

WHAT'S THE BENEFIT - A PERSONAL STORY OF A RESEARCHING MANAGER?

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Reflecting on my auto-ethnographic study over the last 5 years I seek to explore if and how pursuing auto-ethnography impacts on the work of a practitioner like me. I try to highlight how my research efforts also contributed to my managerial practice. Reflecting on my field-note writing and exploring a single field-note I show how pursuing auto-ethnography caused a shift in my thinking from straight forward problem solving to problematizing and the appreciation of alternative views. Doing auto-ethnography required me to observe not only my environment but also myself and to write about both. The writing triggered a reflexive process of ever deeper questioning of my own conduct and role within my business. I realised the how little I know and that there are always alternative interpretations of events. In turn, I understood that I should not search for the right way to solve problems but instead stay open and attentive to alternative interpretations. I developed a deeper understanding of the limits of my knowledge, scepticism about it, and an openness to alternative interpretations of my experiences. This form of reflexivity supports me running my business more adaptively. Through auto-ethnography I achieved this form of reflexivity and therefore it had a positive impact on my managerial practice.

Keywords: auto-ethnography, practitioner-research, practice relevance, education

INTRODUCTION

I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it. (Richardson 2001: 35)

After almost five years of my doctoral journey, I wonder what I have learned over this period. I would not hesitate to say that I learned something but when I ask myself: 'Honestly, what did you learn and was it worth all the effort?' I begin to struggle to find proper answers. My feeling says that it was a worthwhile experience but is this just a feeling or more? To answer this question, I seek like to reflect on my auto-ethnographic journey more thoroughly.

Back in 1999, I started my own construction business, which employs now about 40 people most of them bricklayers and carpenters. In my position as owner/CEO, I fulfil exclusively administrative tasks. A big part of them is to negotiate on an almost daily basis. Since I did not always achieve what I expected to achieve in these negotiations; I developed some interest in the subject of negotiation. Out of this interest in negotiations and a vague desire to learn I embarked on a part-time doctoral program.

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My research project is an auto-ethnographic study into trust and negotiations. Predominantly, I study my experiences as a businessman. Drawing on Emmanuel Lévinas' work, I seek to understand how and why we trust. Within this context, I realised that pursuing postmodernist informed auto-ethnography deepens my understanding of my role as business owner/CEO. Therefore, I am focussing on the learning of and the benefits for me as a practitioner in this paper.

I start by looking at the 'cost' of being researcher and practitioner; then I explore my field-notes and reflect on an example in depth. I seek to answer how the auto-ethnographic work had an impact on my professional work in business. Doing so I will understand whether my auto-ethnographic journey was worth the effort seen from a professional perspective.

COMMITMENT

Running a business is a full-time job. Before enrolling into the PhD program, I worked 50-60 hours a week. I often spent 3-4 days in office and the rest on building sites or in meetings. To squeeze in this schedule a PhD, I inevitably needed to cut some time out of it. It is more easily said than done. What kind of tasks may I delegate to others? Which meetings may I attend and which not? During the intense research phases, I spent most weeks only 2 in office the rest of the week I attend business meetings, visit building sites, and work quite long hours in the library on my PhD. Most Fridays and almost all Saturdays I work in the library. However, Sundays are sort of 'holy' - no work, no research, just family.

The time I spend in office and on building sites has significantly decreased which turns out to be problematic because it meant less connection to the daily business in my company and my staff. Still, I need to some extent overlook and understand what is going on in my business because I am the one who steers the vessel called the company. Of course, I rely on others to fulfil their responsibilities; I rely on their accounts to take decisions. Although I provide my staff with freedoms to decide, certain decisions stick with me. I always liked to take these decisions on a broad base of information. However, the broadness of my information has been compromised during the years I studied for the PhD. I simply spend not enough time in business. It resulted in losing control of things in my business; I had to hand over responsibilities. But on the other hand, I do explore my business practice more thoroughly by which I gain control but in another sense. Since, this ethnographic exploration consisted of observing, writing, and reflecting I gain new insights into my role and my business.

