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Parallel journeys: An auto-ethnographic account of how a change of place impacts on our conceptions of community, identity and practice.

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Abstract
This paper acts as a sister piece to my paper (Lucas 2012a) detailing some of the key outcomes of an ethnographic study I undertook between 2009 and 2011. The study itself examined the practices of a small village community in contributing to a regional, multi-site folk-culture festival from my role as a volunteer "observant practitioner" (Moeran, 2009). My attempts to develop an auto-ethnographic narrative as part of the study data have caused me to reflect more deeply on my relationship to this newly adopted place-community and its impact on my identity and practice as an academic. The aim of this paper is to share my reflections on this theme.

In summer 2008, my wife and I bought a family holiday home by a lake in central Sweden. It lies in a village at the centre of an idyllic tract of forest straddling the border between two Swedish administrative regions. Thanks to my wife's enthusiasm for visiting the place and our willingness to participate in village activities when we visit, particular those related to the organisation of the local summer festival, the permanent residents probably see us more than most of the other tourist home owners. Hence we seem to have attained a rather strange, half-way status, oddly closer to the community despite the geographical and cultural distances, than the rather peripheral position we hold in the community of our home village in the UK. This has subsequently struck me as somehow analogous to the state of my professional identity as I will endeavour to explain.

During 2004-9 I became involved in the activities of a UK government-funded Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) for Practice-Based Professional Learning project based at my own University. It allowed me to meet with colleagues, including a number of eminent scholars in the field of practice based learning to discuss, in workshop settings, our differing perspectives on the relationship between learning and practice. Etienne Wenger was a visiting fellow of the Centre and his contributions to the discussions on social learning and communities of practice captured my imagination. Almost without me realising it, I began to reflect on which practitioner community I belonged to. This proved a more difficult question than I first understood, since as I thought about it more deeply, I realised that although I had travelled through a number of practitioner communities at various times in my career in education, I had never really 'settled' in one as such. Wenger's notion of community began to seem to me a rather static metaphor which evokes 'settlement' – the development of a stable (professional) identity within a peer practitioner community. This also seemed at odds with my own personal journey of learning/practice, which involved lengthy periods of transience

between different communities of education professionals and business academics, and of a temporary, all-too fragile lodging within them. It seemed I was in a perennial state of what Wenger has termed 'peripheral participation' in several communities at any one time.

The Physical Journey: Discovering a Place in the Forest.
In summer 2008, my wife and I bought a family holiday home by a lake in central Sweden. It lies in a village at the centre of an idyllic tract of forest straddling the border between two Swedish administrative regions. In itself the house purchase was a really big undertaking for us. My wife had long harboured a dream to buy a property somewhere 'in the country' and renovate it. I think she saw it partly as a creative project and partly as an escape from our increasingly cluttered family home and working lives. In the years prior to 2008, I noticed that in each country we visited outside the UK, she would quietly peruse the property agents' windows and show an unnerving interest in broken down properties for sale in rurally isolated areas. I was very ambivalent about this at best. I enjoyed visiting different countries and experiencing different cultures so I really had no desire to fill my holidays with gardening and house repairs, much less take on yet another mortgage. That changed in spring 2008 when we visited Sweden for the first time. She managed to persuade me that the combination of low property prices in the region we had chosen and the operations of Ryanair at several nearby airports were the key to a successful holiday home. I consoled myself that at least I could now persuade her to take a skiing holiday in the winter time.

Glittering black and gold
In a pristine blue June morning
Seducing us to join her
With her sensuous, rippling gaze
(from *Our Lake in Summer*, personal poem to my wife, 3rd June 2011)

On the day we took possession of the property in late July 2008, we arrived at the house in the middle of what appeared to be a small village fete. We were quickly told that this was a forest festival in which our village and a number of the neighbouring villages participated. While we struggled anxiously to come to terms with our decision to buy a second property, with an associated second set of responsibilities, the warmth and open-hearted good will of our new neighbourhood community swirled around us in their celebration of the festival.

I vividly remember the day we 'moved in'. The early excitement of a new adventure – the buying of a holiday home – soon gave way to a curiosity about the strange isolated forest community and its annual festival, being held as we arrived. As the day wore on our adrenalin levels declined, and anxiety set in as we realised the extent of the commitment we had taken on. Very little sleep was obtained that first night. It was hot in the stuffy dusty little summer house and too many doubts crept around our minds." (Personal notebook entry 10th April 2010).

