Self-reflective management learning: Toward an autoethnographic approach

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Abstract

This research uses autoethnography within a business/management context. The first author explains her experiences in attempting to research leadership and innovation in her organisational setting. She proposes that the research framework is best derived from a methodology that enables an analysis of the lived experiences of the researcher as subject. She greets the reader through the narrative genre that tangibly illustrates the research paradigm she proposed and engages in. By co-constructing the autoethnography, the validity of the research is enhanced. It is proposed that the affective impact of the writing and of the reading of autoethnography is at least as effective as is the cognitive impact of mainstream objectivist organisational research into business and management.

Keywords

Co-constructed autoethnography, reflexive subjectivity, reflective objectivity, leadership, innovation

Introduction

The aims of this article are fourfold. The first aim is to convey to a management audience the nature of autoethnography as a research method for business and management scholarship. The second aim is to demonstrate how autoethnography helps the researcher to understand the management phenomena that are being studied, and so to promote their learning. The third aim is to demonstrate how the reader of an autoethnographic account will also gain a better understanding of phenomena. The final aim is to propose the wider use of autoethnography within business and management research. We will use the example of one person’s experience with this method to attempt to achieve these aims. Autoethnographic text will be italicised. Conventional text will be in conventional font, whether in first person or third person.

This research, written in the overt form of the first-person, begins with a narrative description of the leadership dilemma of the first author (and research subject). The subject informs of the need for a framework to understand and learn from management challenges that are inherent within her personal interactions as a line manager in the organisational society of a small-medium sized business.

This quest to find an appropriate framework is contextualised as she describes her quest for learning from traditional pedagogical sources. She finds theoretical frameworks to be relevant yet incomplete. The extant literature offers her only vignettes of understanding as opposed to a complete framework for the holistic sense-making of her leader-specific organisational experiences. She relates her levels of leadership development and effectiveness as a manager to this incompleteness of understanding.

Autoethnography is introduced as the proposed methodical scaffolding for this applied qualitative research. As such, the findings were derived from data that drew upon recorded narratives of her personal experiences as an employee, line manager and key research participant. On a secondary level the research further serves as a platform to engage in new exploratory knowledge creation processes through the innovative mechanism of autoethnography.
A search for meaning

When I was younger, I aspired to roles with increased responsibilities. It wasn’t just about status - even though a business card with ‘Regina Gockel’ followed by the boldly imprinted word ‘Manager’ beneath it sure would be nice!

But, once I was there on that career and promotional staircase, I learnt that these workplace travels were rife with the unknown – organisational experiences that were new, different and untenured. To me, management is really like one big problem solving operation on par with a national geographic expedition! And it’s sometimes a very lonely existence. But I have always aspired to be an effective manager, the type who incubates innovation, and, the type who takes ownership; this situation was no different.

And so I set out to find frameworks to understand and learn from the management challenges - the frustrations and the successes that manifest year after year. I’ve turned to mentors, coaches, professional development seminars and even became a popular management literature junkie.

But nowhere could I find a custom-made fit — a fit or framework that cross references between the idiosyncrasies of my interactions within an organisational society. So, I took myself to business school - surely the academy would have a framework.

The pursuit of understanding

I spent three full semesters learning about management and leadership from its various angles. Still, I did not have my framework. There I was seated in the second back row of a dimly lit university theatre listening to a lecture on leadership. My mind moved into a state of deep thought as I reflected on the theoretical frameworks I was pursuing - from leadership to innovation adoption.

‘These frameworks were all singularly relevant however holistically incomplete’ I noted mentally. ‘The key issue really is that the extant literature offers me only vignettes of understanding as opposed to a complete framework for the holistic sense-making of my leader-specific organisational experiences’, I bemoaned.

My mind briefly returned to the discussion being solicited from the front of the theatre. ‘This lecture is good and my studies have been great, but after 1½ years and thousands of dollars of fees, I have not come much closer to grasping that understanding I was really looking for. The academy has let me down’, I concluded.

But then I thought, ‘I wonder whether this guy down the front can help? After all he is a leadership expert’.
So a few days later there I was in his office explaining my dilemma and my passion to tailor some research in response. I explained that nowhere could I find a theoretical model that nourishes me with the predictive strength to holistically explain and tackle my challenges especially in the context of getting innovations adopted.

A few days later an email from him was there waiting in my inbox. It was an autoethnography written by one of his colleagues overseas. The work was the author’s exploration of the emotional interactions between herself as a first time mother within the context of her working and mothering dilemma.