WRITING NOTES - THE PRIMARY TASK IN FIELDWORK

Participating in the activities of and observing one's field of research is common to all ethnographers. Writing field-notes is the common means of recording these observations. The difference in auto-ethnography is that the auto-ethnographer's field of research is his or her own environment - her or his 'backyard' (Wolcott 1999). It is my construction business and me in my role as owner and CEO. My experiences, what I do, think, and feel is the content of my field-notes. When I get time and energy, I sit down on the computer, tablet or phone and write. It often happens in the evening. Sometimes, I use my voice recorder and talk my initial thoughts into it and transcribe and expand them later. It is almost like writing a diary.

By writing about myself, I am forced to observe and to think reflexively about my actions. Doing it properly, I inevitably come to the point where I question my actions and their impact and repercussion on the people around me.

TENDENCY TOWARDS THE NEGATIVE IN FIELD-NOTES

Skimming through my field-notes without going into too much depth, I realise that most of them deal with conflicts, frustration, bad mood, anger and so on. It looks as if my business life were a mixture of frustration, anger, and conflict. But it is not. I am very often quite satisfied with what I do in my job. Although I am sometimes disappointed with some staff members, most the time, they do a pretty good job; most of my clients are fair and honest; to work with the majority of people in and around my business is great fun. However, as long as everything runs fine it does not make its way to my field-notes. I am not the first to recognise the tendency toward the negative or problematic (Illouz 2015) but why is that so?

One aspect of it might be that the positive experiences do not bother me too much. I am much more moved by frustration and anger than by joy and success. Am I taking the positive for granted? Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) advise ethnographer to follow their sense of significance, to follow what they think or feel is important. But it is perhaps at this point when this sense fails to some extent. Of course, the negative emotions are not insignificant, but neither are the positive ones. Without some joy, fun, success, and satisfaction running my business would be a pure hardship, but it is not. Most days I like to go to the office and enjoy myself in my role as CEO.

Further, it is perhaps the engineer in me that focusses on the problems. Positive experiences do not pose a problem to be solved; there is not a lot to improve. But with negative experiences things are different. Here the engineer in me can do something. As an engineer, I am trained to solve problems rather than problematize positive things. Hence, I focus on the things which do not run well and try to make them work better.

Another aspect is that I am not as moved by the positive things as by the negative ones. When I clients praise our work, emphasises the value of our relationship, and pays the bills in time, I do not have to worry. But if the client does not like our work, sees no value in our relationship, and stops paying our bill that becomes a problem very soon. The profit margins in the German construction industry are not too big. A margin of 3-5% of turnover is the average. Hence, an unpaid invoice can become a major setback. When two or three clients are not paying their invoices, the annual profit can be jeopardised rather quickly. In this sense, Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's (2011) sense of significance seems to guide me to what is important but although numbers and profitability are very significant to businesses they are not everything.

In field-notes, this turning away from numbers takes place very fast. It is often the case that my field-notes begin with a problem related to economic issues. For instance, a client does not pay the bill; our offer is too expensive, things go wrong, and we lose money. But the field-notes often turn away from the purely economic issues to the human side of my enterprise (McGregor and Cutcher-Gershenfeld 2006). Events of economic significance often triggered my writing, but the possible ways to deal with the problem I found in the rather social, inter-human realm. I try to demonstrate a shift in emphasis by the following journal entry.

