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Exercising power in autoethnographic vignettes to constitute critical knowledge

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Abstract

This article shows how autoethnographic vignettes can be used as a reflexive tool to problematize the power relations in which organizational ethnographers participate when doing and representing their fieldwork. Foucault's analysis of the ethical self-formation process provides the impetus to explore the embodied experiences of my autoethnographic study of a cooperative retail outlet in New York. In questioning how power and knowledge reflexively generated my actions and interpretations, I frame this autoethnography as a means of critically reflecting on my own practice as a researcher. By writing about our own embodied interactions with others through discourses that constitute our experiences, we begin to understand how power is exercised in practice. I conclude by discussing the practical benefits for researchers of writing autoethnographic vignettes and, in particular, for doctoral students seeking to become qualitative researchers in the field.

Keywords

Autoethnography, care of the self, disciplinary power, embodiment, identity work, methodology, reflexivity, vignettes

Introduction

Through the use of what have been called "autoethnographic vignettes" (Humphreys, 2005), this paper records how my interpretations and actions in the field were disciplined by my interactions with others. The reflexive turn in organization studies recognizes that "research is as much about the world of the researcher. . . as it is about the world we are studying" (Cunliffe, 2003: 995). However, the "role of the body as a medium through which cultural norms and values are acquired remains. . . relatively unexplored" (Bell and King, 2010: 429), even though such "processes of

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becoming" (Cunliffe, 2003: 991) have implications for research practice and for the study of relations of power within the (ethnographic) research process. My central argument is: by reflexively engaging with our research process, we may intervene in organizational discourses and practices that shape our experiences, knowledge, and identities.

Here, reflexivity denotes the perceptual nature of the body that "involves us in things and puts us in contact with people" (Thanem and Knights, 2019: 27) and with ourselves. The body is both an object and subject of knowledge, through which visceral experiences move us to reflect on action. Foucault (1997) elucidates how this process of self-formation exercises power to ask how might we think critically. Although Foucault does not use the term "identity," the process of critical reflection that he names "care of the self" is a form of identity work (Huber and Knights, 2021a), which I employ as an autoethnographic technique and methodological practice for critical thinking.

Qualitative research findings are often presented through discourses that remain abstracted and disembodied from the lived experience of the researcher (Thanem and Knights, 2019). However, reflexivity without embodiment is problematic if we wish to move beyond treating the researcher's own identity as a "taken-for-granted resource" (Knights and Clarke, 2017: 350). Furthermore, a researcher's own sentience—their capacity to identify, make sense of, and subjectively relate facts to theory—is ontologically driven (Foucault, 1994). How then, as qualitative researchers, might we interrogate our own ontological interpretations more rigorously? The answer, according to Heidegger, is to "capture the Being of this entity, in spite of this entity's own tendency to cover things up" (cited in Foucault, 1983: xxii). Thus, we must "do violence" (Heidegger's phraseology) to "detached and formalistic" research accounts by becoming "passionately and bodily engaged with our research subject(s) whether texts or other bodies" (Knights and Clarke, 2017: 339).

Thus, motivated by the observation that "so little reference is made to bodily matters" and "how we use and rely on our bodies in our research" (Thanem and Knights, 2019: 7, 13), I address this lacuna by focusing on the contingent and contextual character of critical reflection. To do so, I view power as positive and productive of subjectivity and identity. Relations of power are reflexively embodied in a researcher's emotions, perceptions and practices, such that discourses and power do not exist separately to their enactment (Foucault, 1979). I use Foucault's notion of "care of the self" to delineate how autoethnography exercises power in the embodied reproduction of organizational life to argue that embodied practices of self-examination—exercised through autoethnography in relation to one's encounters with the Other—produce critical modes of being "informed by reflection" (Foucault, 1997: 284). This process of identity work emerges through lived experience and reflexivity to constitute "a significant basis for understanding how social reality is lived and experienced" (Thanem and Knights, 2019: 37). Through my own experience of writing autoethnographic vignettes, I conclude that early-term researchers (engaged in qualitative research) would benefit from the adoption of this approach and method of writing when it comes to critical reflecting on their bodily research and analysis processes.

To highlight the implications for research, I provide three autoethnographic vignettes from my study of a cooperative retail outlet in New York that chart my engagement with the centrality of researcher identity as I progressed and evolved as an ethnographer. I define an autoethnographic vignette as a relatively short, contextually complex, self–Other story that encompasses the plural understandings and outlooks that constitute the environment studied. These "reflexive first-person narratives" (Humphreys, 2005: 150) place the researcher at the heart of the story and are a device for inferring subjective meanings through "the featuring of multiple voices" that connect "practices of social science with the living of life" (Sparkes, 2002: 210–211). I argue that autoethnographic vignettes that feature the techniques of fiction-writing (Watson, 2000) but are "as close as memory and field notes would allow to what actually happened" (Humphreys and Watson, 2009: 46) provide a reflexive tool by which to construct (and ground) a researcher's own perspectives in the ontological relation between the researcher and researched and the relations of power that constitute this relation (van Eck et al., 2021).