The following year we learned more about the festival, which after only a decade or so has established itself as a focal point for the celebration of the region's folk culture and the host communities' sense of place. We volunteered some of our family holiday time to

help our village prepare and became involved in the organisation. During the festival itself, only three days at the end of July, we toured a number of village sites to sample the atmosphere and look for second-hand furnishings for the house. It was then that I began to make notes on what I saw happening and to reflect on how the small community in which we found ourselves responded to and was affected by their engagement in the festival. I began to ask myself questions prompted by professional and intellectual interests. The festival is one of many such cultural events which have grown in popularity and number in rural Scandinavia in recent years (see Aldskogious,1993: Ekman 1999 for early evidence of the trend). Its formal organizational goals, are to highlight the rich folk-culture heritage of the region, and to promote the area as a tourist destination. By observing the village's organizing practices and focusing on some of the explicit symbols of community identity displayed and enacted, I set out to examine the complex relationship between organization and community in the setting of this festival. Some of the outcomes of the study are summarized in a companion paper (Lucas, 2012a)

Looking back through my notes, particularly my reflective journal entries, my clumsy attempts at poetry, and my wife's vivid photographic evocations, I realised early on that the place itself and its resident community of amusedly curious neighbours was prompting a profound change in our lives. I began to explore my physical experiences and emotional responses to the place in my writing, inevitably leading to some exploration of the impact of spatial and temporal change.

"How should we deal with our feelings about a place, when it becomes a subject of study. Places can evoke all manner of emotions, from the first flush of discovery in a new and beautiful place, to the tinge of sad nostalgia on revisiting an old haunt. There is an unmistakable pull on the human emotions that certain places hold. My feelings about X are ambiguous at best, growing more complex as my connection with the place develop " (Personal notebook entry 10th April 2010)

The meaning of the place in which I have been conducting my research has continued to appear and reappear in my reflections during the course of it. Gieryn argues that the concept of place in sociological analysis comprises three interwoven elements – geographical location, material form and meaningfulness – all of which are subject to social provision and construction. It is this last element - the meaningfulness of a place which has intrigued me from early on in my research. As he notes, "Places are endlessly made,…when ordinary people extract from continuous and abstract space a bounded, identified, meaningful, named, and significant place."(Gieryn, 2000). His conclusion that what makes a place remarkable, "an unwindable spiral of material form and interpretative understandings or experiences."(Gieryn, 2000), resonated very strongly with my reflections. As the focus of my research has essentially been a small village community, and the nature of the study has comprised a significant element of co-participation, the meaning of the place I know as both my holiday home and the location of my research has been mediated to an extent by my experiences as part of the community and of its organizational practices, as well as by the approach I have taken to my research. It has led me to the view that place meaning is not something which is extracted as an abstract concept, but something that is enacted in specific practices, most notably in this case, my own.

The Identity Journey: In Search of a Community

"Our first morning of the current visit. Tents have already been erected around the fishing stuga, visible from the house, and we decide to wander down with an offer of help. Seven volunteers are gathered –neighbours A,B,D,E,M,R and S with T, another holiday home-owner from Stockholm, inside the fishing stuga kitchen, drinking coffee. They welcome us and D makes us coffee. A and E are busy composing signs for the food stall on A's laptop. ..While we sip our coffee M tells us that the main job for the day is setting up the food and drink bar so they probably don't need any more help. B asks if we can help tomorrow with the setting out of the 'loppis' (bric a brac) tent as she will be doing this with L (an elderly neighbour) while the others are working. And D asks would we mind if one of the stall holders hooks up an electric drill to our external point. We agree and leave them to it" (Anonymised Site Observation note, 24th July 2010)

Arguably one of my 'parallel' journeys started well before the discovery of our new place had sparked my research study. It relates to my involvement in my University's CETL[1] for Practice-Based Professional Learning which occurred during 2004-9. It allowed me to meet, amongst others, Etienne Wenger and to discuss, in workshop settings, our perspectives on the relationship between learning and practice. Wenger's theory of social learning, based on his early research into apprenticeships, contains the central concept of the 'community of practice' (Wenger,1998). He posited the view that from a social perspective all learning can be viewed as 'peripheral participation', or preparation for full participation, in a community of practice comprising expert users of the knowledge being acquired. This theory captured my imagination and without realising it, I began to reflect on which community I belonged to.

"(The concept of)Communities of practice implies that learning is about an emerging sense of belonging through participation, which movesthe learner from the community periphery to a more central position of community membership."(From a draft paper on practice, learning and identity, 2nd November 2006)

Community belonging proved a more difficult question than I first understood, since as I reflected on it more deeply, I realised that although I had travelled through a number of practitioner communities at various times - further education teachers, educational quality managers, adult educators, educational staff developers, University academics and curriculum developers – I had never really felt I belonged in one as such. Wenger's notion of community seemed to me a stable, not to say rather static, metaphor which evokes 'settlement' – the development of a stable professional identity within a peer practitioner community. This seemed at odds with my own personal journey of learning/practice, which involved lengthy periods of transience between communities and of a temporary, all-too fragile lodging within them.

