

Autoethnographic Vignettes of Working Lives

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Introduction

Many members of faculty in business schools have had relatively lengthy industrial experience prior to joining academia. Mike, for instance, worked in technical and further education colleges for 25 years before his PhD, Christine worked for 18 years in Local Government Administration, and Mark worked for 17 years in the UK National Health Service. Indeed, according to 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. In other words, 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. The aim of this article is to explore the value and potential impact of practitioner knowledge within academic writing, especially writing concerned with the lived experience of working lives. The intent is to develop methods in which:

- (i) Practitioners (or former practitioners) can provide personal, autobiographic vignettes about aspects of their own working lives that are of interest to non-academic audiences;
- (ii) These same people can also critically analyse their own accounts within the conventions of academic writing.

One particular contribution of scholars' own personal vignettes is potentially to create new windows on 'difficult-to-research' areas. For us, the value of using vignettes is not just to

analyse – 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 things 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.

In this paper, therefore, we start by discussing a potential theoretical framework for presenting personal vignettes within academic writing – autoethnography. Then we look at the ways in which this kind of writing has already been attempted in management and organization studies, finishing with some pitfalls to avoid as well as some ideas for those who are interested to construct their own vignettes.

Introducing autoethnography

In recent years, certain leading ethnographic researchers have begun to place an increasingly strong emphasis on highly personal, experiential and emotionally evocative narratives. Often using drama, poetry and other experimental modes of literary and artistic expression in their quest for evocation (Denzin, 2003; Humphreys, 2005; Spry, 2009; Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012), the narratives produced seek to encourage empathy and identification in readers, along with a wide variety of other personal responses, which might range, for example, from therapeutic catharsis to political action. Furthermore, in seeking to 'change the world by writing from the heart' (Denzin, 2006:422), this mode of enquiry typically sets aside conventional social scientific preoccupations (with method, validity, reliability, generalizability and so on) in favour of factors like personal meaning, empathetic connection and identification. Indeed, in conducting such experimental ethnography, as Denzin explains, the 'focus [is] on epiphanies, on the intersection of biography, history, culture and politics, turning point moments in people's lives' (2009:335).

What is perhaps especially distinctive about this new genre, however, 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, 2009:13). 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, 2004:1).

We think that the following narrative, drawn from a widely-cited journal article, gives a flavour both of the literary style and of the evocative, highly personal accounts that many in this new mode of experimental ethnography are attempting. The paper's narrator, Jim, 'presents a story about the embodied struggles' (Sparkes, 2007:521) 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, 2007:533; italics 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” (1996:12/3).

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 21st century, the popularity and influence of this newer version of autoethnography has started to take off. Indeed, according to the Proquest PhD dissertation index, over the ten years to 2009, there were 206 PhDs completed which focused centrally on autoethnography or similar personalized accounts.

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: 66)

The classic fieldwork studies of twentieth-century anthropologists, sociologists (and, of course, organizational ethnographers) typically construct 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: 99). Instead of studying ‘a distinctly different group than their own’ (1979:100) – 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: 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 (i.e. the card game’s) loose network of nocturnal devotees (Hayano, 1982; see van Maanen, 1988:106/7 for a contemporaneous commentary).

It is clear, therefore, that the way Hayano originally envisaged auto-ethnography differs significantly from today’s dominant “experimental” 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. 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 on-going) 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 experimental 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 which 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 (1989:34; italics 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.” (Pratt, 1992:9; italics in original).

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. Thus, while Pratt's version of autoethnography is different from experimental autoethnography, it seems to us that Pratt shares with experimental auto ethnographers 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 & Bochner (2000:735) chart the development ‘of reflexive, experimental, 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 (2000:735; italics omitted).

Organizing and Managing Autoethnography

In a brief review, Doloriert and Sambrook (2012) classify current organizational and management autoethnographic research into three “streams” namely: studies within higher education (HE) organisations; accounts of “previous/other life” organisations and complete member research in other organisations. Unsurprisingly perhaps given the relative convenience of writing about self within one’s own organization, there is an ever- growing list of autoethnographies of academic life covering the areas of teaching, research, and administration particularly in the perceived managerialist context of recent research assessment exercises.