My principal contribution is to elucidate how power animates autoethnographic accounts, by demonstrating how writing in the first person entails the exercising of "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1977: 30). I conceive autoethnography as an exercise in "care of the self" that can transform lived experiences into critical theory through a reflexive and analytical regime that is, simultaneously, "a practice, an embodiment" and "a style of life" (Foucault, 1997: 281). My discussion extends Foucault's notion by framing autoethnography as a regime through which to critically reflect on relations of embodiment and power. Second, I contribute to the expanding literature on identity work and, in particular, that which examines how a researcher's identity is transformed through the research process (Humphreys et al., 2003). Although the need for self-reflexivity in qualitative research has been studied extensively, autoethnographic vignettes have been underutilized in the analysis and accounts of in-depth case studies (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012). My paper highlights how a qualitative researcher's becoming/identity is disciplined by discourses exercised and generated by the research process. A critically reflexive researcher must question how such discourses become intertwined with their perspectives and thereby impact their research. By writing about their embodied interactions with others, using discourses that constitute and represent their experiences, a researcher might better understand how relations of power are exercised in practice.

The paper is structured into four major sections. First, I conduct a review of the relevant literature on care of the self, disciplinary power, and autoethnographic vignettes. Second, I provide details of my research context and modes of (self-)reflection. Third, I present and analyze three interconnected autoethnographic vignettes by reflecting on the discursive practices, including gestures and emotions, that produced my interpretations. Finally, I discuss the implications of exercising care of the self in relation to autoethnography for theory-building and practice, with the aim of engaging and inspiring early-career academics to employ autoethnography in their research.

Situated autoethnographic vignettes: Understanding others through care of the self

Foucault's (1997) analysis of the ethical self-formation process is helpful when it comes to exploring the embodied experiences of this autoethnographic study. Embodied truths are invariably disciplined through discourse, that is, via culturally and historically embedded symbols of meaning, including others' talk, gestures, and responses. As people, we cannot remain ambivalent to others because our emotions, impulses, and self-consciousness are constituted and sustained through our everyday social interactions (Empson, 2013). Our actions and our reflections on them exercise a history of relations and gestures that constitute what we find meaningful.

In this paper, I am not just focusing on how academics should be reflexive, that is, in interacting with others (Humphreys, 2005), in collecting and analyzing data (Alvesson et al., 2008), and in accounting for the self in describing research findings (Hardy et al., 2001). Such nuanced arguments are recognized and particularly well-established in feminine research writing (e.g. Beavan, 2021; Mandalaki, 2021). My interest also resides in how the self is reflexively disciplined through interactions with others and, more particularly, how a researcher's impulses, emotions and interpretations exercise power in relation to these experiences. Hence, my view echoes the call by Rhodes (2009: 665) for greater "deliberation over the meaning of the ontological relation between self (as researcher) and Other (as researched) and the exercise of power that is embedded in this relation."

How one embodies, practices and interprets discourse is positively produced through power, as are the truths that emerge: this ongoing identity work exercises certain “truth effects that are a function of representations being transformed into knowledge and then drawn upon in the exercise of power” (Knights, 2006: 707). By observing and categorizing others we can, perhaps unwittingly, create psychological profiles that decentre subjects from the circumstances of their production (May, 2011). Our impulses and our theories are both part of this process, for although we might “pretend that personal life is distant from our intellectual endeavours, this is rarely the case, for personal and professional lives are interdependent” and “intertwined with personally meaningful experiences” (Knights, 2006: 699).

Foucault (1997) reveals that he always concerned himself with the relationship between subjectivity (knowledge), power (truth), and hermeneutics (the subject), and the way that “the human subject fits into certain games of truth . . . such as those one may encounter in institutions” (p. 281). This impulse led Foucault to consider embodied “ascetic practices,” through which one might identify with or resist epistemic practice, “as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain . . . a certain mode of being” (p. 282).

With the appropriate effort, we can become more aware of how our thinking reproduces power: “To take care of the self is to equip oneself with these truths” (Foucault, 1997: 285). In particular, by thinking critically about the circumstances that give rise to our emotions and thoughts we might be moved to think differently. To exercise such practices requires a “certain degree of liberation . . . something different from states of domination” (Foucault, 1997: 283), a way of engaging in research that locates power everywhere and, in particular, within our relationships with others. Put simply, in order to understand others we need to analyze those forces that bring our own perceptions into being.

An autoethnographic vignette can be conceptualized as a claim on meaning that both recognizes and reveals these reflexive and self-forming processes. The idea of “being *in* the text as a self-reflexive, embodied subject rather than representing the world as a detached observer” can be liberating (Knights, 2006: 699) when the goal is to “transgress rather than report reality . . . to delegitimize the common sense of reality” (Rhodes, 2009: 656). By documenting and reflecting on our emotions, values, and perspectives in relation to others, we embrace an involved account of the emic, in which the researcher is omnipresent: probing, reflecting, organizing, appealing, problematizing, and framing (Hatch, 1996) in relation to a whole range of power relations that “come into play” in our “pedagogical relationships, political life, and so on” (Foucault, 1997: 283). Given that this process remains an underexplored aspect of the research experience (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015), we need to reflect on how these ambiguous power relationships “turn back and affect the researcher” (Wray-Bliss, 2003: 321) as well as those who are participants in the research process. As critical researchers, our responsibility is to avoid the reproduction in our texts of a “superiority over and distance from those whom [we] purport to represent” (Wray-Bliss, 2003: 321).

Autoethnography now constitutes a substantive and diverse body of qualitative research, which encourages a field-based researcher to engage with their own story, their “embodied experience and underlying concerns . . . to go beyond linguistic and symbolic explanations” (Knights and Clarke, 2017: 339) and, in so doing, to call upon discourses that constitute interpretations. By actively reflecting on the embodied interactions, emotions and discourse through which we exercise knowledge, reflexive researchers are forced to problematize the sheer possibility of making distanced and detached observations. This also includes a resolve to think Other-wise, in order to generate a theoretical account of the real, because such notions remain a derivative of power (Foucault, 2000).

