. Supporting their learning and perhaps ultimately helping them move forward in their careers is a joy

and we can take real pleasure in that. Respect is a keyword. One of the things we seem to have possibly lost in higher education here in the UK is genuine respect for each other's abilities, talents and contributions. Our HE lives are extremely multi-layered but how much teaching does the ambitious HE person do? What is privileged over everything else is research. However, to return to the multi-layered point, we may be able to be collaborative and team spirited in certain parts of our working lives - but that may be more difficult to achieve in other parts such as 'research' – unless we work collaboratively across institutions. Is there something about power in this? Is all of this linked with bigger notions of power?

Our conversations enable us to explore assumptions such as those that we make above, and in particular, our assumption that collaboration is a 'good thing'. But the process involves so much more than exploration; we question and challenge each other, probing statements so that we understand on what basis they are made. Between meetings we reflect further on our writing and discussion, as we have already mentioned, taking it in turns to assemble the pieces of writing for our next meeting. Then, perhaps inevitably, in each subsequent meeting we share more of ourselves, taking more risks, trusting, challenging, and moving out of our comfort zones.

Challenging each other

This is beginning to feel like a forum where I can speak without being censored or self-censoring and I haven't had this experience with academic colleagues before; there hasn't been a space for it. I haven't made a space for it and, even if I had, I wonder what the differences might be with close colleagues as opposed to colleagues from other institutions. It is also exciting to be looking to push the boundaries a little. I thoroughly enjoy using story in teaching and I'm convinced of its value for helping people learn. When working in an increasingly managerial and admin focused role it is work like this that can raise our eyes from the mundane to something that is more innovative, interesting and creative, work that actually energises me. This feels like a space for sustenance.

Are we challenging ourselves and each other enough? Enough for whom or what? We've challenged each other more during this last conversation - what do we do that is self-limiting? Do we say 'yes' when we should be saying 'no', for all sorts of reasons?

And when we say 'no' should we be saying 'yes'? Our shared priority - that of putting our students first - has consequences. I've just noticed that I'm using 'we' more here than I have done when I've written before. Am I making assumptions here (that our perceptions and experiences are shared when they're not)? I don't think so. The 'we', for me, represents a growing affiliation with the others. I'm looking forward to where this might go and am ready to put both feet in now rather than just dip my toe in the water.

It feels like we're making progress, both in the openness of our exchanges and with this project. This feels very positive and I'm also pleased to have some deadlines to work towards. Looking forward to the next bit! Maybe it touches on this ambivalence that seems to be ever present – I want to – and do – go out on a limb, take risks etc. but, what I see being rewarded – in terms of what seems to get published and subsequently rewarded through promotion – doesn't seem to me to be risky. So – I don't want to play the game and often openly resist and subvert it – but then can get upset if I don't feel valued. I feel as if I am always being torn – or tearing myself – in so many different directions. As we were talking, I shared how I had asked a colleague whether it was worth my going to a particular meeting, as I wouldn't be teaching that unit again. He said that, in that case, 'No'. I then felt hurt and cast aside – 'What about all the experience I've had of supervision that I could contribute'? The other two both commented that I had set myself up for that particular response and that, had I written something different in the email, it would have drawn a very different reaction from him. I felt quite challenged by this. No bad thing but it's left me musing on why I did that – and why I seem to set myself up to be knocked down rather too much. Writing this, I'm realising that, at the same time as I feel cast aside by my School, I am receiving more and more invitations from others to collaborate on projects... the phrase 'no prophet is accepted in her own land' comes into my mind... What also struck me was mention of the potential we have for positioning ourselves - as being 'valuable' or 'not so valuable' perhaps - which could lead others to see us in a similar light or, (and possibly more likely in my view) affect our perceptions of how others see us. What do we 'give off'?

The value of collaborative autoethnography

The credibility of collaborative autoethnography has already been discussed and we have relied on the work of others (Chang et al, 2013; Moore, Scarduzio, Plump & Geist-Martin, 2013; Ngunjiri, et al, 2010) in addition to our own experience of it to support our advocacy of its methodological worth. However, the following excerpt offers an insight into our reflections on our work together.

So then, again, what is the value of what we are doing? The focus of our talking and writing is us – and our experiences as academics in three different institutions but – what if the focus were not us but something different – would this process still be valuable? It would seem that for all three of us we believe the answer to be a resounding “yes”.

It seems that in today’s conversation we began to glimpse what is a significant difference in process from writing we have done with others, and we are left thinking about the strengths and limitations of this approach.

An example one of us shared was where she wrote pieces for an article entirely separately from her co-writer, and the other colleague in that instance, the lead writer, did not merge the writing at all. Feelings of being an outsider in that instance were shared with her co-writer but in a limited way for fear of causing offence. She felt that had they talked about their stories, then written, shared, talked and written again, there would have been more chance of the issues - the elephant in the room – being addressed.

We each have experiences of where working with others in research situations has resulted in some uncomfortable or removed writing because of concerns for others’ sensibilities, imagined or otherwise. Do we, through working as we three have done over these handfuls of conversations, have a way of working, a method of working that is useful above the typical research colleague style of writing together? In addition, in more traditional research work using the typical methods of structured interviews or other similar data collecting, one is left knowing there is far more probably left unanswered than said.

Perhaps this brings us back to challenge and power– and the point about it being projected onto you regardless of making an effort to level the playing field. But is it

level even when we think it is? Are there power dynamics even here in this trio that are impacting on our conversations?

