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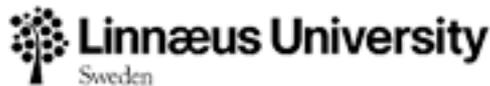
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Organisational autoethnography

Organisational
autoethnography

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review and organise the autoethnography literature: to explore the obstacles of and opportunities for autoethnography in organisation research; to support PhD students and supervisors who have chosen this methodological route to more clearly define their autoethnographic positions and choices; and to propose new research directions for organisational autoethnography.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors critically summarise autoethnography as a contemporary approach to organisational ethnography by looking back, looking at the present, and looking to the future. The authors briefly consider the historical and disciplinary development – and vehement critique – of autoethnography, trace its shifting epistemological positions and introduce three emergent “possibilities” of organisation autoethnography.

Findings – The authors highlight how autoethnography can tell stories otherwise silenced; exploring the mundane, ignored and distorted in current academic life, past and other work experiences, working with others through collaborative or co-produced autoethnography in exciting new organisational contexts.

Originality/value – This paper is one of the first attempts to review autoethnography as a contemporary approach to organisation autoethnography.

Keywords Organizational ethnography, Organizations, Research work, Autoethnography, Co-production, Ethics, Critics, Self

Paper type Viewpoint

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Introduction

In this short paper, we construct a case for autoethnography as an alternative and viable approach to organisational ethnography. We appreciate the critics and challenges of autoethnography. However, we argue that it offers another lens through which to better understand organisation and management. To do this, we “look back” to explore how autoethnography has been developed as a methodology, tracing its definitions, epistemologies, forms and critics. Second, we “look at the present” and focus on doing contemporary organisational autoethnography, its emergent streams within the literature and issues of quality and ethics. Third, we look forward and highlight the potential of autoethnography as a useful contribution to organisation studies, its promise of future research potential, and where these opportunities may reside.

Looking back

In etymological terms, autoethnography is derived from Greek: *αυτο*(auto) = self, *ἔθνος*(ethnos) = nation and *γράφω*(grapho) = to write, and essentially means to write (research) about a nation (group of people) and the self (the researcher), although Reed-Danahay (1997) explains that autoethnographers may vary in their emphasis on graphy, ethnos and/or auto.

There has always been an autoethnographic presence in qualitative anthropology and sociology (e.g. Hayano, 1982; Denzin, 1997; Pratt, 2008). Scholars such as Denzin (1997), Reed-Danahay (1997, 2001), Ellis (2007) and Anderson (2006) have provided detailed reviews of the development of autoethnography from its anthropological and sociological roots. In anthropology, autoethnography and autoethnographic expression



have been used by insiders to capture indigenous people's accounts of their own cultures (e.g. Hayano, 1982; Pratt, 2008).

Hayano (1979) is attributed with being the first to publish the term, but preferring "auto-ethnography", suggesting a relationship where the main ethnos focus of the study prevails, the auto being something extra, pre-fixed on. In 1997, Reed-Danahay introduced an edited text bringing the auto closer to the ethnos using the term "auto/ethnography", suggesting a closer and mutually dependent relationship with varying auto/ethno combinations. In 2003, Ellis and Bochner offered a chapter both exploring and demonstrating "autoethnography". Their move away from Hayano's auto-ethnography and Reed-Danahay's auto/ethnography is indicative of their introspective narrative, making the auto the main focal point of the study – this has become one of the most cited autoethnographic reviews to-date[1] and, arguably as a consequence, the term "autoethnography" is more widely used today, especially by evocative and heartfelt autoethnographers who often focus their narrative on their one self.

These first generation autoethnographers defined the genre, with second generation authors offering new insights (e.g. Adams, 2008; Boylorn, 2011; Callahan, 2008; Herrmann, 2007). Roth (2008) has identified that there are varying degrees of self/other combinations within published autoethnography. Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) have conceptualised these auto (self)/ethno (Other) combinations in a continuum of autoethnographic relationships moving from a more separate researcher-and-researched (e.g. auto ≤ ethno graphy) to that where the researcher-is-researched (e.g. auto ≥ ethno graphy).