Autumn/Winter, 2015/2016 - Context assembled from notes of previous days:

A couple of days ago, rain went through the provisional roof at this building site. The other company commissioned with the demolition work had built the provisional roof in spring. It was a wooden framework with a cover of waterproof polypropylene membrane. Throughout the summer, the membrane was exposed to intense sunlight, and this fact took its toll on the stability of the membrane. Now it was not strong and durable anymore but crumbling and porous. Although it was not our job to maintain the roof, we had to lift it at the edges to

build our walls and a concrete ceiling. Because we touched it once, the site manager sought to hold us accountable for the incoming water from the rain of the last days. Which meant, he wanted us to become liable to the client for significant damages. Within this background, I wrote

Field-note

In case something goes wrong all the responsibility lies with the one who took action. Like in this case. It seems as if the site manager did not care for the provisional roof. I think he should have let someone replace the crumbling membrane weeks before. Only now he realises that he missed some of his responsibilities. With his back to the wall, he is actively shifting responsibilities to us. Perhaps we should make clear to him: that won't work. He cannot put us forward in order to obscure his responsibility. But on the other hand, we had told him that the membrane had to be replaced, but we could have mad much more noise, we could have insisted on replacing it. But we didn't.

Within this field-note, I already began to reflect on the writing itself. Some lines further down within the same field-note I began to look at it from a distance. I wrote:

What happens some moments ago was a quite good example of how auto-ethnography works for me as a business practitioner. By describing the event, writing down observation and experiences, noting thoughts, I inevitably ask myself about the underlying reasons.

I am confronted with the things I do not understand. I can write them down, and the very writing is a sense-making process.

MAKING SENSE OF MY EXPERIENCES

I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it. (Richardson 2001: 35)

The journal entry was my way of making sense of my experience - a form of writing as a method of research (Richardson and Adams St. Pierre 2005). Richardson and St. Pierre use it for research purposes; in my case, although my commitment to pursuing auto-ethnography triggered the writing, it served me as a way of understanding situations I faced in business. Predominantly writing served my business ends and the research outcome became secondary; sort of a by-product.

There are quite a few notes which I created in the middle of the night. I pulled out the laptop, iPad or phone and write something into my Evernote notebooks called 'field-notes' or 'journal.' It serves me as means to calm down. The issue at hand leaves my head and goes into the words I am typing. I write what I think, however immature and little thought out this might be. But the ideas develop while writing. Often, I compare the recent experience with older ones, look for patterns. Sometimes I develop alternative explanations. Quite often I come up with a course of action for the next day(s). I go to bed afterwards having relieved my mind from thinking about the issue because I figured out what to do next (Ellis 2009).

While writing field-notes or journal entries, I am not so much interested in the research questions which steps in the background and become a by-product of these sessions. The main purpose is the relief. I want to get the problems off my mind, not to be bothered by confusion anymore. It is the writing through confusion and anger and finally coming to grips with complexity which Adams (2012) describes. Still, I am aware that even years of writing will not bring me to final closure (Adams 2012). I am aware that in future, I will still be stunned by how others act and will have my difficulties dealing with it. But the skills of writing, especially reflexively writing will help me to cope with future challenges and to think of ways to progress. It is action research for me as an individual (Ellis 1999).

Although, I come up with ways of dealing with problems auto-ethnography reaches deeper; it always goes beyond what seems obvious. It is in the example above first about the damage caused by the broken membrane, then about site manager's conduct, and finally about what we could have done differently or how we could solve the problem. Re-reading it, I cannot help but think about possible implications for future projects. For instance, whether we as a company should act more proactively, should I have trained my staff more in this regard, should we take a more responsible approach as outlined in the last section of the field-note above when I think about whether "we could have made much more noise". Then it is going beyond what seems obvious. It is the second, third, or some later thought that might reveal insights, valuable for me.

Writing about an event, I often come to different possible interpretations. Not too long ago, I sought to solve a conflict with several parties involved. The house owner, his lawyer and his architect, my material supplier, and I met months before to discuss and to work out a solution to some cracks in the walls of a house. After a couple of months with only a little or no action between the parties, a single phone call I made triggered an exchange of emails and letters. One of the emails from the architect caused some anger in me because I understood the architect had an interest in undermining any settlement of the conflict. When I talked to another person involved in this conflict, this person's explanation was somewhat different addressing the email rather to an attempt to obscure the architect's accountability. However, both interpretations could explain the architect's intentions, both on their own but also together. It looks as if the picture became only messier for me, and indeed it did. But instead of calling it messier, I would prefer richer. Subsequently, I see future actions of this person through an additional lens - that of the other person's interpretation. Perhaps even more importantly, the second explanation did provide an example that the first explanation could be wrong or at least not the only possible. Therefore, any number of other interpretations might be possible.