It is difficult to speculate. Each of us would surely challenge something that we felt uncomfortable with or make explicit something that we might notice about any of the three of us. Challenge isn't just outward facing. But it's not perhaps always comfortable or necessary – it is surely dependent on the focus of the research or conversation. We would need to trust and feel trusted and be confident that those we are working with are clear about intentions in challenging for us to be open and honest.

Although this seems to have got us onto a train of thought around where there are real positive possibilities for working collaboratively, offering opportunities to dig deeper, to go down through layers of reality, truth or honesty - whatever we might want to term it, to finding a place where we are writing more openly than is usually possible, there are also still potential challenges.

Overall, it feels that it is useful to push forward and discard or deliberately challenge perceived or actual power relations and other relationship or cultural issues that may affect or in part impact the "data", because there is a value around what is left as something rare. Thus, as we often tentatively pick our way through issues via stories and experiences spoken aloud in front of one another, it seems to allow opportunity to create something 'better'. It certainly challenges the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the system by which the quality of research in UK HE is assessed that arguably proposes that the lone researcher is best. We seem to be moving towards an understanding that, quite the opposite, collaborative, collective working together does result in something richer, the sum of the parts resulting in something more. This of course is the classic constructivist / constructionist approach where one creates something in working with another rather than just falling on one's own personal and professional experience.

Competing demands on our time

Regardless of the methodological approach being used in our individual research projects, we have found that when under pressure because of managerial or administrative responsibilities, it is far too easy to put our own research interests and

time to write aside. This penultimate excerpt below begins with our reflections on the time commitment associated with our collaborative autoethnography.

If we have agreed with others to meet, talk and write we will not go back on that agreement and risk letting others down. Putting a time in the diary to talk ensured that it actually happened. Yet when we talk, we do not always see things in the same way. For example, we had a conference to plan for: for one of us this helped us to focus but for another it felt as though our time together was being hijacked by discussions about how we would present. Focusing on a conference presentation helped one of us to give it her full attention, as we were working on it together and not being drawn into other things, as she would be if doing the preparation on her own. In talking through these different perspectives, we realised how we all seem to let other things hijack what we do. One of us expressed frustration at apparently trying to fit our attempts at creative collaborative writing into a fairly traditional conference format even though we were up for challenging that. We wanted to give the audience a sense of a different way of working and thus we shared original writing with them as we heard it for the first time ourselves.

Sharing our experience of collaborative autoethnography through writing this paper has been a different undertaking to 'doing' collaborative autoethnography. Engaging in this writing has meant giving less time to each other to listen, hear and reflect together. As Ngunjiri et al (2010) point out, collaborative writing for publication is not without challenge; writing about our *process* has presented additional hurdles for us to navigate. This final excerpt illustrates some of the difficulties that we encountered when bringing our writing together into a coherent paper.

For the first time we are in the same room, striving to weave together all our writing from the past 18 months into something that we think is coherent – or maybe that flows more easily - and that reflects the collaborative way in which it was written. Tenses – past or present - and what to leave in and leave out without diluting the strength of the narrative is a struggle. We each sit with what we've written so far on our laptop screens. We read out loud, we weigh each word, pondering on it. The process is slow as we meander backwards and forwards, skipping parts that we struggle with, 'we can come back to them'. One of us makes all of the changes to the 'mistress' copy but then the other two are also tapping away on their keyboards. Why? In case of a

mistake? In case we lose a precious word or phrase? Somehow being together and writing like this feels different to how we've been writing up until now, when we have talked, written, read the writing and then taken turns to shape the writing before our next Skype meeting. We can no longer remember who wrote what. Unlike some of the women in the collaborative writing groups with Davies and Gannon (2006), we do not mourn the loss of our words, nor do we feel "obliterated" (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p.116) by their disappearance. How can we feel obliterated if we cannot remember what we each wrote? But, at the same time, we can share the frustration of those collective biography groups when "the journey took off to a new place and the text we thought we were coming to understand flew away from us again" (ibid, p.119). We disagree, we discuss, we decide. Embarking on this project, it was always thus and this final process of assembling the writing we knew would be difficult. Have we put it off? We had read of the difficulties of others, how hard it was to continue the collaborative nature of the process, how Davies and Gannon's groups passed the writing from one to the other, in turn, each one responding, cutting, adding and how fraught this process had been. Did we avoid that?

This paper has evolved from our autoethnographical writing and, to some extent, it has taken us away from it. Whereas we also started with a reflection on women in academia, in fact gender has not proved to be an important factor within the process. Here we have deliberately focused on our process, using our initial, reflective writing only to provide insight into that process. The goal of narrative writing is "not only as representation but also as communication" (Bochner, 2012, p.158). Our intention in offering some of our collaborative autoethnographical work in this paper is to demonstrate the potential that this approach has to both represent and communicate, whilst accepting the inevitability of change and that insights may only be relevant at a point in time.

We have maintained our collaborative approach throughout, continuing to mix simultaneous individual work with individual sequential work. In its final stages of writing, this paper has passed from one to the other but, as we near the end, it is again difficult to identify our individual contributions – nor would we want to do so. Perhaps this has only become possible because, through sharing our vulnerabilities, we have been able to establish a level of trust that has been crucial for us and, we advocate, for anyone engaging in collaborative autoethnography.

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