Autoethnography has been interpreted in a variety of ways and Doloriert and Sambrook (2011) note three epistemological possibilities. First, evocative interpretivist autoethnographers write emotionally laden (Ellis and Bochner, 1992), artistic (Bochner and Ellis, 2003; Minge, 2007) heartfelt (Pelias, 2004; Sparkes, 2007) and often distressing (Ronai, 1995; Moreira, 2007; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009) narratives, conversations and performances. Such contributions fit with autoethnography that "focuses on bodies in context as co-performative agents in interpreting knowledge, and holds aesthetic crafting of research as an ethical imperative of representation" (Spry, 2011, p. 498).

Second, there has been an attempt, led by Anderson (2006) and drawing on the ethnographic work of Lofland (1995), to underpin the process of autoethnography with analytical conventions, thus moving into the domain of analytic realism (Snow *et al.*, 2003; Anderson, 2006). In this position autoethnography requires: "(1) complete member researcher status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (Anderson, 2006, p. 378).

Third, postmodernists have problematised and politicised autoethnography moving it beyond a world of harmonious social order into a political radical world where dissensus and power conflicts prevail (e.g. Neumann, 1996; Holman Jones, 2005; Moreira, 2007). Autoethnography as a political radical approach has been defined by Neumann (1996) as: "texts [that] democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in a tension with dominant expressions of discursive power" (p. 189).

These three are not necessarily discrete, may overlap and an autoethnography may include more than one position. For example, in his work "Made for sex", Moreira (2007) includes both evocative performances and "from an emic standpoint [...] a radical performance space" (p. 54). Similarly, for Spry (2011), autoethnography is

“critical, reflexive, performative, [...] it is wholly none of these but fragments of each” (p. 498). This pluralist approach is described as “double autoethnography” by Learmonth and Humphreys (2011) who argue for a position “that seeks to be both evocative, and to have analytic engagement with ideas about identity” (p. 7).

There is evidence that autoethnography is loathed by some. This “hatred” is exemplified by Delamont (2007) who describes it as “essentially lazy – literally lazy and also intellectually lazy” (p. 2). Her objections to autoethnography are on the grounds it cannot fight familiarity, it cannot be published ethically, it is experiential and not analytic, amongst others. Similarly, Hammersley (2010) differentiates art and politics from social science, although he acknowledges that they may share common requirements. He sees the utilisation of art and politics by (public employed) social scientists who, he argues, have an ethical obligation to the taxpayer to pursue social science, as unethical.

We take some encouragement from the potential of double autoethnography (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011) and its juxtaposing the analytical with the evocative/artistic/political thus moving autoethnography beyond just art, or just politics into the realms of “scientific”. As even Hammersley acknowledges:

I do not dismiss the use of [...] dialogues or poems [...] what is essential, though, is that these forms are used in ways that are appropriate to the task involved [...] and must be subordinated to the purpose of developing arguments supported by evidence, that provide convincing answers to factual questions about the world (Hammersley, 2010, p. 6).

Autoethnography is further “slammed” because of its focus on the self for both method and writing. It has been criticised as egotistical (Coffey, 1999); a romantic construction (Atkinson, 1997) and Sparkes (2000) recalls his colleagues describing autoethnography as “academic wank” (p. 212). So why does focusing on the self within an ethnography make work egotistical? Roth (2008), adopting etymological discourse, argues that this is because of the way many (alleged) autoethnographies are egocentric auto/graphies, missing out the important “ethnos” or what he refers to as the other:

The ‘auto/ethnography’ stories then become of the woe-me kind, auto-graphies. The difficulties self-ascribed auto/ethnographers face in academe derive [...] from the frequently unprincipled, egoistical and egotistical, narcissistic preoccupation with and auto-affection of the Self (Roth, 2008, p. 10)

This “fear” of overusing the self is openly acknowledged by Morse (2002) who dissuades her students from employing autoethnography for fear of conceptual broadsiding – focusing on themselves rather than the research question and culture.

Amidst all of this condemnation, many support the focus on self (e.g. Denzin, 1997; Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2007; Anderson, 2006). Bridgens (2007) defends that it is only through autoethnography, autobiography or narrative studies that some experiences, which are ignored, distorted or silenced because of the discomfort they cause, can become known and understood. Ellis *et al.* (2010) defend introspection on the self, providing the autoethnographer “consider(s) ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (p. 9). We agree with Roth (2008) and Ellis (2007) that the autoethnography must contribute an understanding to the greater culture (i.e. not auto/graphy).

