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Title:

Reflecting on our unsettling inter-disciplinary research as we explore a new field: enabling research practice and developing insight through co-created autoethnography

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Title:

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Summary:

We apply principles of autoethnography with two interconnected questions: 1) how the methods might affect our research practice; and, 2) what insights might be generated that might be useful to others. Autoethnography was an enabling heuristic allowing us to pay attention to how we worked together to notice and explore mundane and striking events and improve our practice as a form of social reflexivity. There was an awareness of the development and movement of thought, noticing small steps that might otherwise be missed, or unjustifiable steps in argumentation. This we think has a contribution to validity *in action*. We became intrigued by the empathy we developed with our research subjects as a way of making sense of their insights; also of what we revealed of ourselves to each other and the impact this had on our practice and our developing research relationship.

Track: 22 Research Methodology

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Abstract

In this paper three researchers from different subject disciplines are researching a field that is new to them, incorporating both the subject matter of critical action learning and the politics of the new research area. In doing so the principles of auto-ethnography are used. Auto-ethnography being a qualitative research method where the subjective experiences of the researcher(s) are seen as important and the researcher is encouraged to make meaning of experiences alongside the persons who are the object of the study (Siddique, 2011). The paper offers two interconnected contributions to research practice;

Firstly, that the practice of autoethnography is an enabling heuristic allowing us to pay attention to how we work together to notice and explore mundane and striking events and improve our research. We are aware of and chart the development and movement of our thought, noticing small steps that might otherwise be missed, or unsustainable steps in argumentation, contributing to both knowledge and validity *in action*.

Secondly, in terms of understandings, our study highlights our ability to notice and talk about issues of power amongst ourselves, the field and how this impacts on our research, both as individuals and together.

The heuristic autoethnographic process involved the writing of narratives, transcripts of conversations and letters to explicate and make sense of our experiences thus enabling further reflexive conversations. Here we illustrate this process with the use of vignettes to show the development of our thought and impact on our research practice.

Against this background, we consider how different literature that we have read over many years is brought to play in a very natural way to enable this sensemaking, and how this is challenged and explored between us from our different backgrounds forming our identities as researchers. In short, how the use of a social science affects our research practice and its potential outcomes.

Key words

Autoethnography, Research practice, Reflexivity, Validity, Power, Identity

Context

We (**R**, **J** and **A**) began working together as action learning set facilitators as part of a leadership programme run for an NHS trust. Action Learning (Revens, 1980) has been adapted and applied by management academics and developers to support the resolution of real problems in the workplace and is supported in other organisational research by Lynch et al (2013) and Philips & Byrne (2013). The programme comprised of senior doctors, nurses and managers and led to a postgraduate certificate in leadership and management.

We became intrigued as to what was going on in terms of the impact the programme had both on the individuals and the organisation, as well as ourselves. This led to us embarking on a research programme in action learning. Although we were all experienced facilitators, the research field was new to us, including sources of literature and the notable individuals within this niche of the Academy. Our interest soon focused from action learning in general

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to that of critical action learning (CAL) with its attention to criticality in relation to context, power and emotion (Reynolds and Trehan, 2008; Trehan and Rigg, 2007; Vince, 2008) where we could explore issues of power in learning sets and organisations.

We are writing this paper in the midst of this experience and we have had some success (with two papers published), but we have not yet been able to achieve acceptance in a three-star journal, having had one rejection and now a re-submission. In a conversation amongst the three of us **J** reacted against the idea of rejection suggested by **A**, to which **R** reframed as 'success that has yet to come'. Within this experience, we are therefore working towards future unknown with its multiple possibilities, rather than of success achieved with its post hoc rationalisation. We hope to give voice to research and collaboration *in action*.

Prior to academia the three of us came from different backgrounds including nursing, general management, microbiology and human resources amongst other practitioner roles. In keeping with the ethos of action learning we as a group of researchers became intrigued as to how we were working together. For example, how issues of differences, similarities and identity would affect our research. Early on **A** expressed a concern that we were not being true to ourselves, or our research, if we did not attend carefully to how we were working together, **A** explains:

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.

