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Building sustainable yet unsettling inter-disciplinary research practices: paying attention to ourselves as researchers

Introduction

Descriptions of methodology and the content of research that treats them as separate endeavours can hide the work done in how researchers come to make sense of and understand what they are doing together. Dan Schendel, the joint founder of *Strategic Management Review*, expressed his concern thus: 'The separation of content and method is artificial, and that processes must be studied alongside or coincidentally with content (Schendel, 1992).' This can be uncomfortable yet building more sustainable research requires us to do just that, to look at our own practice, to be aware that we are both the subjects and objects of our own work (Empson, 2012) and how we shift our approaches in the face of experience and carry on. These are insights that can both shine a light on our methods as well as the content of our research.

This is an exploratory autoethnographic case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011) of our work together as an interdisciplinary research team – the team being us: **R**, **J** and **A** as we reflect on the development of an academic paper on the topic of leadership.   We pay attention to the quality of difference, the challenge that occurs in conversation and how we sense and react. Here we seek to draw out implications for the researchers' identities in what the ethnographer Melvin Pollner described as 'an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality' (Pollner, 1991) and its implication for the research process. In other words paying attention to our reflexive engagement with our different practices (Cunliffe, 2004; Johnson and Duberley, 2003; Warwick and Board, 2013). We seek to notice and explore striking moments (Shotter, 2005) and unsettlement we experienced during the progression of the paper. We will track our sensemaking as we develop the paper, submit it to review and work through the achievements and disappointments. In doing so we hope to make a contribution to the discussion on the role of creative unsettlement in working across professional and institutional boundaries in research and the implications for sustainable research practices.

Auto ethnography studies of Inter-disciplinary academic research teams

Auto ethnography is about recalling and critically reflecting on one's lived experiences (Donmoyer, 2012). The method offers the opportunity to rethink and retell events as part of a continuous review of one's life (Ellis, 2013). The approach has been used widely, although Bryman and Bell (2015), in their leading business research text, suggest that autoethnography has had limited application in management research, this is ironic considering the weight of auto-biographies weighing down the shelves in airport book shops.

Walker and Taylor (2014) articulate their experiences of using a collaborative approach in an academic setting to explore authenticity in research. Drawing on Patillo-McCoy (2000) they

Building sustainable yet unsettling inter-disciplinary research practices: paying attention to ourselves as researchers

investigated individual responses to a phenomenon to move towards a collaboration of self, community and the social justice system. Hodgins and Boydell (2014), document the experiences of collaborative interdisciplinary research in healthcare where academics from science and arts backgrounds come together to collaborate. Bauman, Acker-Hocevar and Talbot (2012) present their collaboration in higher education to explore their responses to the under-representation and retention of ethnic minorities in the setting. Boje and Tyler (2009) use autoethnography to examine the phenomena of workaholism through accounts of their own academic lives and the narrative of the American Dream portrayed in popular films.

Contrary to Bryman and Bell's contention (Bryman and Bell, 2015) there is an emerging interest in using this approach across the full range of business areas; entrepreneurship, accounting, consumer behaviour, organisation, leadership, business ethics, management learning and development.

In short auto-ethnography provides a vivid and textured account that gives voice to the full array of human emotional being in navigating through organisational life (Warwick and Board, 2012) that others, faced with similar dilemmas, might usefully relate to (Shotter, 2011) as part of their on-going experience.

The context

In the autumn of 2015 we presented a developmental paper at the BAM conference in Portsmouth (McCray et al., 2015). The paper you are reading now tells the story of how this developed further, how we worked together on our argument, the conversations we have had, the public presentations, the quandary as to whether to submit for a 'Special Issue', and how we are navigating our way through the peer review feedback (Dashper, 2015; Gibbs, 2003). Here we summarise three striking moments.

The staff club – voicing difference amongst ourselves

We were in the University staff club, hard worn carpets with pastel furniture dating back to the early 90s, trying to make sense of our findings and the feedback we had received at BAM. Our particular concern was how they located themselves within the differing philosophical and practice positions each of us, consciously and unconsciously, held.

A begins tentatively with a concern, worried as it seemed that it might provoke a disagreement. The issue was an anxiety that:

Building sustainable yet unsettling inter-disciplinary research practices: paying attention to ourselves as researchers

A: '*the methodology in the recent draft of our paper just did not give voice to the challenging conversations we have had given the emergent nature of both the method and how we had come to understand our research material'.*

This was the moment when we first spoke of our differing opinions and perspectives and began to realise its importance to our work together and from this the realisation of the constraints this posed. In attempting to respond to the editorial guidelines for the journal we sought to publish in, where traditional single discipline of methods was valued, would be difficult because the demands of our question required a wider disciplinary collaboration and response.