While we dismiss Delamont's claims of autoethnography as "lazy" (a similar "unfair" argument could be made for secondary data-based studies), we recognise such fundamental critique has stimulated interesting and thought-provoking debates.

Having reviewed its emergence, development, forms and opponents, we now consider some of the current obstacles to and opportunities for doing organisational autoethnography.

Looking at the present

Marcus (2008) appreciated the ethnographic gaze for understanding organisational settings and processes and Brannan *et al.* (2007) also recognise it as a valuable tool for better understanding the demands placed upon employees within an organisational culture. We argue that autoethnography enriches this by "hold[ing] the self [the researcher] and culture together" (Holman Jones, 2005). Despite its critics and constraints, autoethnography is increasingly popular with scholars and students, across disciplines (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011). However, here we focus on the organisational context.

Streams of organisational autoethnography

It was not until 1979 that Hayano clearly laid out a case for self-observation in ethnographic research. He outlined that "the shared similarities among autoethnographies are that in each case the researchers possess the qualities of often permanent self-identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognized by both themselves and the people of whom they are part" (Hayano, 1979, p. 100). Given this, we propose that there are three opportunities for organisational autoethnography, depending on the context.

(i) *Autoethnography within higher education (HE) organisations.* Autoethnography is increasingly popular within HE, probably due to the convenience of researching one's own organisation (see Sambrook *et al.*, 2008; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011). Contributions to this literature explore, first, the autoethnographer as a researcher/teacher/administrator, etc., doing scholarly work, and/or second, as an employee working in an organisation (that happens to be HE). Many HE autoethnographies fit into both categories as the autoethnographer reveals her complex and multifaceted story (Humphreys, 2005; Pelias, 2003; Jago, 2002; Haynes, 2006; Riad, 2007; Sparkes, 2007; Sambrook, 2010; Poulos, 2010; Sambrook *et al.*, 2008; Medford, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Etherington, 2007; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009; Rambo, 2007; Duarte and Hodge, 2007; Scott, 2009; Sambrook, 2010; Krizek, 1998; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011).

(ii) *Autoethnography within "previous/other life" organisations.* Autoethnographers sometimes write about their experiences elsewhere, particularly their work experiences prior to entering HE, although this could include work experiences simultaneously with HE. This type of opportunistic organisational autoethnography is often, but not always, formed from recollection. As such we could argue it to be less rigorous given that a narrative formed from memories can represent a partial and incomplete "truth" and become distorted over time. Bochner recognises and defends this:

Doesn't this mean that the stories we tell always run the risk of distorting the past? Of course, it does [...] stories rearrange, redescribe, invent, omit, and revise [...] Only within the memoro-politics surrounding the accuracy of recovered memories, which emerged within the context of positivist psychology, would such a criticism be threatening and become distorted over time (in Ellis, 2007).

Examples of these types of organisational autoethnography include Blenkinsopp (2007), Vickers (2007) and Zavattaro (2011).

(iii) Autoethnography as complete member research in other organisations.

Autoethnography as complete member research is arguably more difficult to achieve given the tensions and impracticalities of becoming a complete member researcher in an organisation other than the researcher's own. Doloriert and Sambrook (2011) have observed recently there are several examples of works that show organisational autoethnography (Van Maanen, 1998; Goodall, 1994), but only a handful that outwardly call themselves organisational autoethnography (e.g. Yarborough and Lowe, 2007; Kempster *et al.*, 2008; Kempster and Stewart, 2010).

Opportunities arise through what Kempster *et al.* (2008) refer to as co-produced autoethnography where at least one author is researcher and at least one other a practitioner working in an "other" organisation (Kempster *et al.*, 2008; Kempster and Stewart, 2010; Yarborough and Lowe, 2007; Boyle and Parry, 2007).

We argue, from experience, that co-produced autoethnography opportunities can be improved by supervising and writing with students who are actively working and who wish to conduct research focusing on their organisational context in some way. Clair Roberts (2007) wrote an autoethnography for her PhD, an entrepreneur exploring other entrepreneurs. Sally recently supervised a doctoral candidate's autoethnography exploring the psychological contract of other health and social care employees (Wainwright and Sambrook, 2009) and the impact on their own psychological contract (Sambrook, 2010).