There were therefore twin tracks of: researching and writing a series of papers on critical action learning; and, paying attention to ourselves working together to achieve this. We met regularly in the University staff club; a drab room with pastel coloured furniture of the 1980s with worn carpets of similar hue, or when celebrations were in order, a gastro pub in the country. Thick descriptions (Kempster and Stewart, 2010) were a feature particularly of **R**'s narratives as a means to explicate tacit knowing for us as researchers and convey a sense of context and place for the reader.

We have attended five conferences, four in management and one in sociology. Our primary research continues with another round of interviews with the action learning participants two years after their programme has ended.

Methodology

Our approach is autoethnographic, a process of recalling and critically reflecting on one's lived experiences (Donmoyer, 2012). Done well it is a means of connecting both personal experience and theory, contributing to knowledge and practice in a way that the reader can follow the author's lived experience. In responding to a letter suggesting that autoethnography was merely about the self, Caroline Ellis, who wrote much early work on the subject, responded: 'From my perspective, personal narratives and autoethnography always have been about the Other; they always have involved critical engagement, social problems, and social action, though authors may not say so explicitly' (Ellis, 2002, 400-401). In other words, it is a means of exploring self to shine a light on the wider social processes of which we are part. Drawing more broadly on the social sciences the sociologist C Wright Mills bridges the gap in *Sociological Imagination* between subjective experiences and wider sociological implication; in gendered language of the day he explains:

The first fruit of ... imagination – and the first lesson of the social sciences that embodies it – is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and

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gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those individuals in his circumstances

...

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognise this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst (Wright Mills, 1959, p5-6).

Denzin draws on Ellis and VanMaanen to explain that it is: ‘traditionally the cultural study of one’s own people, but more recently a turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintain the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context herein self-experiences occur’ (Denzin, 1997). In a paper exploring her role as a doctoral supervisor and the responsibility she feels for further generations of academics Lemmer (2016) explains that autoethnography is ‘an innovative addition to the compendium of qualitative research methods [and] is gaining prominence as a means of examining the academic life through the personal and professional histories of individual academics’. A feature of this approach is that it offers various avenues for interpretation. Whilst the contribution of this paper focuses on the impact of the entwined processes of autoethnography and reflexivity and the effect it has on research practice and validity the reader should be alert to other possibilities and meanings. In short, despite academic conventions, we are wary of overly focused neat lines of thought.

Autoethnography is not without its critics, even amongst its own advocates Coffey (Coffey, 1999) warns of the ‘dangers of gross self-indulgence’ (p132). Holt (Holt, 2003) too points to the risk of narcissism but also a lack of traditional means to judge the worthiness of such inquiries. Boyle and Parry (2007) point out the positivist criticism that the researcher has little control over the process thus impacting on the validity of any insights. They counter this by problematizing the notion of ‘researcher as controller’ (p188) stressing that there is little control between the researcher, the research process and how this will be taken up by the reader.

Some will draw connections between our project and action research (Marshall, 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2006; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006), but it differs in the sense that we have no cycles or ‘stepping in and out’ of experience, rather it is a continual flow of experience of which we are constantly making sense (Weick, 1995). Autoethnography offers an opportunity to rethink and retell events as part of a continuous review of one’s life (Ellis, 2013), but here it enables us to shape events as we move on together. It is an approach that enables exploration of everyday happenings; in our case of academics grappling with an area of knowledge new to us, but in different ways and from different traditions. It is an approach that lends itself to creative forms of knowledge and artefacts that might include poetry, stories and pictures. We have taken similar licence in plotting, reflecting and telling our story. The range of autoethnographic approaches includes Walker and Taylor (2014) who articulate their own experiences of using a collaborative approach in an academic setting. Drawing on Patillo-McCoy (2000) they investigated their responses to collaboration in terms of self, community and the social justice system. Using the metaphor of an affair Empson (2012) explores issues of her identity as an academic and her work in a professional service firm. 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 and others (2012) present their collaboration in higher education to explore their responses to the under-representation and retention of ethnic minorities in the

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setting. Boje and Tyler (2009) use autoethnography to examine the phenomena of workaholicism through accounts of their own academic lives and the narrative of the American Dream portrayed in popular films. Kempster and Stewart (2010) lay out their own experience of executive education and coaching in a process of co-constructed auto-ethnography that we too are drawn to.