The richness is a very valuable part of doing ethnography, and in particular doing auto-ethnography, I do regard messiness, not as problem or threat, which I did before, but appreciate enrichment of my thoughts. By interpreting a situation in different ways, I create options for me and, hence, prepare myself better for possible twists and turns in unfolding processes.

I was not used to this way of thinking before. By the time, I started my PhD I wanted clear answers. I wanted to know who is accountable for what and hence hold this person accountable. This way of thinking was in line with the experiences I made during my time in business. It often boiled down to the question "Wer ist schuld?" [Who is guilty?]. I tended to search for a clear verdict - right or wrong. I thought in terms of finding "'the' answer." (DiCarlo, McGowan and Rottenberg 2014: 254).

This clarity is achievable about a technical question. I may say whether a concrete beam has enough iron in it to sustain the anticipated loads - I find "the" definitive answer. Regarding technical questions, my positivist thinking worked fine. But this thinking becomes very problematic regarding conflicts as the one briefly described above. I do not have objective data about the conflict - it's all my tainted perception - and it is only limited 'data', it is only a small fraction of the whole conflict that I can observe at best. Every claim to know something must be followed by an "as far as I can see" and "in the way I see it." I had to adopt another stance; I had to search for "'an" answer.' (DiCarlo, McGowan and Rottenberg 2014: 254) Soon, I realised that postmodernism worked better for me in relation to human interaction.

RELEVANCE TO PRACTICE

Antonacopoulou (2010) talks extensively about how to create practice-relevant research. To her, scholar, business executives and policymakers practice research in their own fashion. Important to her is the collaboration of them. This gap between researcher and business executive is in my case inherently close. From time to time, I wear the researcher's or the CEO's hat, put more emphasis on being one or the other, yet I am always one person with only one mind.

Then, I do not think about knowledge-transfer. I am not transferring anything to anybody. What I do is applying knowledge from one field - that of research - to another field - that of my business practice. When I learn a skill like reflexivity (this assumes that reflexivity is a skill which is debatable) or writing (which I would consider a skill) - so when I learn a skill for research purposes I do inevitably apply this skill wherever I find it reasonable and helpful. It is of course very helpful to apply rigorous argumentation when one deals with a lawsuit.

To develop a well-thought through argumentation is a feature of all research attempts; it is not particular of auto-ethnography. Special to auto-ethnography is to observe me, to write about myself and to think about me reflexively. To learn these skills is inevitable for an auto-ethnographer. Also, auto-ethnography is more about exploring. I tap an unknown potential; I enlarge my understanding of a situation, I create possibilities. It is not the limiting of 'the' answer but the opening of 'an' answer which leaves space for any number of different answers.

Finding an answer, however, had also a tranquillizing side-effect on me. Writing field-notes in the middle of the night had a lot to do with my emotional reaction to stress and conflict. Luckily, it did not happen too often, it was, however, my way of dealing with emotions. I found a way to calm down. For research purposes, I had to observe my emotional reaction, write and reflect about them (Grosse 2015). In this regard, being researcher and businessman made up for the practice-relevance for me. Others may find it at best interesting, inspiring or helpful but I am the one who benefits most when I learn to deal with my emotions. I use it without any intention to do research.

LIMITS OF KNOWING

But, perhaps the most important part is not to know what I know, but to know the limits of my knowledge. What can I know? What can I see? What do I observe? What is the basis of my decisions? What do I not know?

Often the writing about an experience opens my view on how little I know about the event. I have just seen what happened in front of me. With some luck, I may have an idea of the other players' context. But then the limits of my knowledge become visible to me. I just know very little of them, even if we have a long history of common projects. Even if I have the feeling to know them quite well, the other always escapes my grasp (Lévinas 1961). I am not the architect or the supplier and will never be. Hence, I will never know what it feels like to walk in their shoes. It situates my knowledge as a subjective and inherently incomplete matter. I know only from sensing others in our interactions. I am always a subject that claims to know, but whether I know, anything remains to be seen.