Challenges of organisational autoethnography

Enthusied by the prospects and potential of autoethnography, we should also reflect on the struggles of being an autoethnographer, whether in anthropology or sociology, but particularly within business and management. It is by no means a choice for the lazy (contrary to Delamont, 2007), requiring considerable time, effort and resilience. More so than ethnographers, autoethnographers have "satellite" communities of practice with very limited, if any, critical mass within home business schools. Because of this, they rely heavily on conferences for support and are isolated in terms of mentorship and sponsorship. They are marginalised researchers, struggling in the current climate of "journal list fetishism" (Willmott, 2011) and where departmental conference budgets are being squeezed and competition for grant capture is tough. A key pressure is associated with publishing autoethnographies, which in turn is linked to tenure and promotion, fraught with difficulties (Poulos, 2010).

There are many different ways of "showing" and "telling" (Ellis *et al.*, 2010; Adams, 2006; Lamott, 1994) autoethnographic work that both the more experienced autoethnographer and novice student are confronted with, including narratives, performance, poetry, storytelling and art. Therefore, writing organisational autoethnography can test traditional publication formats and university thesis regulations. There is limited discussion of autoethnographers' attempts to publish their work. In a key, but not the only article, Holt (2003) tells a story about the process of getting an autoethnographic manuscript published within sports sciences. He shares his reviewer's feedback through a reconstructed conversation, highlighting their discomfort with the use of the self as the only data source and anything other than traditional measures of quality for qualitative research. For UK business school academics, publishing struggles are further compounded by the Association of

Business School (ABS) list pressures. While some organisational autoethnographies have achieved ABS three and four star journal success (e.g. Kempster and Stewart, 2010; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011), we note there are several important journals that do not feature on this list (e.g. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Ethnography*, *Qualitative Health Research*, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *Qualitative Researcher*).

Novice student autoethnographers also face considerable difficulties with the research, thesis production, examination and supervision process. We have previously argued that doing an autoethnographic PhD, particularly within a traditionally positivist business school, demands bounded discretion, negotiation and overcoming cultural-, procedural- and resource-related issues (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011). Some of the problems include: lack of appropriate internal examiners for autoethnographic PhDs; inadequate resources, including suitable reading materials, outdated library books and not subscribing to relevant journals; and lack of internal research networks. Ways of overcoming these challenges include: looking outside the business school for appropriate internal examiners; making full use of the inter-library loans; and developing relationships with external networks, through attending “friendly” contemporary ethnography conferences (such as Symposium on Current Developments in Ethnographic Research in the Social and Management Sciences in the UK and Qualitative Research in Management and Organization Conference in the USA).

We have also argued that the autoethnographer’s supervisor is critical in ensuring the success of an autoethnographic PhD thesis (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011). As examiners make decisions based upon their own reinterpretation of HEI rules, the supervisor is key in communicating the contemporary nature to examiners and ensuring a fair and spirited interpretation of the regulations. The student autoethnographer must also be aware of her HEI’s rules of play and prepare to defend her non-conventionality and creativity, based on an orthodox quality criterion as a completed process (polished report) or, more helpfully, as embedded in the (messy) practice of completing.

Ethics of organisational autoethnography

The various degrees of self/other combinations in autoethnography bring different ethical considerations for writing, reviewing, publishing, presenting and examining autoethnography. There are three ethical concerns with autoethnography: first, and familiar across all forms of inquiry, is protecting the participants (individuals and organisations, etc.) within the ethnos of the study; second, relational ethics of those family, friends and work colleagues talked about in the auto; and, third, the auto ethics of revealing the autoethnographer’s identity both during the blind review process and for publication.

Slattery and Rapp (2003) define relational ethics as “[doing what is necessary to be] true to one’s character and responsible for one’s actions and their consequences on others” (p. 55). Ellis (2007) explores relational ethics in both ethnography and autoethnography and, for most cases, advises that consent is sought from those we write about as a consequence of writing an autoethnography.

The ethics of revealing one’s own identity is a complex moral and ethical minefield, one that Flemmons and Green (2002) refer to as outing: “you have to decide if you are ready to be outed or to put yourself out that way and consider the impact on personal identity” (p. 93). Ellis (2007) discusses this as the ethics of the “I” of the reveal: “Our personal lives, once published became vulnerable to attack and disapproval

by readers [...] you become the stories you write” (p. 22). In organisational autoethnography, the auto ethics can have serious implications on the workplace, as Vickers (2007) discusses in her autoethnography on bullying in the workplace: “few have considered (psychologically, physically, materially, or emotionally) the potential harm to researchers when we write about our experiences as we go about our work” (p. 612). For student autoethnographers, this is complicated further in that writing *nom de plume* for assessed work is not feasible.