In this project the three of us are working together as a co-constructed auto-ethnography. This is a developing field (Cann and DeMeulenaere, 2012; Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2013; O'Mahoney and Sturdy, 2015) as Cann and DeMeulenaere explain, it enables 'collaborating activist researchers to reflect on the tempo, uncertainty, and complexity of research relationships' (2012). It enables the exploration of the textures of how people relate to each other. By textures we mean the paying attention to the gamut of being a person and of developing relationships in pursuit of research; including aesthetics, emotions and embodied experiences (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p29) that come forth as well as logic and the rational. Within the family of autoethnography methods Ngunjiri and colleagues (2010) have identified four phases of autoethnographic writing: the preliminary phase (self-writing and reflection); the subsequent phase (additional data collection, self-writing, and reflection); data analysis and interpretation (data review and coding); and report writing (meaning-making and outlining). Whilst we can recognise these features our experience was fluid, the four phases underplay the impact of learning and how new insights came to further affect our autoethnographic and research practice as a heuristic process.

We have approached our two-year project with a combination of reflexive conversations which we recorded as data focusing on striking moments (Corlett, 2012; Katz and Shotter, 2004) of shifts in understanding of how we related to ourselves and the research field. As we come to write this article (not as an end, but as a further vignette in how we relate to each other) we used insights in a round of letter writing to pick out themes that were important to us, and had wider research implications.

There are three interwoven approaches of this autoethnographic heuristic, they are reflexivity, explication, and narrative.

Reflexivity involves a paying attention to thought and practice and how they come to affect each other. It can be unsettling as it addresses beliefs and ways of being, and taken for granted assumptions (Cunliffe, 2009). The sociologist Melvin Pollner describes reflexivity as 'an "unsettling", i.e. an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices in describing reality' (Pollner, 1991). In these social reflexive processes assumptions in our research practices become available for discussion albeit in ways that can be challenging of practice, thought and identity.

Explication, to explicate, is the process to make tacit knowledge noticeable and explicit, it is 'the process of developing or bringing out what is implicitly contained in a notion, proposition, principle etc' (Franklin, 2006). It involves reflection, consideration of impact, group sensemaking, scholarship and synthesis; and taking a holistic approach and noticing the interdependences of what is emerging (Franklin, 2007; MacKenzie and Franklin, 2006).

As part of the process we wrote several narratives. These included the meetings we held and the conferences we attended as well as sharing accounts of ourselves, of who we were and our early influences. Of events we wrote these close to the point of happening so as not to dull the confusing senses and multiple possibilities we felt (Warwick and Board, 2013).

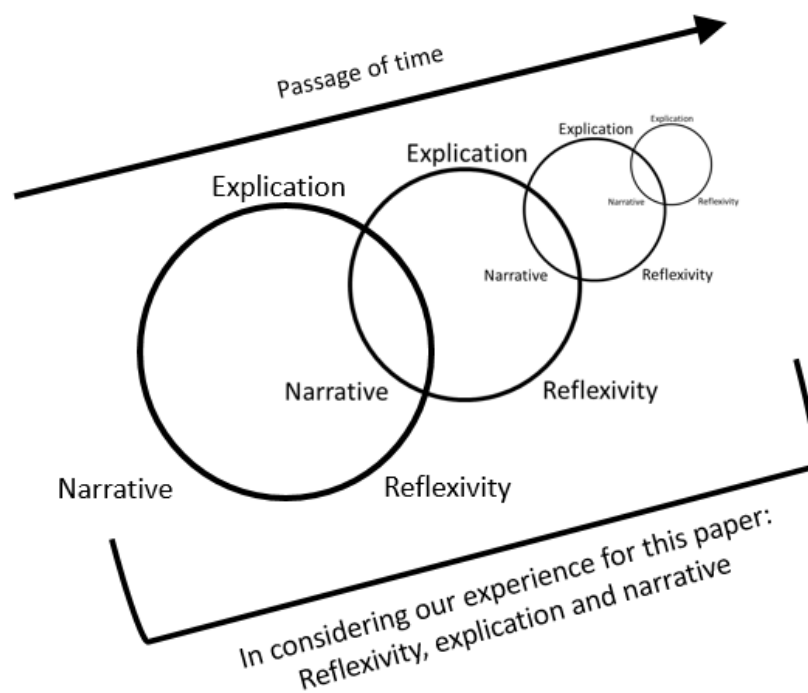
In preparation for writing this paper, and in a further reflexive twist in the process of research, we were wondering how to bring this together, both in terms of data collection and presentation and to enable further reflexivity. We were at a workshop looking at performance