The second and third streams of management literature identified by Doloriert and Sambrook, (2012) are broadly speaking the kinds of approaches we are advocating in this chapter. The second of their streams consists of autoethnographic accounts written by academics about their “experiences elsewhere, particularly their work experiences prior to entering HE, although this could include work experiences simultaneously with HE” (p. 86). The third category identified by Doloriert and Sambrook (2012) encompasses auto ethnographies written by “complete” members of non-academic organizations. Doloriert and Sambrook (2012) seem to be particularly advocating the notion of the “co-produced autoethnography where at least one author is researcher and the other a practitioner working in a non-academic organisation.” (p. 87). We ourselves feel that a very useful way of getting practitioners (and/or academics who were practitioners) to provide autoethnographic accounts of their working lives is through the explicit use of vignettes. This is the issue to which we now turn.

Autoethnographic Vignettes

Vignettes have been variously defined as: “short scenarios in written or pictorial form, intended to elicit responses” (Hill 1997:177); “concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can offer comment or opinion (Hazel 1995:2) and “stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes (Hughes 1998:381). 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 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.

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: 232). 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: 712). We suggest that the combination of vignettes and autoethnography presents an opportunity for synergy between academics and management practitioners. As Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, and Le (2014: 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’. Here are three examples from our own 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: 43)

Christine working for Local Government

I was very young and I was frequently told ‘very fortunate’ to have been promoted to such an elevated position in the Legal Department of the local council. I was one of only five employees at the higher administrative grade. The work included very detailed analysis of local maps and planning documents to prepare legal documents for property purchase. I

loved the work and cleared my allocation each day quickly. I was seen as a young bright spark, the other members of the office were elderly (to me at least) men. However, within three months of starting the job I found out that I was pregnant. I was delighted and appalled at the same time – followed by guilt and pleasure in equal amounts. I knew I had to keep this to myself until I worked out how to tell my line manager. Unfortunately, my early pregnancy nausea alerted people and before long I was called into my manager's office. 'Are you pregnant?' he asked before I had chance to sit down. 'Yes.' 'Were you planning on telling me at some point? Were you pregnant when you took the job? Why did you take the job if you were planning to start a family?' I wasn't surprised at this outburst, I felt humiliated but guilty. 'I knew it was a waste appointing a woman' he shouted as I left his office. 'I have to start recruiting all over again.' (Coupland, Forthcoming)

Mark working in Health Care

As a health care manager I had been tasked with implementing a new ward-based MIS 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. (from Griffin, Humphreys and Learmonth, 2015:29)

Mike's vignette is a contextual scene-setting story in the style of Van Maanen (1988: 136), adding flavour to an account of a difficult consultancy visit and subsequent discussion of culture difference. Christine's vignette is a rather shocking account of management attitude to gender. Mark's vignette formed the basis of an exploration of alternative approaches to human resource management. We consider that using vignettes of work experience in this way can enhance the theory and practices of both academics and practitioners. 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: 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 are also a range of problems inherent in providing such own personal accounts.

Pitfalls and Ideas for Constructing Autoethnographic Vignettes

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, etc.) 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. And that reminds us of another point – we don’t think auto ethnographies are something that can be knocked off overnight. In other words, autoethnography is not an easy option – just writing down your thoughts may be the start, but will be most unlikely to interest anyone the story needs to be told well, has to have a (theoretical/analytical) point and you need to persist.

The Potential of Autoethnographic Vignettes for Management Research and Practice

In organization 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 organizational ethnography (Watson, 2011) we nevertheless find much to commend in the best auto ethnographies. 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. We would also like to suggest that autoethnographic accounts are 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: 280).

Management practitioners can use their experiences to construct such evocative vignettes which, 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’ organizational issues.

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