Importantly, autoethnography has demonstrated that (i) personal and professional lives blur when a researcher engages and identifies with their subjects (Brewis, 2005), (ii) relations of power are a condition and consequence of professional identity/identities (Ford and Harding, 2008), and (iii) theory is integral to any meaningful account of research participants (Ford et al., 2010). Despite autoethnography facilitating a consideration of self–Other interactions, through which "culture is inscribed" (Bell and King, 2010: 429), it is also important to examine the researcher's embodied perspectives (Thanem and Knights, 2019) and how relations of power constitute the research experience, including the write-up (Weatherall, 2019).

Autoethnography is a regime through which we might scrutinize the conditions of our own subjectivity and give substance to our interpretations. By doing so, we affect a number of disciplines on our bodies, emotions, thoughts, and conduct. Implicit in our findings are a number of "truth obligations: discovering the truth, being enlightened by truth, telling the truth. All these are considered important either for the constitution of, or the transformation of, the self" (Foucault, 1997: 177–178).

Equating truth not with representation but rather viewing it as a matter of embodied experience, we might repurpose the thick descriptions of autoethnography (Jääskeläinen and Helin, 2021)—while remaining alert to "questions of social differentiation, social conflict, and associated negotiations and contestations over meanings" (White, 2007: 1201) which we spin and are spun by—to excavate and (de)construct how interpretations are filled with and disciplined by the energy and voices of others. The research process and resulting write-up are formed through these "material experiences which shape how we live, think, feel, work, see others and so on" (Gilmore et al., 2019: 4). Autoethnography involves such practices in a struggle "to bring the political into the text without the text being [principally] about us" (Brewis and Williams, 2019: 94).

My research process

This was my first major empirical study, a "discursive" ethnography of the Park Slope Food Cooperative (PSFC), Brooklyn, New York, through which I concluded that members exercise "certain ways of talking and acting by instantiating norms" that tightly prohibit or license particular forms of humor (Huber and Brown, 2017). The PSFC retail cooperative was founded in 1973 by a small group and has since grown to 16,500 members; it is committed to principles that include diversity, equality, openness, solidarity, and reciprocation. This culture of mutual responsibility produces generalized, ethically progressive practices of care, nurture, and trust (Huber and Knights, 2021b), which facilitated the provision of access for my study. Having become a Coop member, I interviewed a general coordinator who gave permission for my research, provided that I enacted responsibility and respect for other members in the spirit of cooperation, which I did. There were only a small number of additional provisos: that I respected the Coop's rules, did not disrupt member work squads, interviewed members away from the Coop, and respected members' privacy. I was free to make field notes and to speak with members about my research while I worked, and it was through early conversations about my thesis that I met members willing to donate their time for interview.

Volunteer-members conduct around 75% of the organization's work and are responsible for the everyday operation of the store, which has grown steadily into a multimillion-dollar business, with an annual turnover of $50 million. I worked for up to 30 hours per week, in various roles and assignments, as an "observant participant" (Wacquant, 2015), simultaneously taking field notes and carrying out semi-structured interviews, "conversations of purpose" (Burgess, 1984: 102) that proved vital to what I came to regard as critically important within the scene. I collected my data between November 2011 and December 2012, during which time I conducted 60 semi-structured interviews. Following a prompt from one of my reviewers, I now recognize that these discourses produced an embodied ethical subjectivity that inspired me to theorize my autoethnographic process as critically engaged care of the self.

My approach was facilitated by observant participation, semi-structured interviews, reviewing of organizational texts, and field notes, which are carefully written into my account of the organization. My aim is to indicate how such vital discourses constituted my subjectivity and persistently disciplined my perceptions and thinking as I continued to observe, interact and represent the scene. This is because analysis is a “pervasive activity throughout the life of a research project” (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 10–11) and requires detailed and iterative immersion in one’s empirical data—tacking back and forth between empirical materials and emergent theories to construct patterns of content and context. Research materials are grouped to “structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking” and in so doing, as researchers, we thereby generate a particular knowledge that “shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” (Rose, 2012: 190). Where one has determined that meanings are associated through a particular discourse, then a specific “discursive formation” (Foucault, 1972: 38) has been defined—what might be referred to as a “dominant discourse” or “discipline”—that produces the thoughts of those subject to it, including those of the researcher. Such “knowledge” constitutes not only the write-up, but also the researcher’s embodied experience.

The three vignettes that follow are virtually identical to those that I wrote in situ 9 years ago, yet over the passage of time, my continuing engagement with academic theory and knowledge has dynamically shaped my reflections. My aim is to present myself as a “leading character in dramatic form” (Saldaña, 2003: 222) in scenes rich in understanding, gleaned through multiple experiences within the organization, both emic (from the perspectives of participants) and etic (from my own experiences as a researcher), in order to represent the action/talk that constituted organizational life. Autoethnography allowed me to switch focus from the observer to the observed by considering my own feelings and embodied actions in relation to others, and to implicate “me,” the researcher, in the scene to create storied narratives that preserve the complexity of activity within a specific environmental context. In so doing, I seek to make my telling(s) less one-sided, richer and more “open” (Foucault, 1983).