J responds:

J: '*Well we will have to conform if we are going to get it in that journal'.*

R responds:

R: '*But I think there is relevance in giving voice to our confusion and the tensions that we are grappling with. I too feel the same as A, but I couldn't put my finger on it. There is something very interesting here, particularly with us coming from different backgrounds. There is an authenticity and value in making this explicit, I think it is important'.*

We agreed a way forward and departed.

These striking moments (Katz and Shotter, 2004) were memorised (Lemmer, 2016) and revisited when **J** and **R** presented at a university seminar on interdisciplinary research and writing.

The university research seminar – voicing differences in public

It was all a bit of a rush. **J** had asked **R** to come along about an hour before the session was to start due to someone pulling out at the last minute. What emerged between the two of us and the dozen or so others in the room was highly, but not entirely, improvised: **J** had put some slides together a few minutes before and we were walking and talking as we approached the venue. The audience listened as we discussed our different approaches and interpretations. **R** voiced his frustration at **J** about the lack of version control on the various drafts – laughter. This seemed made the session more intense. A question from the audience asked: '*How do you manage any ontological differences as researchers?'*

We then recalled the scene in the Staff Club and what we had learnt from our reflective data. The excited conversation between us and the participants developed further.

Building sustainable yet unsettling inter-disciplinary research practices: paying attention to ourselves as researchers

We developed a sense that others were interested in this too, the counter points of what might be called ontological tidiness with the messiness of how one comes to know something from experience and working together live.

The pub – reflections and steps beyond

Our next meeting was at the pub, a small Christmas lunch for the three of us, using the opportunity to explore our experiences. We discussed our roles and identity in relation to our collaborative working**. J** notes:

J: 'R writes beautifully - I am trying to be freer and go with a different writing style but I am so determined it will go in this journal and it's hard to lose sight of that'.

A: '*I wish I had **R'**s writing style and **J'**s completer finisher mind together with my own theoretical and practice knowledge and I would be the perfect academic…'*

Note the polite nature of how difference and appreciation were being voiced. However, there was a tension: the style of writing coming second to the task of getting the paper submitted. We departed and work separately on the construction of the paper.

R writes an email:

R: '*Well, here it is 600 words that probably break loads of conventions that said, I have tried to make it readable and interesting (yup, rules broken already)'.*

The email resulted in smile emoticons in reply emails from **J** and **A.**

J's reflective notes records Denzins' (2011) observation that an interpretive reflexive text has vitality and should never be boring as it grips the reader, a point stressed by Billig in his book with the playful title of *How to write badly and succeed in social sciences (2013).* None the less formal academic writing may over ride and our conversations and collaborative writing remains a compromise and challenge of identity of literature versus science. And this continues.

Learning and reflexivity as a social endeavour

We are keen to pay attention to our movement of thought, prompted by each other, to make both the auto-ethnographic process and the findings of our research more revealing (note again how the content and methodology are entwined). When it comes to movement of thought we are attracted to the literature on reflexivity, but not only as individuals, but the social processes between us.

Edmondson (2002) writes that team learning refers to a process of reflection in which past strategies and behaviour are reviewed, leading to development of modified strategies. This

requires that learning is shared with other team members and involves cognition, emotion and behaviours shared by individuals, as opposed to individual learning which focuses on individual cognition, behaviour and emotion (Kayes et al., 2005).

We are drawing attention to the practice of critical engagement of thoughts and actions with others as a process of social reflexivity, a point that Tucker explores in the work of Anthony Giddens (Tucker, 1998) and how this might come to affect our imagination of future practice (Wright Mills, 1959). It is dialogic and relational and comes with unsettling of our conventional practices (Paton et al., 2013). Research into the benefits of reflexivity has focussed on shared understanding (van Ginke and van Knippenberg, 2009) using diverse perspectives (DeDreu, 2007) and learning from previous experiences (Schippers et al., 2013). Reflexivity in research highlights the multiple and often contradictory and shifting identities (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009) held by researchers at moments in time and across boundaries. In short, we are interested in social nature of reflexivity as we work through this together towards a future goal; or as John Shotter might say, those shared structures of anticipation (Shotter, 2008).

Final thoughts

As researchers clarity of ontology is required, but coming from diverse backgrounds this is challenged frequently and unexpectedly.   Also, there are the power dynamics of convention as we seek to publish in our chosen journal.   As interdisciplinary researchers with practice backgrounds, we have been acting as bricoleurs (Weick, 1993) with non-linear approaches to the problems we face with resources to hand, including each other. It is our current view that these enabling constraints are proving effective in forming new insights and sustainable working relationships. It is this that we seek to test further at and beyond BAM September 2016 as we evoke our academic vulnerabilities and make our personal experiences available to others.

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Building sustainable yet unsettling inter-disciplinary research practices: paying attention to ourselves as researchers

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