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evaluation in the NHS when one of us was asked to be part of a letter writing circle to understand our experiences of the NHS (Watton and Stables, 2014). We too were drawn to this approach to finish this stage of our project, particularly **J**, a keen letter writer. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) point out it is a way of offering and responding to the ‘tentative narrative interpretations’ (Ibid, p6) of experience. With a letter one has someone explicitly in mind, it turns into an imagined conversation in which one anticipates a response and writes accordingly.

Our process is summarised in figure 1, but our collaboration continues, only brought into sharp focus here in writing this paper, with more ‘focuses’ to come.

Figure 1: Routines of reflexivity moving towards meta-reflexivity



Developing a sense of our experience

Here we present four vignettes from our data (Humphreys, 2005; Lemmer, 2016) which includes: transcripts of conversation, narratives and letters to each other. Within one vignette, a letter, we refer to previous artefacts to illustrate the explication of material that enabled reflexivity. Humphreys makes the explicit connection between the use of vignettes and reflexivity in qualitative research (2005).

We begin with vignette 1 a longer narrative that gives a sense of surprise and bewilderment; but also of noticing.

Vignette 1: homeward bound from the conference

We had attended a conference where we presented three papers on different subjects, two of which went well, the other (the subject of this paper) prompted reflection and learning, and it is this we dwell on. This is **R**'s narrative written on the homeward train the day after. Here **R** reflects ...

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I open the door, it has a squeaky hinge and it closes with a bang. We are presenting our paper and are hoping for lots of lively conversation. I see white tables arranged in dishevelled rows with chairs facing the front. I feel awkward, my heart sinks A conversation with the chairwoman of the session ‘shall we move chairs round into a circle?’, ‘No we will just ask people to move their chairs a bit’ comes the response. The result: a hodgepodge of scattered people. Those at the back have a view of other people’s backs. We begin, I introduce **J** and **A** and go through the genesis of the paper. **A** describes a striking moment of us working together, a challenge that he made to **J** and I that the paper we were working on just wasn’t consistent with our practice. **J** describes her striking moment of how she is noticing her research practice developing and changing. Over to me. I talk about the opportunities that we are keen to explore: the implications for research validity in the reflexive process of working together; how difference between us enables us to notice what might otherwise go unnoticed and unchallenged. And how we are extrinsically becoming aware of how the selection of a journal impacts on our research practice. I stop for questions, pause and the audience responds: ‘have you thought about Organisational Ethics’, ‘what about Management Learning’, ‘The international Journal of Qualitative Research and their special issue on dirty work’; ‘or Journal of Management Inquiry’. Another tack: ‘What about other forms of evidence, such as pictures?’ The conversation picks up on the theme of the interaction between us as researchers and the tasks of writing and getting published. I notice that *We don’t talk about the areas that really interest me, implications for validity and how we enable a social form of reflexivity to notice insights that might otherwise be lost.* Why don’t I say something? The other two presentations occur and a crane trundles past the open window, I can’t hear what is said. The sessions finish 10 minutes early and **J**, **A** and I are talking. **K** an audience member comes over: ‘can I join you?’ We have a conversation ‘I wanted to say something but it seemed too mundane’, I question **K** as to what she means by mundane, I find this intriguing. What is it about the mundane that is difficult to talk about? Is the *apparent* obvious out of bounds because it might be seen as boring, patronising or time wasting. And what are the implications of this inhibiting reflexive conversation?