Vignette No. 1 - Early impressions of the co-op, Brooklyn, NY

I am working at the checkout on the express line and daydreaming about my interview with Alex yesterday. She told me a story about a woman she had seen shopping in the Coop who had casually asked someone stocking shelves, ‘Excuse me, do you work here’? ‘Everyone turned around and were like, “How did you get in?”, “Who are you?”, “What do you mean, does she work here. . . Everyone works here, how can you not know that?”, “You are not supposed to be in here.”. This poor woman was so overwhelmed by it. Somehow, she had managed to get through without having to scan a membership card’ The unlucky individual was then escorted from the premises. I imagine how disorientating that must have felt, as I scan some kale crisps, making a mental note to buy some myself next time I am shopping. I am snapped out of my thoughts when the woman I am ‘scanning’ informs me, ‘I have lost the membership receipt’ (provided at the entrance desk for those who do not have their member card with them). As a result, she is unable to pay (to prevent suspended members from shopping), so she makes off to the front desk to obtain another receipt. I have already scanned her items so I wait patiently for her to return, while people in the queue eye me suspiciously, wanting to check out and vacate ASAP. Some minutes later, she returns and starts dancing and singing to the song currently playing instore, performing a full pirouette before brandishing the new receipt with a flourish. I feel the blood in my neck pump a little faster, my face is flushing slightly and my sense of disconnect begins to turn to mild embarrassment, as I am aware that my feelings are not quite held in check and are leaking out from behind my composed features. I smile and attempt to act unfazed, realizing in an instant that I am not at ease in this, ‘our community,’ and that this may be apparent to the other members who are watching me in frustration and now, it seems to me, ever-increasing interest. If I laugh, it is simply to save face and my sense of unease is increased by the realization that I am now an

> organizational researcher, trying to gain valuable insights, in an unfamiliar cultural landscape that does not resemble any of my preconceived notions of the organization that I would be researching. I am not a nervous character and am at ease meeting new people and experiencing different situations, but I can feel a slight twitch in my left eye as I process the card payment, grinning and sweating like some lovelorn idiot. After 'turning my heartbeat up,' this 'sweet soul sister' departs and I feel my composure return somewhat as I begin scanning the next member's groceries. After another minute or two, I begin to 'zone out,' returning gradually to my silent soliloquy, reflecting on Alex's story of the 'non-member caught shopping.' I think about my own discomfort and with no similar experiences or personal reference points, picture myself as the savage from Aldous Huxley's novel, *Brave New World*, who comes into the organization bright-eyed, but uncomfortably in awe of the community, identity and solidarity he finds there.[1] Nagging doubts that I do not belong remain. . .

This vignette asks the reader to relive an experience through my eyes, feelings, and perspectives in order to reveal my own processes of discovery as I navigated an organization as an ethnographic insider. Within these fledgling moments in the field, I experienced what might be termed "identity dysphoria" (O'Shea, 2019), through my *profound unease* in inventing myself as a researcher (Humphreys et al., 2003: 7) and, to some extent, a fraud, while framing myself as an organizational outsider (Butcher, 2013). I was concerned with discovering how members discursively constructed their environment and was sensitive to the importance of informal interactions, conscious that I, an Englishman in America, drew on different social milieux to generate knowledge. Concerned that this could stymie my interpretations, I became sensitive to the argument that writing research is a means of self-transformation in relation to "things I'm interested in" (Foucault, 2000: 239) and mindful that "We live in a world completely marked by, all laced with, discourse . . ." that "in one way or another determines what can be said" (Foucault, 1986: 179).

In my telling, I can only draw on a narrow array of organizational discourses, but reveal an "interview discourse" that came to shade my emotions and perspectives. In doing so, I elaborate how writing ethnographic vignettes can become a reflexive exercise in power (Foucault, 1977: 27) that reveals how power is "reproduced *within* research practices" (Wray-Bliss, 2003: 307). I felt limited by a thin repertoire of interactions (upon which to reflect) and experienced "powerlessness" (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015). To overcome my clinging doubts, I sought solace by orientating myself "to the care of oneself, toward definite objectives" (Foucault, 1991: 365): observantly participating, listening to others, empathizing with people's experiences, examining my self-conscience—"reaching myself" (Foucault, 1991: 365)—and, in the process, transforming myself through reflection. Subjecting myself to a sense of *belonging* and *community* forced me to focus on my sense of awkwardness, vulnerability, and irony, conveyed through the discourses that gave substance and legitimacy to these feelings. My desires and aspirations reflected the existential concerns (Knights and Clarke, 2014) through which one becomes "someone else that you were not in the beginning" (Foucault, 1988: 9).

To write about this embodied experience would require a method that explicitly made my subjectivity central to my descriptions; a regime through which I might make my "self" visible to myself through verbalization (Fejes, 2017; Foucault, 1988), and thus better comprehend (and interrogate) the contexts, discourses and subtle nuances inherent to my interpretations. This agency is "central to both the object represented and the process of producing representations" (Knights, 2006: 707). I wondered how I might incorporate my subjectivity into my research work and reflect on the ways in which I act upon myself, "to monitor, test, improve, and transform" myself (Foucault, 1986: 28). In counsel with my academic mentors, I began "crafting" autoethnographic vignettes that were "characterized by care . . . rather than self-aggrandisement or defensiveness" (Bell and Willmott, 2020: 7). In doing so, I aimed to "draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts . . . by engaging them exactly with complex specifics" (Geertz, 1973: 27), with the view that my ongoing quest for knowledge should constitute self-care, but only if I could find a means through which to "eliminate . . . the distance of language" (Foucault, 1986: 136) from my own knowable truths.