‘It’s very powerful’ I said, ‘But, it’s like a therapy session without any privacy. You are really exposing your personal self to the world. Are you sure this is permissible?’ I questioned feeling an air of uneasiness.

Deep down though I knew it was the perfect fit. I had also been quite a big self reflector and I am usually quite frank in my approach to things. I am just bundling these factors into a written form with a greater capacity for readership - besides this may be useful for others going through similar dilemmas.

My search for an authentic research mode to understand me as a manager, a mode that will enable me to grow professionally, and a mode that will enable me to perform to my greatest capacity had finally ended. And there’s more! For free, I am also going to gain the comforting benefits from its therapeutic attributes! At this stage I was able to establish some research questions.

My research questions

The research has been designed to answer:

• How can autoethnography help researchers gain a better understanding of the workings and dynamics of management and leadership phenomena?

• How can autoethnography support the leadership development/growth of junior managers?

Together these questions form the basis of my working research topic:

The role of autoethnography in undertaking research into the leadership role of management.

About Autoethnography

Autoethnography examines a phenomenon from the perspective of the researcher who integrates a social science understanding. It has become a generic term to describe the linkages between the research process (graphy), culture (ethnos), and self (auto) (Ellis & Bochner, 2003: 210) and manifests as an ‘autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2003: 209). As such, it is more subjective than objective. Even so, the impact is as much emotional/affective as cognitive because the author creates a heightened self-consciousness through textual production (Plummer, 2002: 398). It rides on the epistemological belief that the vicarious learning and knowledge creation that comes through the literary
discourse of an autoethnography is as effective as the cognitive learning that comes with the discourse of more scientific objectivist research (Richardson, 1994).

We propose that as with the more objectivist methods of mainstream business research, the learning benefit from autoethnography comes with the reading of the research write-up. This affective benefit gained from vicarious learning is just as effective as the cognitive benefit gained from the nomothetic approaches that constitute much mainstream business and management research.

Autoethnography has been used as a form of research in various disciplines such as in The Arts (Picart, 2002; Scott-Hoy, 2003; Martineau, 2001), Education (Slattery, 2001; Baker, 2001; Woods & Henderson, 2002), Health (Scott-Hoy, 2003), Racial identity and ethnicity (Gatson, 2003), Journalism (Ehrlich, 2003), Life history (Richardson, 2003), Feminism (Halley, 2003) and Consumer behaviour (Gould, 2003). More detailed explanation of this research is provided by Richardson (1994) and Ellis and Bochner (2003). The present research focuses on the following treatment of the narrative form: personal experience + first-person voice = emotional evocation, as proposed by Ellis and Bochner (1992).

Further justification

The research serves as a platform to engage in new exploratory knowledge creation processes through the mechanism of autoethnography as an innovative method of data collection relevant to these phenomena.

The data collection approach is justified as appropriate and relevant due to the limitations of the traditional methods of researching these phenomena. These limitations are perceived to be drawn from positivist epistemological and objectivist ontological approaches that do not readily embed in the research process a strategy that respects the idiosyncrasies of the individual people and their social interactions. An approach that follows an interpretivist epistemology alongside a subjectivist and constructivist ontology is believed to more readily create and capture continuous constructions (reconstructions) of social meanings central to the objectives of this research. Further discussion on epistemological and ontological approaches is provided by Bryman (2001) and Neuman (2003).

Justification is further derived from the sociological nature of these phenomena and the contextual appropriateness to therefore employ autoethnography as a methodology congruently grounded in sociological roots. Plummer (2002: 398) discusses the evolutionary tract that sociology is taking into the generic field of life stories in ethnographic research, with particular reference to autoethnography. Ellis, Ronai Rambo, Richardson and Reed-Danahay are all widely cited sociologists involved in the evolution of autoethnographic styles of research.

The autoethnographic methodology used in this research follows a combined postmodern/interpretivist approach to best reflect the epistemological and ontological dynamics and complexities of the presented research problem and consequent research questions. It enables the gathering of raw data of my daily interactions as a junior (line) manager to create a dialogue that is explicit about behaviours, thoughts, emotions and attitudes.
Methodology

Data Collection Procedures

The object of data collection was my recent past experience working within an organisation over a one-year period. That experience included my role as a junior manager and my challenges in attempting to introduce innovation and change to organisational practices. Several specific attempts or incidents came to mind and constituted the majority of my reflection.