Something has been niggling away. The conversation gravitated towards advice, for example which journal to publish in, there was no exploration of ideas or relating our experience and questions to *their* practice. This only occurred in our conversation with **K** when she explained that our talk had made her think about her practice, yet couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

This experience continues to impact on our movement of thought and reflexivity. **J** had noted the audiences rapid return to the safe activity of journal choice within the academy and considered her own response. Ellis (2004) notes that an aim of autoethnography is exploring how one responds to developing connections in the social world and its context and how this helps in understanding what is happening. For **J** as a researcher already recognising her own vulnerability, and being accepting of this, the need to create this openness in others for a discussion of validity to be had was noted. Here we draw on our experience together in vignette two which offers an example of the process we have shared.

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Vignette 2: First letter from R to J and A

Dear J and A,

In looking through all the material we have collected over the last year or so there are some memorable excerpts that have jarred my thinking. Halfway through we wrote those narratives to describe ourselves to each other, reading mine again I can feel a blended sense of intimacy and vulnerability. I was struck by your comment **J**:

22nd March Narrative in the Staff Club

J: ‘To me there are implications for trust. It enabled a more collaborative working, it enabled learning and growth, a shift in writing, knowledge and development as well as leadership. We are working on transparency both to ourselves and with colleagues. In being able to explain our journey both to ourselves and others are implications for validity.’

There was nothing there that I wouldn’t have shared in conversation quite easily but it was the act of writing that made it vivid and edgy, even a sense of permanence. But in reading the two of yours I sensed that feeling was shared. What was striking was the clarity I had about how we fitted together. For example, **A** it was clear to me how good you are at spotting the flaws in our argument and reigning in my imagination particularly when I was making those shaky connections. Perhaps there was a sense of the dour that came over for me in that narrative that crystallised things? **J**, I was struck by shared experiences with our parents and younger years and that shift of identities. Over the years I have moved career several times, each time it has felt like shedding a skin, but only partially, with itchy scar tissue becoming more noticeable – particularly being an academic deeply interested in our practice. Sometimes this gets in the way as I become frustrated with the academic conventions.

I’m looking through our conversation transcripts and was struck by this short clip on 6 October in the Staff Club. We were meeting to share preliminary data analysis of the interview transcripts carried out on a group of doctors of their experience of action learning as well as reflecting on our experience as facilitators. We start to share a collective sense of the data’s importance, for example the access that some medical consultants have to secretaries to write their correspondence:

6th October Narrative in the Staff Club

R: ‘I would like to include mention of the surgeon and an anaesthetist as they see the world very differently.’

A: ‘Hmmm’

R: ‘Their worldviews are very different; we saw that brought to life by the discussion on the letters. And of course, letters are an issue of both resource and prestige.’

A: ‘I had some of this in my group too.’

J: ‘So did I, and about how to manage that resource.’

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A: 'I had a similar issue, we had a discussion as to why secretaries couldn't be removed. Why should we have them at all?'

R: 'I remember something similar.'

A: 'Yeah that's right, I had someone in charge of the admin in my group. There were [various job titles mentioned] in my group. It was not just what they did, the conversation was about status.'

When I read this short conversation again it is interesting how we came to realise a common thread through all our experiences. This centred on being a learning set adviser, where the issue of power and resource focused on access to a secretary, but how this cropped up from nowhere, I remember as I read this being quite excited at the connections we were making.

On the issue of how data is to be presented and the tension between offering detail to catch readers' imagination and the anonymity of research participants I would like to make some comments. What strikes me is how views shifted on this. We talked about how far we should go to anonymise our findings, I was keen to include small details and colour such as the layout of the room and even the fact that the bacon rolls had tinfoil around them. Then we shifted to minimising the thick descriptions of our writing, something that I understand but struggle with.

Regards, R.