> ***Vignette No. 2 – Significant others***
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> It is a Thursday afternoon and I am sitting in the Coop office taking phone requests from other members. I am sweating, even though I am wearing shorts and a T-shirt. There are skylights open and large ceiling fans turn overhead, like a 1960s hospital room. The dim yellow light is supplied by strip-lighting; its glow may well be white, but the painted yellow walls give it a sickly hue. At this time there is no air con in the office, and this is summertime New York. Those who can afford it have escaped the city for the Hamptons or Long Island Sound, but I have swerved doing a Great Gatsby in favour of a shift and an afternoon in the company of my Coop peers. . . We sit around the edge of the office, the shift schedules above our heads, listlessly helping members locate squad openings. The phones buzz and one of us laconically picks up, taking a message if the query is directed at a particular coordinator. It is the office coordinators' monthly meeting and so, as usual, Kenneth and Barry supervise from behind the coordinator desks in the middle of the room. They are usually in the store downstairs, supervising deliveries, and take a more relaxed stance on office duties. Right now, Kenneth is playing guitar and singing a self-composed children's song, in between idly swapping witty retorts with Barry, creating a unique atmosphere:
>
> It [humour] definitely defines the energy of the room. I notice the people who want to be a part of it, but can't tap into it, because it is not their style. Others are on that wavelength themselves and jump in, while others don't want to be part of it [Barry, Full-Time Coordinator].
>
> The office feels different and members are keen to be part of it: 'You want to be careful to keep the balloon in the air, there is a sense of collective desire, once it's up, to keep it up and not kill the vibe' [Sid, Volunteer Squad Leader, Food Processing]. This collective vibe signifies that we are all on the same page: 'We want to cooperate through humour . . . you want to feed off each other' [Barry, Full-Time Coordinator]. The process begins with Kenneth:
>
> He is impossible to keep up with, so I see working with Kenneth as a challenge . . . I definitely conform to his style . . . I am allowing myself to enter more into his space and fall under his umbrella, to try and be loose and free enough to allow myself to compete in that arena [Barry, Full-Time Coordinator].
>
> The phones keep buzzing, people keep working, Kenneth and Barry field questions from members who come in, yet the spirit of cooperation is constituted through the constant humour and, inspired by Kenneth, we fall in line, so that 'the vibe comes first' [Mandy, Volunteer Member, Office]. As I laugh, I begin to embrace another side of my personality and my perspectives shift slightly through my association with Kenneth and Barry: 'You create common ground within each other, to build these jokes around. We have things that we know, believe and like, but we have also created things within ourselves that are between us' [Sean, Volunteer Member, Receiving]. I have not become a different person; it is a subtle change, because I usually look for common ground with others and humour can be an effective way to achieve that. Then, as the shift nears its end, the regular office coordinators return from their meeting. I ask what the meeting was about and Ava tells me, cheerfully, that 'We have been discussing ways to improve the dynamic between full-time coordinators and members [who make up the office squads].'

This vignette was written and explored to reveal my own story of growth while suffering from pubic symphysis,[2] a process that continued as I reviewed "acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extend beyond the self of the author" (Sparkes, 2002: 222). Writing autoethnographically exercised my desire to realize and develop productive ways of understanding and critiquing my interactions with others. My aim was to capture and situate participant testimonies seen and experienced first-hand as I worked alongside organizational members and enacted discourses that constituted people's perspectives, including my own. Autoethnography provided me with an analytic and representational strategy, a regime, through which I might reflect on my experiences and sharpen self-reflexivity (Humphreys, 2005). Within this vignette, I have become more comfortable in my own skin (Brewis and Williams, 2019) and (dare I say) have begun to enjoy a more connected life (Beavan, 2019) in which I am more sufficient to myself. I have begun to picture and comprehend myself as a "bricoleur" (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 17), who takes on others' views not just to represent them but also to understand their significance to those holding them, as well as to my own way of life. It makes me mindful of Foucault's proclamation (1997: 157) that "We should fight against the impoverishment of the relational fabric. We should secure recognition for relations of provisional coexistence . . . [and] adoption."

Thus, I began to comprehend more fully the ways in which my own perspectives and insights were co-constituted in relation to others, and hoped this had insulated me, to some extent, from producing an unimaginative and narcissistic analysis (Pelias, 2003: 369). As I listened to my interviewees and engaged the gestures of others, it became clear that my perspectives were not simply individual and personal, but rather pluralistic. In this sense, my vignettes express "truth" by radically destabilizing any conception of the researcher being an "individual apart," or "objective" (Cunliffe, 2003: 990). I am omnipresent in my text, actively reflecting on my experiences in relation to myself. In writing about this embodied experience, I became "more and more interested in the interaction between [my]self and others," and how I acted upon myself through "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1988: 19) to exercise knowledge.

These autoethnographic vignettes, written over the course of 1 year in the field, reveal how my self-knowledge and perceptions were transformed as I was (unrelentingly) disciplined through (so many) interactions with others during this period. As researchers, we are ourselves disciplined by multiple plot lines, which we then refine into heuristic, socially constructed, truths: discourses exercised through processes of reflexivity and reflection (identity work) that are integral to our interpretations and accounts of research materials. This felt change experience, grounded in moments of "emotional epiphany" (Denzin, 1997), was characterized by serendipitous, often "broken transitions" (Knights, 2006: 709) that were subject to the reprimands of, and/or contradiction by, others. While social constructionist accounts explore the meaning that is exercised between research participants, much less has been written about how research participants affect the researcher (cf. Thanem and Knights, 2019; Wray-Bliss, 2003) through bonds of relatedness (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015), "arresting moments in conversations" (Cunliffe, 2003: 988), evocative language (Boncori and Smith, 2019), physicality of style (O'Shea, 2018), and the material presence of their bodies (Brewis and Williams, 2019). Power is productive and my desire to write "from the body" (Wacquant, 2015) in relation to other bodies engendered a positive sense of relatedness. These relatively unconscious (and, to some extent, transient) processes became visible (and more concrete) through the writing of autoethnographic vignettes that exercised critical moments of "sociological introspection" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 737) within the contexts that gave substance to my thoughts.