Given our own experiences of these complexities, we offer a number of approaches to managing the ethics of the auto reveal, for both student and more experienced autoethnographers alike (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009). First, we came across “ethnography fiction-science” or “fictionalisation” (Watson, 2000, p. 502) and then “semi-fictionalised ethnography” and “fictionalised ethnography”, which provide a means of “using data which is highly sensitive or confidential and which would not be publishable without heavy disguising” (Humphreys and Watson, 2009, p. 3). Examples of this approach include Doloriert and Sambrook (2011), Sparkes (2007) and Watson (1994). A second approach, particularly useful for work that cannot be fictionalised in autoethnography, is Medford’s (2006) notion of mindful slippage, the “slippage between Truth (or our experience of reality) and truthfulness because sometimes it seems appropriate – even necessary – to abbreviate, edit, or otherwise modify our life stories in our writing [...]” (p. 853).

Looking to the future

We have highlighted three emerging streams of organisation autoethnography. Looking ahead, we envisage future contributions within these streams:

(i) *Autoethnography within HE organisations*. Reed-Danahay (2001) suggests that “the next ‘taboos’ broached in intimate ethnographic writing” (p. 418) might be careers, most specifically mentorship, education and employment issues, family and work issues, career success and failure. Autoethnographers from across the HE organisation can contribute to this. There are opportunities for individuals, or colleagues, students and supervisors with similar or contrasting experiences to work together on co-constructed (Ellis, 2007) autoethnography and to open up the discursive space for exploring the culture of self, work and relationships within the HE organisation.

(ii) *Autoethnography within “previous/other life” organisations*. Although some argue that narrative reconstructed from memory is not valid or rigorous, others counter-argue that any form of interpretative research is open to reconstruction. If we accept its defence, then autoethnographers should also be able to contribute by reflecting back on critical moments within their career in other organisations. The notion of organisational autoethnography can also be extended beyond the large public/private organisation sector into micro-entrepreneurships (such as a family business) and to voluntary organisations and groups, and broadened to include religious and para-religious organisations and membership of other social arrangements, such as conferences, special interest groups, professional bodies and virtual networks.

(iii) *Autoethnography as a complete member research status in an organisation*. This is arguably the most difficult mode of organisational autoethnography due to the sheer logistics of becoming a member of another organisation with the sole purpose of conducting research. There are currently only a few contributions to this

stream, but this could be expanded with opportunities to engage in autoethnography through sabbaticals, exchanges, voluntary work and non-executive directorships, for example, with more co-production (Kempster *et al.*, 2008) and student research. Other opportunities could be leveraged through willing business partners, colleagues, local community members and students by means of co-production. We could also look further afield to international studies. Karra and Phillips (2008) argue that an increasing proportion of research in international management is taking on the characteristics of autoethnography (p. 542) for “local” researchers carrying out a research project locally, or “back home” and publishing the results internationally. Such autoethnography provides a methodological frame for understanding and managing research for studies conducted in our own cultural contexts. If their argument holds, then autoethnography could be useful and applicable within the UK, e.g. a Welsh autoethnographer studying an organisation in Wales, a Scottish autoethnographer studying a Scottish organisation and then sharing and comparing experiences. Similarly, this could extend beyond geographical to other areas of cultural analysis, such as gender, race and ethnicity, which could also develop the more radical, critical form of autoethnography, giving voice to oppressed researchers and participants.

We encourage colleagues to explore the mundane, ignored and distorted in current academic life, past and other work experiences, and to work with others through collaborative or co-produced autoethnography. Yet, we do not underestimate the difficulties. Autoethnographers require considerable time, face complex ethical issues, encounter fierce barriers to thesis production and journal publication (Holt, 2003) and experience fraught attempts at career progress (Poulos, 2010).

An important purpose of this paper has been to bring autoethnography to a wider business and management audience. Having introduced three emergent “possibilities” for future research, we conclude with optimism that, despite the considerable obstacles, there is much room for growth in autoethnography within organisation studies.

Note

1. Over 1,320 citations according to Google Scholar, as at July 2011.

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