Vignette 3: Second letter from J to R and A

Dear R and A,

R thank you for your letter about our collaborative auto-ethnographic work. In reflecting on our research and writing, the experience has been enriching in terms of learning about myself and others and the impact on my position in relation to research. I would describe it as a freeing experience with tensions. **R**, I picked up in your letter, your point regarding power and for me it also links to trust. The collaboration we are engaged in enables a mutual understanding (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012) of social research – no one expert view is prioritised and we are moving away (via critical thinking) from the application of natural science measures to craft our research understandings and practice. This raises for me a number of issues – one is the place of the research participants – how much are they engaged with us in this creation? How likely is it on moving forward with CAL and 'evaluation' that we will truly participate as ourselves and with our participants? Have we assumed a level of trust from our participants? I was caught by this conversation about mutual understanding, power and Foucault in a book review (Caterino, 2013, p743). Caterino cites Foucault: 'As exemplified in confession, the subject's own reflexivity is seen as necessary to find the truth about the self, but as these confessional discourses are basically administered by the new social sciences they are forms of objectifying and normalizing subjectivity. This leads to the same problem on a different level. If subjectivity and self-reflection are just forms of self-surveillance or self-policing and domination, then how can subjects get a hold of this domination?'

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On one level we are writing about shared experiences with participants in our study – on another we may have different understandings as they are not a part of our interpretation of the data. I maybe making an assumption that I am taking a phronetic position - in that to undertake research I am using insight, skill and wisdom in an Aristotelian sense. However, I am not as Flyvbjerg (2012) suggests, independent of theoretical knowledge as I am interested in building a theory around CAL. Further, Caterino suggests if we do take a phronetic position we need to incorporate mutual accountability and to do so a form of evaluation is required. How are we (I) justifying our aims and goals? Have I moved position – or are am I crafting in a sense of “naturalness” about our work? Is my rejection of scientific forms of evaluation but acceptance of our evaluation of participants’ experience, based more on not being able to meet the criteria of natural sciences i.e. size of samples etc. rather than any moral or theoretical position about the research and participants? I was very happy to grasp the Scrivens hand of generalisation offered by a presenter at a collaboratory – it certainly eased some of the tensions I felt – and offers patterns or symptoms (Caterino, 2013) for interpretation. Caterino suggests the positions of Flyvbjerg (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012) around mutual understanding and Foucault’s with regard to constitutive power make an uneasy mix (Caterino, 2012) which I can see.

To an extent I am partially comforted by the idea that we are researchers participating in a larger social project – that is whether CAL can help improve how individuals, groups and organisations deliver care in a complex NHS setting. Caterino cites Corey Shdaimiah and Roland Stahl (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012, p122-136) who advocate this form of collaborative research which they describe as inherently phronetic. I will stop here to ask you both – what do you think?

All Good Wishes J

Vignette 4 : Third letter from A to J and R

Dear R and J,

Thank you for your letters. I intended to write on Friday with reference to **R’s** transcripts of our experiences and conversations but I read a bit instead. If I were to take a pessimistic view I began to feel an overwhelming sense of yet again joining a discourse ‘too late’ and also wondering if this game of academia, in trying to make an original contribution to get published, forces us into process of fixing our data. On the other hand, I can see that contribution is essential otherwise why bother writing up and publishing? I find it particularly abhorrent that attempts to develop practice from the work of others, who after all we are promoting their ideas and citing their papers, seek to dismiss it as saying nothing new.

Hence having enjoyed **J’s** philosophical discourse (which I can relate to) I was relieved to see that final paragraph about being part of a larger social project. Action research has always been the poor relation in academic research and this is still reflected in the rankings of journals dedicated to AR. Much of our work is loosely aligned to the AR framework in its various forms and I am reminded yet again of Lewin’s (Lewin, 1948) original conception of AR as a way of engineering change for social good. I was also persuaded by McNiff and

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Whitehead's (2006) action research as living theory, that is to say 'theory' does not have to be grand or generalized; it can have utility at the individual level. This applies to a lot of educational research (again low status). So phronetic I would say yes **J**.