In writing this second vignette I incorporated several conversations (transcribed verbatim), embracing a creative emphasis that legitimizes members' talk through acts of verisimilitude, whereby "truth" is established through "the use of an already spoken language" (Foucault, 1986: 180) and exercised in "certain telling moments of life" (Foucault, 1986: 58). Within this autoethnographic vignette, others' testaments in relation to *reciprocation, solidarity*, and *cooperation* constitute my principal perspectives, while I interact "at a distance," complicit through my laughter, yet only nominally active within the scene. Situating interview narratives within these vignettes allowed me to consider more closely how they enabled me to focus my attention on the ways in which I had subsumed discourses, “attitudes and values prevalent within the organization in order to provide meaning” (Berg, 2002: 398).

Vignette No. 3 – Impressionist tales of self–Other ‘insider’ knowledge

> I hit the street with a bounce and head uphill, towards the park, past Rosewater, Union Market, and Hunan Delight, the Coop sign lit green ahead. I take my earphones out, people chat outside: smiles, laughs, ‘Hiya’s, and ‘Catch you next Tuesday’s; the worker who checks my pass gives me a breezy ‘Enjoy’. I arrive for my shift in Food Processing and it appears the mood has carried over: peals of laughter greet me, members exchange pleasantries while donning aprons, familiar faces are grouped around the central tables, laughing at something said, something I missed. . . That familiar feeling of curiosity hits me; not as researcher, you understand. No, I am the person who missed the joke and feels momentarily uncomfortable, someone on the outside. I head towards the laughter and, as it dies away, start chatting with Twila. I bring up the article in *The New York Times*: nannies working their employers’ shifts at the Coop. ‘Oh please! At least it’s a change from making us all out to be a bunch of vegan pacifists; I mean, who do they think works here?’ Humour attracts that most precious of gifts, our attention; others are filtering, interpreting, searching for meaning. . . Twila’s line takes hold and Tim and Ray are quick to keep the ball in the air: ‘Oh yeah, I sent my nanny in last week with my baby still in her Ergo [a harness to allow a baby to lie against the chest]; they worked a shift in Receiving, unloading the trucks’; ‘As soon as we have a baby and a nanny, I am sending them both in here.’ I joke, ‘You can borrow mine; they both prefer an office shift,’ and so it goes on. . .
>
> Most of us poke fun at the bureaucracy . . . that there are so many rules, but it is beloved and I will defend the Coop to someone who is outside and not a member. It is a way to connect with other people we meet . . . but I feel that it is an act in some way, because my outlook in the world is actually to be very protective of the Coop . . . I actually like those things, but when connecting with other members, we always laugh at those things [Cathy, Voluntary Member, Food Processing].
>
> An Hasidic member of the Coop arrives in white shirt, black trousers and large hat, looking far better-dressed than our motley crew, all rocking Day-Glo-yellow bandanas and clashing neon-green aprons that make us look like overaged kids-TV presenters. He asks politely if he can work a ‘make up’ bagging kosher produce; Twila smiles and says ‘Please.’ Tim is curious and asks, ‘Why is it only Jewish members can handle kosher food at the Coop?’ The shift draws to an end and people are beginning to leave, replaced by members of the next squad. A flamboyant young man arrives, very light on his feet, and announces loudly, ‘Hi, I am a vegan, but would like to slice and price the cheese,’ flashing a big grin. Without giving it any thought, I reply, straight-faced, ‘There is a rule at the Coop that vegans cannot carry out cheese-cutting,’ at which Twila, Ray and Tim burst out laughing. He looks worried; are we laughing at him? Is there such a rule? How should he respond? Will processing slabs of cheese undermine his vegan principles? I smile at him, aware he has missed the irony, taking strange pleasure in his discomfort: ‘Of course you can, fella,’ and I hand him the cheese-slicer. He is still looking perplexed as I start taking off my apron, ready to step back out into the daylight. . .

This final vignette evokes the social world of the Coop, as I had come to perceive it, through discourses that are now naturalized in my actions and affect how I picture the scene. I exercise power/knowledge in my habits, expressions and interactions. Writing autoethnographically brought this to my attention and creates a rich tapestry, through which “we” might reflect on “my” (*logos*) situated outlooks, (*bios*) authorial personality, and (*épreuve de vie*) trials of life that provide markers of where I am (Luxon, 2008: 388), and cast “me” as an organizational insider.

While authority resides with me, as author, my views are “grounded in mutuality” (Foucault, 1997: 233) and produced through philosophies that constitute being a recognizably “good” member of the Coop. In this sense, I was not simply a researcher per se, but rather a person whose own "modes of practice" in pursuit of a "good life" (Foucault, 1997: 233) exercised the rules of our community. The dominant discourses, which became obvious as I read and engaged with my data (including the testament of others), exerted power on me directly. The self-constituting "relationship between evaluation and identification" (Schirato et al., 2012: 169) has disciplined my experience. This "profoundly embodied process" (Hancock, 2008: 1368) was exocentric rather than egocentric, and was supplemented through my steady engagement with critical theories that permitted me, with the help of others, to apply common-sense understandings to questions of exercising care of the self. This was a reflexive project embedded in a series of conversations and observations that incorporated "fluid processes of give and take, back and forth, struggle and resistance, as well as the living of everyday" (cf. Foucault, 1978: 138), which helped me define the culture and, to some extent, came to define me. Writing about my experiences in relation to others, through a prolonged period of study encompassing serial observations and analysis, shaped my own thoughts and actions (my "self") as an organizational insider, such that the knowledge gained was part of this production.