The data collection was derived from the use of ‘self’ in dual roles - first as the ‘actor’ and the purposely selected single participant (Creswell, 2003: 185), and secondly in the role of researcher. As such my role was one as a ‘complete participant’ (Creswell, 2003: 185). However, this research is a co-constructed autoethnography. It is the lived experience of the subject person, but is constructed concurrently by the subject, ex-colleagues and a co-researcher. The co-constructed nature of such research is another attempt to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. The roles of the various parties to the research, and the ways in which their relative reflectivity and impartiality can enhance the objectivity and the subjectivity of the research, are represented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectivity</th>
<th>Ex-colleagues – reflective objectivity</th>
<th>Impartial 3rd party – impartial objectivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivity</td>
<td>Self/subject - reflexive subjectivity</td>
<td>Co-researcher – impartial subjectivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflective | Impartial

The data collection process is completely overt with text written in the first person. This is considered appropriate as the dilemma and research questions were driven out of personal experience, and that the use of ‘self’ as participant best helps the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

However, these methodologies lead to some design challenges. I merged this research mode with the theoretical background I learned from my classroom study. In order to limit contamination in the data collection process, I chose to then isolate myself from any further exposure to the research literature and theoretical paradigms. This is with exception to the literature on Autoethnography. From a research design and methodological point of view, it was deemed imperative to the overall validity and reliability of the research process to conduct in-depth research into this research method. This allowed my research to be built on the scaffolding of methodological strengths and create compensatory strategies to address methodological flaws previously determined by the research community. This allowed the data to more closely represent and capture my perceptional lens as the key participant during the pre-research period, rather than be tainted by the extant literature of others. The layered approach however allows for and incorporates the shifting paradigms of personal understanding that were predicted to occur throughout this process.
Furthermore, the data collected in these retrospective accounts were supported through semi-structured interviews with other stakeholders who were involved in the scenarios at the time; and with less structured interviews with my research colleague. They were asked for their recollections using the prompts in appendix one. This contributes to enriching the depth of the data and enhancing the credibility and internal validity of this research.

Types of Data Collection

The data collection process was multi-layered (Ronai Rambo, 1995), embedding opportunities to create the two primary criteria proposed for qualitative study: trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1995).

The first layer of the two layers consisted of the recording of descriptive narrative text. These personal organisational accounts were written retrospectively in an overt first-person form. They describe from my perspective an insight into my interactions within a singular organisation over a previous one-year timeframe. These accounts reflect what Boje (2001) would call an ante-narrative.

The second layer of data collection involved the gathering of reflective notes, prompted by four types of observational protocol that are then integrated into the first layer of data.

- Standardized open-ended questions. These questions are listed in Appendix A, and were developed to elicit/solicit a consistent set of memory triggers throughout the data recording period.
- Shaver’s taxonomy of emotions (cited in Santrock, 2000)
- Autoethnography protocol (Ellis, 2000)
- Informal interviews with other participants involved in my organizational experiences
- Informal discussion and interpretation with a research colleague

Strengths and weaknesses of data collection

Strengths. The key strength of this literary form revolves around the reliability to ‘seek the truth’ or snapshot of the reality of my personal perceptions of management experiences, through first hand retrieval of data from myself. The introspective data is presented through my personal lens and therefore indicative of the perceptual flavours and personal emotions that abound in the narrated situations. As such, it provides the subjective capacity to focus and create knowledge based on the vivid and rich experiences imprinted as significant in my memory. The observations and interpretations of others however, were integrated as parallel data for analysis, and reflected data triangulation. These observations and interpretations also added to the validity of my findings.

The narrative form of the data and the dissertation as a whole is an unusual non-conventional form of genre for management scholarship, but can be partitioned with the company of the increasingly evolving postmodernist school (see Agger, 1991; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Denzin, 1991; Hutcheon, 1988; Lehman, 1991; Lyotard, 1995; Nicholson, 1990; Turner & Bruner 1986). In the field of business, however, this form of dissertation seems to stand alone.
My experience in reading narrative autoethnographies by other researchers is that the narrative form, through the power of emotional engagement and the power of novelty, enhances readability and interest; and creates impact, motivation, cognisance and connection. I have read many diverse autoethnographies as a lead up to this research. These can be found in the bibliography. But even more enduring is the substantive contribution it makes to my understanding of social complexities. If I want my research to add to knowledge creation, I surely wish it to be presented in a way that is best imparted and imprinted into the hearts and minds of my audience and readership.