Turning then to our experiences as a research team they are of course a source of enjoyment and learning. It is good that we practise what we preach in being reflexive about our own practice. It is fascinating that after all I say above I have colluded with you to stay in the closet about our silence on rejection; this is the politics of research and protection of our reputation. Yet amongst ourselves, because there is so much trust we have become increasingly transparent. **R**'s transcripts offer an account of these issues and how three practitioner researchers try to find a way of supporting others in their learning challenges and disseminating what may help others in tackling similar problems. Are we saying anything that has not been said before though? Maybe not but it might be interesting/useful? If so to whom and what would they do with it? Does it maybe have a purpose in a way that translates to learning for our participants in our leadership development course as a model of collaborative working e.g. our doctors. We certainly can't promote it as an exemplar of how to get published in a 3* journal as a collaborative research team (ha ha).

The paper **R** distributed by McDonald (2015) prompts some useful descriptors to apply to our interactions in our team. For instance, the way we 'reveal' aspects of ourselves. **J** and **R** on soft reviews looking for supportive views whereas **A** thinking about getting challenged; revealing his anxiety about the need to be relevant. **J**'s openness to 'changes to herself through interaction' regarding how our research is affected by learning about other worlds (**R**). The one page stories are similar to 'confessionals' and 'coming out' in what we pay attention to. **R** notices what is going on, **J** emphasizes the importance of trust/security that enables 'transparency'. We all want an 'identity' with a work ethic but also reveal our anxieties **R** re completion and **A** re writer's block through self-criticism of every sentence he writes as if there is a danger that he will be found out as an imposter in this academic world (still lacking confidence after all these years). It comes through for me that **J** loves the learning experience of research. **R** enjoys coming up with ways to express what is going on using his wide knowledge of literature and **A** seeks assurance of impact on others.

It is interesting that we all pay attention to our surroundings when we meet or present but it affects us in different ways. **J** can be knocked off her usual confident/positive course, **R** can unusually be annoyed/distracted whilst **A** through some abandonment of anxiety/self-critique attempts to find black comedy in the situation. Hence **A** tries to detract from the 'are we as interesting as we find ourselves' whereas **R** and **J** have more confidence but feel the disappointment more (squeaky doors narrative).

All the very best, A.

Discussion - developing social reflexive abilities

In adopting a co-constructed autoethnographic approach there are two interconnected themes that we became intrigued about. Firstly, *process*, how the rigour of such a methodology came to affect our practice as researchers. Secondly, *findings*, drawing on the above, what are the features, surprising events and mundanity, that we notice that might be of relevance to others.

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Process - Using autoethnography to affect research practice.

Here we draw attention to the process that we went through that developed our reflexivity to engage in our research practice. Whilst studies of reflexivity (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009; Cunliffe, 2004) often pay attention to individuals, here we consider the social nature, a point that Tucker explores in considering Giddens's work (Tucker, 1998) and Leggatt-Cook and others (Leggatt-Cook et al., 2011) looking at 'researchers at play'. In creating artefacts and engaging with them, we developed a heuristic process of reflexivity, explication and narrative (in their various forms and styles that we all adopted) through which we increasingly knew each other and ourselves. It forced us to question who we were and who we were working with, not as a single event, but gradually as we each created gestures that were responded to by others that invited further response (Stacey, 2003) and thus developing a communicative sense of understanding. We therefore began to notice how we related with each other changed over time. In particular, what we revealed of ourselves to each other and the impact this had on our own professional identity in moving into a new field. To make sense of our experience and to facilitate further reflexive conversation we found a useful body of thought in queer theory. Here attention is paid to the fluid and unstable identities that we reveal to each other using the metaphor of the closet (Jagose, 1996), this was the subject of conversation in reflecting on how we related to each other. In the course of everyday events we continually negotiate with ourselves what we reveal and what we hide (McDonald, 2015).