Within this third vignette, I draw on discourses centering on *normative rules, equity and inclusion*, and to evaluate and contextualize actions and speech. I have taken stock of lived testament and, through my desire to comprehend relations of power, framed and revealed "meanings that were really important, just beneath the surfaces of talk and folded into . . . actions" (Goodall, 2010: 257). I was aided by my autoethnographic method, through which I reflexively knitted and located my own subjective imaginings in the discursive practices of others. Our conversations exercise power to constitute what "we" find funny as our unique experiences, views, and actions overlap with one another. As the text shifts from one member's perspective to another and from one discourse to another, my prose encompasses my own search for reflexivity, capturing my desire to author (and reflect on) a text rich in "narrative collage" (Dillard, 1982: 21). Though this was not necessarily my intention, these vignettes reveal how *using the language of the Coop* to "elaborate" on "and stylize" my experiences through autoethnography became an "*activity* in the exercise of its power" (Foucault, 1986: 23, my emphasis). While these reflections center on my own practical knowledge, the objective was not (primarily) to know myself, but rather to reflexively yield forms of knowledge that constitute and make comprehensible a productive manner of living (Foucault, 1997).

Autoethnography: A regime through which to think the unthought

I have argued that autoethnography is a regime through which we might "free thought from what it thinks silently" (Foucault, 1986: 9). In exercising power, we might better understand others by reflecting, deeply, on our own "personal, physical, and real involvement" in a scene to constitute knowledge that exercises regimes of truth "in concrete, precise, and definite terms, in a given situation" (Foucault, 2000: 281).

Geertz (1973) believed that the role of anthropology was to chronicle discursive practices in order to better comprehend the "webs of significance" that serve to govern our lives (p. 5). Yet, he remained unconvinced that culture is power, "something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be . . . attributed" (Geertz, 1973: 14). Importantly, this led him to the belief that to better capture (what might be described as) relations of power (Foucault, 1977), we must make them intelligible through thick description of people in action. I have argued that one might become more cognizant of reflexive processes of enculturation by examining one's relation with oneself. We attain such knowledge through the vibrations, emotions, desires, and so forth, that constitute our lived experience of interacting with others and that effect "a transformation of the individual as a whole – of his [*sic*] body. . . habits [and] . . .mind" (Foucault, cited in Geertz, 1978: 4).

This carceral movement—one's evolving discursive regimes, social networks (including texts), and experiential knowledge—allows a progressive, non-linear, picture of the scene to be drawn. Geertz (1978) elegantly describes this process through the metaphor of "those cathedrals that have been built up around the frame of a temple, itself erected on the stones of a sacrifice site" (p. 4). This ongoing process of self-transformation was, in my case, inspired (and aided) by relating "*theoretical materials to empirical details* . . . woven into the body of thick description" (Geertz, 1973: 28, emphasis mine), which, in representing the scene and my part in it, preserve the experience in a "state of being" to give facts "ontological weight" (Foucault, 1986: 137). Thus, while my personified accounts remain incomplete and liminal, they are *not* "detached from the realms to which [they] point" (Visweswaran, 1994: 1).

Relations of power are "there" in the moment, embodied within this personal and intimate way of writing. A reflexive researcher and writer needs constantly to question how these discourses became intertwined with their own perspectives, providing a lived experience that reveals self-reflexivity, self-criticality, and a degree of vulnerability in the process of furnishing a "credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the real" (Richardson, 2000: 254). In placing actuality in doubt, I do not "render impossible all rational meditation . . . from my resolution to discover the truth" (Foucault, 1994: 408); rather, my autoethnographic vignettes emphasize the subjectivity-shaping character of knowledge. My interpretations represent the conditions of their possibility, by making explicit "the subjectivity on which they rely" (Knights, 2006: 707).

So why undertake such deep reflexive work? Foucault notes that we write to better understand that thing in which we are interested. Through our compulsion to write, we transform our identity and with it our thinking. From this perspective, writing constitutes a practice of freedom, whereby one fluidly changes oneself "in order not to think the same as before" (Foucault, 2000: 240). For me, autoethnography became a regime for self-reflection—"an experience, for its writer and reader alike" (Foucault, 2000: 243)—through which the process of reflecting on self-reflexivity constitutes critical knowledge.

There are also practical reasons for incorporating autoethnographic vignettes into our research accounts. Autoethnography constitutes a potent aide-memoire (Wolcott, 1995) for considering how people exercise power and knowledge within discursive practices. It provides a reflexive method by which to reflect on, analyze and confront the operation of power in everyday lives (Flyvbjerg, 2015). One's clarity of thinking derives from the ethnographic story that supports and demonstrates the discursive practices (including one's own emotions) that produce thought (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). Critical reflexivity is enhanced through autoethnographic methods that encourage one to embrace new experiences and closer (more meaningful) connections with others. This recursive process increases one's desire for new experiences and more intimate relations by freeing oneself from oneself (Foucault, 1997) through "experimentation and care for those aspects of our interiority" (Marchetti, 2011: 154). This process enhances truth through open, unreserved, and delimiting modes of engagement that reduce the distance between oneself and others, for which "there is a limited vocabulary . . . in the research literature" (Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018: 1299).