Over the last five years, my very focus has shifted. Using a metaphor, I went into the bedroom looking for red sock and guess what I found, red socks. That happened to me as ethnographer as well. I looked at negotiations and had the concepts of cooperative and

distributive negotiations brought forward by Fisher and Ury (1981) in mind. And of course, I saw them reflected in my field-notes. Later, I thought more about trust and trust was one of the observations in the field. Later I 'observed' what Lévinas (1961, 1974) termed Same and Other, Saying and Said while reading in his works.

These shifts in emphasis are what guides my observations. Richardson (2001) talks about colleagues although they were claiming to write from a neutral position they wrote about issues which touched them personally. It is very similar in my case, I wrote about phenomena I read beforehand. I wore some special glasses. That is unavoidable; I am never free of these influences. Prior interpretations of the world shape later ones (Iser 2000). However, the more I think about it, the more I understand how limited and tainted my vision is.

Applied to my daily work, it alerts me to jump too fast to conclusions. As I had one interpretation of the architect's action in the conflict, after the phone call I became aware of another person's take on his actions. However fast I may need to act in urgent situations, I must be prepared to revise my course of action. There is always something, what I cannot see. Every conclusion I draw is only temporary and is in itself the source of and subject to scepticism (Lévinas 1974). This scepticism is not going away - which is a good thing - because I do not need to search desperately for 'the' answer. Perhaps, the architect's motives are something completely different. I do not know and probably will never know. That gives relief, although I keep on asking.

It does redirect me to McGregor's question "What are your assumptions (implicit as well as explicit) about the most effective way to manage people?" (McGregor and Cutcher-Gershenfeld 2006: xxiii) Is it really about effectively managing people? It sounds as if people were objects to be moved from here to there. It is a view of people - human beings by the way - that I find more and more difficult. The others around me shape my own self without them I would not be what I am (Lévinas 1961). Hence, I am required to respect their otherness. I am supposed to let them be individual human beings.

My thinking shifted from trying to control others to the idea to live and get along with others. I began by searching for a way to negotiate with other so that I am more successful (as I termed it at the start of my journey). The idea behind was clearly to get the things I wanted to get. I sought to control the negotiation process and therefore control the business partners, clients, suppliers, employees, etc.

After five years of auto-ethnography, for me, management is essentially not so much about control and power as it is about navigating. I may have the power to choose between alternatives, but I seldom have the power to create alternatives. These alternatives are to some extent given. The power that lies with me is to discover these alternatives. I may react to a given context, which I may influence to a very small extent, but which has a lot to offer to me. I can decide which action I take, which route I go. Doing auto-ethnography did contribute to my ability to observe, to uncover, and to judge. This shift from "the" to "an" answer is, as Wolcott (1999) says, a way of seeing. Auto-ethnography is for me not about finding the solution but finding new possibilities (DiCarlo, McGowan and Rottenberg 2014).

More than a single answer, the multiplicity of perspectives is the richness of auto-ethnography. 'The' answer is a form of control. While reading Lévinas (1961, 1974), the notion of controlling people became more and more problematic to me. Controlling others is to make them like me. It is not only unachievable; it is very undesirable. Others are an infinite spring of inspiration as long as they are not like me. The other sees things

differently, the other challenges my worldview, the other is what I am not and therefore valuable without limits for me.

For example, most of my employees are craftsmen. Although I am trained carpenter, I would not call myself a craftsman anymore since I finished my training 24 years ago and had not worked as carpenter ever since. I have some idea what it means to work on building sites, yet the experience and the skills are not present to me anymore. By this difference, they can provide me with insights into the work on building sites which would be otherwise hidden to me.

My professional work is often demanding in psychological and emotional terms, but it is not demanding in physiological terms; for my employees, it is often the other way around. They are tired of lifting heavy materials. Neither of us really feels the way the other does. But trying to make me aware of that difference can help me to appreciate their work. One must not forget, they make it possible for me to research.