This was a reflexive process, but one that was mediated by each other, in this sense reflexivity is a social process. Hibbert and others (Hibbert et al., 2014) point out that our identities reflexively respond to and in turn affect our research colleagues. Thought of in this way we are paying attention to the gestures we offer and receive as micro-process of social sensemaking (Rouleau, 2005). This social sensemaking is linked to identity formation as one reveals and conceals (Brown et al., 2008) in terms of impression management and how one gets to know others. These issues of identity come to affect the entire span of research from initial ideas to contribution (Cunliffe, 2011). As we see, it became useful to consider this interaction of as phonetic craft, of being organic and emergent through the social interaction between ourselves, but one that was tacit (Baumard, 1999).

We quickly noticed the roles we each adopted and felt comfortable with. As part of this we became aware of the way we developed our argument, from small steps built on empirical evidence or literature, through to unsustainable leaps that undermined our argument. And then to respond: from shoring up to relaxing. We therefore noticed the effect of how paying attention to the dynamics of ourselves had on the validity of claims that we made, or as the action researcher Peter Reason would describe, the quality of our research (Reason, 2006).

During our time together there were a number of moments when connections were made from the mundane to those akin to jazz improvisation where ideas built on each other in ways that surprised us (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, p168). These moments seemed fragile and would easily have been missed if we had not been paying attention to how we interacted with each other.

In summary, the 'techniques' of a co-created autoethnographic enabled us to pay close attention to our research practice and to make explicit our social learning as researchers.

Insights that might be useful to others in their research.

The following issues may seem trivial, but how often are they paid attention to and talked about? This became striking for us, both in exploring our own work and the reaction we had to our initial work explored in the above narrative.

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As we worked with the research material, namely the interview transcripts of those on the action learning programme, we noticed how we lived and imagined the participants world, they became characters of a story that formed the basis of conversation, sensemaking and sociological imagination (Wright Mills, 1959) as opposed to treating them as distinct objective entities. There was a striking moment early on when we challenged ourselves to work in a similar way in which the research participants worked, in other words paying attention to issues of power and our own reflexive development of thought. What was particularly striking was the need for us to make this explicit, by which we mean how natural it would have been not to do so. In the process of our research on CAL we quickly drew on our own literature sources to make sense of what was happening and reflecting our own academic identities. And in getting to know each other we had to explain and were challenged on our assumptions and why we were drawn on these sources.

We became increasingly aware of: 1) ourselves; and, 2) how we engaged with each other. In terms of the former one of us noticed an ability of creatively leaping and making connections with literatures and findings, but with the drawback of not building solid foundations (this had previously caused frustration). It was in working together that a greater awareness of the filigree of argumentation developed rather than its broad brush. With respect to the latter we developed a noticing of the serendipitous nature of our insights and the importance of conversation wending its natural course, allowing connections to be made that were unexpected. Added to this the importance of mutual challenge, and the tracing of this challenge, in both the development of argument and validity *in action*, as opposed to a priori or post hoc.

Conclusion

Here we addressed two interconnected questions. Firstly, how autoethnography might improve research practice. We found that the practice of autoethnography and reflexivity was an enabling heuristic. Secondly, to gain useful insights in undertaking management research. Our study highlighted our ability to notice and talk about issues of power that were happening amongst ourselves and how this affected on our research. This did not come naturally; it was a striking moment early on when one of us pointed this out. In working through the interview transcripts, we were able to pay attention to what happened to our research subjects as we developed an empathy; they were 'with us' as characters. Through this we noticed the development and movement of our thought contributing to both knowledge and validity *in action*.

Through the process we became increasingly able and interested in talking about issues of power between ourselves, the subject of our research, and the part of the Academy we were engaging with. In one paper we (Warwick et al., 2017) spoke of these power relations in the development of our argument to lay bare our thought processes. To use a metaphor from film and theatre of the 4th wall we were breaking down the distinction between the audience and the stage; in this case of the research, the researcher and reader.

Finally, it took time to get to this stage of knowing each other, ourselves, and making this available to others: it felt exposing. It was difficult to talk of rejection or uncertainty set against an expectation within the Academy of being confident. To offset our discomfort, we hope that we say something that others will find useful.

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