My autoethnographic approach helped focus my attention on this process and provided a reflexive means by which to uncover discursive practices that are "implicit in silent habits" (Foucault, 2000: 456). In my case, this involved the careful layering of direct experience, practical wisdom, and philosophy in pursuit of socially constructed truths that inevitably involve "the self, as both subject and object in fieldwork" (Harding, 2007: 1764). Through writing about myself in interaction with others, I began to reflect more vociferously on the forms of a possible knowledge available to individuals within power relations to critically consider the modes of subjectivity that emerge in specific contexts. My analysis is both derived from and aimed at experience, constituted through practices of subjection and, "in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation . . . on the basis, of course, of a number of rules, styles, [and] inventions to be found in the cultural environment" (Foucault, 1988: 50). I formed and revised my interpretations by reflexively testing my own assumptions (and actions) through further conversations, as I refined and exercised discourses through which I might relate and understand the intricacies of an organization.

Thus, my autoethnographic vignettes became "practical texts . . . designed to be read, learned, reflected upon, and tested out," constituting a framework for deeper reflection on everyday conduct (Foucault, 1988: 12–13). While these vignettes are self-referential and non-definitive, they are "true" in the sense of being of a world known through the exercise of power. My interpretations and testimony are formed through the operation of these power effects, as are objects, relationships, spaces, and scenes that reveal "various knowledges which are dispersed into a particular society, permeate through that society" and are asserted "as the foundation for education, for theories, for practices" (Foucault, 2011: 35). These autoethnographic details transform dry reportage into self-aware, reflexive, and intimate testimony that enhances my own (and, I hope, other's) understanding of lived experiences.

Concluding thoughts

The above autoethnographic vignettes reveal how my interpretations are an interactive realization that expresses the gestures and voices of others. The gradual and intermittent process of their generation, through which I became someone I was not before, was nothing out of the ordinary. Yet, to *exercise care* one must actively consider how discursive practices, including one's own, constitute the research experience. We cannot separate self-knowledge from research because the knowledge that is generated reflects the desires, emotions, and philosophies of the researcher. At the same time, to reflexively engage in one's field of enquiry implies a tacit understanding that "the knower is not so much an individual . . . as a discourse" (Rose, 2012: 192), exercised in thought, action and write-up, and producing both intellectual and affective power effects that demand more than fleeting attention to the esthetics of their production. This knowledge, which exercises a "number of rules of acceptable conduct or of principles that are both truths and prescriptions" (Foucault, 1997: 285), produces, in some measure, the space to critique (and resist) taken-for-granted assumptions within the population with whom we are engaging.

Writing about myself in interaction with others encouraged me to delve under my own skin to consider my ways of dealing with the gestures, expressions, and responses of others. Autoethnography became a manner of living that brought words to bear on my actions "in the testing of life" (Rabinow in Foucault, 1997: xiv). Foucault viewed ethnography ("anthropology") as "a discourse that breaks with the representationalist paradigm in favour of a practice of knowledge" (Ali, 2019: 11). This is a process enriched by reflecting more deeply on provisional and intense emotions that constitute moments for introspection (Foucault, 1997: 159). While I experienced self-doubt (and, almost certainly, moments of self-loathing), these experiences did not define my research experience and life, but rather encouraged "self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself" (Foucault, 1986: 29). My anxieties encouraged me to *take care of myself* by actively resisting practices that, in tying myself to my identity in constraining ways, could break my link with others (Foucault, 1983: 211).

The uncertainty and doubt that accompany the role of organizational researcher are driven, in part, by the subjective ambiguities that dog the majority of research accounts (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015). Few studies provide concrete details of how the researchers' own subjectivities are constituted, in situ, through the direct, unremitting, and embodied experiences of interacting and engaging with the indeterminate gestures of others. Rather, "[t]he faces, the movements, the gestures, even the thoughts, secret habits, the yearnings of the heart are presented like mute signs on the backdrop of the night" (Foucault, 1986: 113). This is problematic, for one's uncertainties and anxieties can trigger habits that detach us from, or limit, interaction with those we research in "more unreserved and open" ways (Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018; Wray-Bliss, 2003: 1299). As early-term academics, we must avoid practices that (in becoming habitual) curtail self-knowledge and foreclose deeper insight. Thus, we would be wise to exercise regimes that are "organized around taking care of oneself" (Foucault, 1988: 21), including autoethnography, which has a tremendous capacity to vivify our engagement with organizational life.

In writing about the "function of author," Foucault notes that we are not restricted to the domain of discourse (i.e. to that which already exists). Through experience, and in reflecting deeply on the knowledge that this engenders, one might create "theory, for instance . . . or a discipline" within which other authors "can proliferate" (Foucault, 1979: 11). Ideas have a "transdiscursive" quality in that they make possible a number of analogies and modifications that constitute the means by which we might transform discursive practices. Such innovations encourage us to re-examine and use founding texts that challenge the representational sphere of reality. To participate in and evolve such conversations, early-term academics might ask a simple question, through which a multitude of possibilities can emerge: under what conditions and through which discourses does my sense of self or subjectivity emerge? To answer this question, one must decentre the self by situating the subject within complex and variable discursive practices that embody knowledge.

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Notes

1. "He's being sent to a place where he'll meet the most interesting set of men and women. . . people who aren't satisfied with orthodoxy, who've got independent ideas of their own. Every one, in a word, who's any one. I almost envy you, Mr. Watson" (Huxley, 2007: 155).
2. . . .relating to, or connected with.

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