Only through our differences, it makes sense to cooperate. I have the skills to work as CEO of my company, and they have the skills to build foundations, walls, ceilings - that I have not anymore. We can find common ground. This common ground is the appreciation of the Other, the very act of taking responsibility for the Other.

THE SUBTLE KIND OF PAY-OFF

Da steh ich nun, ich armer Tor! Und bin so klug als wie zuvor. (Goethe 1979: 17)

I tried to demonstrate a development within myself during the last five years. I learned a lot, but still, I feel like Goethe's Faust - "Here, I am as clever as before." Although I reach a deeper understanding of my environment, I am as often puzzled as I was five years ago. The difference is that I know that it is not going to change. I cannot achieve a full understanding of my environment. I see the world in a peculiar way, and each other person does see it differently. It is just impossible to understand the infinite other readings of the world. That does not mean that I am not interested in others' interpretations, but I am not desperately trying to make sense of their action. I know the Other "is not wholly in sight" (Lévinas 1961: 39).

I rather direct my efforts to be comfortable with my lack understanding because I am supposed to work with people on our building sites which are different. And who in the end escape my final influence, I do not have them at my disposal. Functioning of the team is then less my control over them but rather my way of dealing with them. I want them to achieve something - something with which I am comfortable.

For me, it took time to appreciate the messiness, the richness and I must admit it was not always easy as some field-notes in which I just had let off steam show. Still, I fall back into believing that there is a silver bullet to solving conflicts, although I learnt there isn't one. But to see that I am never completely 'right' and that the notion of 'right' is very problematic indeed demands more tactful acting (Van Manen 1995) and some forgiveness. If my best efforts do not lead me to do the 'right' things how can I expect others to do what I think is the 'right' action? If they do not act as I expected, I must be prepared to revise my interpretation and forgive. Not that I must forgive everything, but if I cannot unambiguously answer a question, I cannot judge someone's action unambiguously. Hence, there must at least be a bit of forgiveness. That leaves the space open for maintaining and rebuilding relationships.

SUMMARY

During my research journey, I constantly changed the researcher's and practitioner's perspectives. Often research stepped in the background and became a by-product. Field-note writing initially used for research purposes turned out to be of great value for my professional practice, even dealing with daily struggles. Using auto-ethnography, I learnt, to be attentive, to write, and to think reflexive. Whether a manager needs write is not up for debate. In recent years, scholars emphasised the use reflexivity or critical reflection in management (e.g. Rigg and Trehan 2008). Following them, my personal experience confirms that the ability to pay attention and to be reflexive are essential management skills. So-called soft skills are required to manage building site and construction businesses. Observing is the foundation for any appropriate reaction to changing circumstances. Doing auto-ethnography trained me to observe not only others but to be attentive to my own actions and reactions. This connection between the self and the environment makes it possible for me to be reflexive.

On the one hand, reflexivity gives me some sovereignty to admit that I lack some knowledge or skill that I am not always in charge and on top of things. I become aware that my observation may lead me to conclusions which no one shares. Observing myself did not make me a better manager, but more conscious of my own shortcomings even to the extent that I recognise that I will never be fully aware of my shortcomings. There will always be a more appropriate way of doing things than the one I chose to go.

On the other hand, auto-ethnography opens a vast array of alternative understandings of my environment. Reflexivity forces me into a recurring scepticism. Hence, I permanently search for and deal with alternative views and interpretations of events. Seeing myself and my business within an environment of ambiguous and sometimes obscure relation makes a difference to the way I approach my role. My thinking shifted within this five years from wanting to know 'what's right and wrong' to 'what's appropriate'. Further, I think more in terms adaptation to things I do not know.

Pursuing auto-ethnography is not the only way to come to this understanding but it is the one that I chose, and that worked for me and my professional practice. Hence, I can recommend it to other managers if they are keen to embark on a reflexive journey.

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