The process of writing inspired introspection and learning about myself. As such it can be used as a discovery and analysis method as well as become a knowledge creation mechanism in its own right (Richardson, 1994). As I re-lived the experience of organisational innovation and the range of emotions I felt during those times, my personal appreciation was magnified of the management theory that I had learnt in class.

Weaknesses. Autoethnography as a methodology is growing in use across health and education disciplines. There is little evidence that the methodology frequents the minds of business and organisational researchers. This lack of precedence may therefore negatively influence the perception of this type of unconventional research by academic traditionalists.

Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis commenced with the data interrogation reflected in Appendices A and B. Throughout the data collection process, the data were organized into trends and categories of information for a detailed analysis as per the principles of the Grounded Theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Parry & Meindl, 2002). This analysis aimed to understand the causes, consequences, contingencies, conditions, covariances and context for each category. Ultimately, these emergent realisations and findings are to be reflected in a cause-effect model and hierarchy of abstraction model, as per the work of Kan and Parry (2004). These findings will then be compared with the extant literature.

Scope of the research and limitations

The methodology in this study is geared for leader-specific discovery and analysis on site through the discursive use of the narrative language I constructed subjectively. Hence, because each human being is unique, with different experiences, memories and factors that influence interpretations, the findings do not readily transfer to individuals, relationships and organisational societies in other situations. However, this is no project seeking to make generalisations. It is about evolving this methodical framework to understand oneself as a leader interacting within the intricacies of an organisational society. However, this approach to ‘knowledge creation’ about oneself holds opportunities to be considered for its universal transferability (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1995).

My findings thus far have been twofold. First, I found that autoethnography is a valid methodology for me to learn about business leadership. Hopefully, I have conveyed to readers this same realisation. Second, I have proposed autoethnography as a bona fide valid methodology with which to research business and management.
These were my findings about the pursuit of a valid method with which to conduct my research. Of course, the findings about the autoethnographic pursuit of understanding about organisational innovation and leadership will come later.

**References and bibliography**


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Appendix A: Autoethnography Prompts

Self Questioning

1. Describe/ draw the organisational chart of the organisation and indicate where you fit in this
2. What type of organisation, what size?
3. Describe your role?
4. What type of delegations did you have?
5. Years of experience at the time?
6. How long have you been in this organisation?
7. How does my contribution reflect innovation?
8. Use the taxonomy of emotions by Shaver as a framework to describe the emotions felt at various parts of the account
9. List each person involved in the situation, what their roles are, type of relationship, any other previous incidents as important context?
10. How involved in the incident was your managerial report?
11. Why do you think you are thinking as you are? What do you think is influencing your thinking?

Prompts from others

Ask others who were around at the time of the situation(s):
1. Can you remember that time when?
2. What do you recall?
3. How did you think I reacted?
4. Why did you think this?
5. How did others react?
6. Why do you think this?
7. Why did you think the process was successful or unsuccessful?

Appendix B: Autoethnography considerations

A series of questions to explore the contribution more fully and more cognitively:

• Ask what I have learned from the story: About social life, social process, the experience of others, the author's experience, my own life.

• Are there unexplainable holes in the plot? Or too much detail about insignificant points?

• I ask about the writing of the story: Does the author show instead of tell? Does she develop characters and scenes fully?

• Does she paint vivid pictures? Sounds? Smells? Feelings?

• Does the conversation feel real to life?

• Am I missing an opportunity to learn something about racial, class, ethnic, age, gender, political, or national difference?

• Is the author providing a view that complexifies how I look at the phenomenon? Or is this story, as I first suspected, simply not convincing enough?

• Now let's say the story has engaged me sufficiently the first time through. What do I do next?

• I ask about the plot of the story: Does the story have a balance of flow and authenticity of experience?

• Is there sufficient, yet not overblown dramatic tension? Do I long to turn the page to find out what happens?

• I ask about the goals, claims, and achievements of the author: What is the author trying to achieve? Has she achieved her goals? Are these worthwhile goals?

• Did the author learn anything new about himself? About other characters in the story? About the processes and relationships described? What might readers take from the story?

• Will this story help others cope with or better understand their worlds? Is it useful, and if so, for whom?
• Does it encourage compassion for the characters? If not for the characters, does it encourage compassion for those acted upon by them?

• Does the story promote dialogue (Ellis & Bochner, 2000)?