Community of Practice theory represented, as my colleague Caroline Ramsey might say, a piece of "provocative theory" whose value was in establishing the "relational process

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[1] CETL is the acronym for Centre of Excellence in Teaching & Learning. These were UK government funded projects to encourage the dissemination of good teaching practice amongst University's with common areas of subject interest.

whereby academic theory 'speaks into'…practice" ((Ramsey, 2011, p.1). Initially it spoke into my practice as an educator and a manager, but as I began to reflect on my newly found research work, I called it to mind in trying to make sense of my involvement in the community festival. Consequently I began both to try to involve myself as a participant in the activities of my new found community, and to explore theories of community to establish a clearer picture of my realised experience of them. As I began to converse with my village neighbours – about what the festival meant to them, about how our village related to others participating in the festival, about how the whole thing started – it became clearer that they viewed this annual rite as part of the community's cultural fabric. It enabled them to act together each year with a clear, simple common purpose of contributing to the festival. Of course this supported other individual interests like promoting their businesses, showcasing their hobbies, fundraising for good causes, or just using up the last supplies of frozen elk meat from last year's hunting trips, but the sense of community cohesion created in organizing their festival contribution was palpable. And so, after my first full involvement the festival in 2009, I came away with a few pages of scribbled notes, a mixture of observations and personal reflections, and a half-formed research proposal based on my interests in practice-based learning theory:

"This is a complex proposition involving an exploration of the links between identity, place, community and practice, each of which are contested in their own right. At its core though is the theory that learning is intrinsic to practice – a view articulated by a number of learning theorists from Dewey to Schon, and refined in Wenger's writings on communities of practice. According to the theory participation in practice, in this case in the organisation and delivery of the culture festival, provides both an enactment of and an opportunity for learning." (From first draft research proposal, 28th August 2009)

That summer, after returning from my annual holiday, I decided to explore a broader range of literatures on communities and their development (Granovetter, 1985; Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995; Portes,1998; Svendsen, 2006) to try to relate what I had experienced of the community cohesion engendered by the festival to another area of theory with which I was familiar from my teaching work, social capital theory. The problem with much of the theoretical work on this subject is that it overemphasises the need for and practice of building community social harmony, failing to reflect the diversity of interests which must be negotiated constantly in a kind of eddying swirl of human interaction.

In the course of my wider exploratory reading, Edyvane's (2007) work on metaphors of community drew my attention back to spatial/temporal change with its focus on journey narratives. Through an examination of differing philosophical and literary articulations of the concept of community, Edyvane highlights the fundamentally dynamic and pluralistic nature of communities, constantly changing over time and pulsing with conflict. He focuses particular attention on journey narratives as metaphors for living at both the individual and the community level. "Journey narratives are often used to symbolise lives because they convey two important features of a life: time and change", but in order to convey the life fully, a narrative must contain "elements of flux (time and change) and unity (shape)…that serves to lend intelligibility and continuity to the series of episodes it comprises". (Edyvane, 2007 p.48)..

Edyvane then proceeds to apply the same journey metaphor to support an aspect of his theory of community. "The narrative of a shared journey can similarly be translated into the narrative of a shared life…"(p.49), and by doing so he asserts "…we begin to identify a far richer, more open-ended and flexible way of talking about community than currently prevails in much of the literature devoted to the concept."(p.50). Rather than communities as "havens of peace, stability and permanence in a potentially chaotic world", the journey narrative allows us to view them as "in a range of different shapes and also to see that it is inappropriate to conceive of a community as a static social entity."(p.50).

"*Being a part of a new place, a new community, has offered us new opportunities, above all the opportunity to forge for ourselves new identities. To become different people in the eyes of these neighbours to those we are perceived as backing our home neighbourhood. But it is a slow and difficult process, being as we are fleeting irregular visitors, tourists in our own place*." (Personal notebook entry 11th April 2010)

The Epistemological Journey: Wandering Through the Fields

When I returned to the village to participate in the 2010 festival I had scoped out more fully the basis of my research, having discussed it with a small group of interested colleagues and spent some time reading some of their recommended sources e.g. Whyte, 1948; Van Maanen, 1988; Glaser and Strauss, 1967. I was, I thought, equipped with new methodological and theoretical tools, an emerging understanding of ethnography and grounded theory, which would help me in my sense-making quest. But as I spent some of that year's festival, conversing with our village neighbours, helping and observing, touring other festival sites and villages, making field notes and photographing some of the venues, the new tools didn't really help me make any more sense of what was happening. If anything my understanding of what was going on felt more distant than ever. When I thought I had grasped something of the culture and practices I was trying capture, like some delicate plant, it seemed to shrink into comparative insignificance. And what is more, my wife even began to question what I was doing. Surely, she muttered disconcertingly, there is more to it than this. Echoing my own discomfort, she began to ask about my lack of formal interviews or questionnaires. Torn between action and apparent passivity, I continued to scribble my in situ observational notes and record my reflections every evening, hoping that it would all come together in the end in a kind of miraculous intellectual potion. I reassured her that this was what I had been advised to do – observe what was going on, talk to people informally and document as much as I could.

It was only at this stage, as I disconsolately typed up my observations that it began to dawn on me. My scribbled notes *were* the research data. They provided an "evidentiary narrative"(Altheide and Johnson, 2011) helping to capture my interpretation of what was happening as a 'border inhabitant' operating halfway in the community, as a helper and a neighbour, and halfway out, as a festival tourist and an academic observer. I also began to realise that to add more depth to my interpretations of the cultural and social phenomena I was experiencing, I would need to incorporate in a more systematic way the reflections

I had been noting of the impact on me, along with fragments of my clumsy attempts to capture the essence of our place[2].

"Picking apart the significant from the random.
Reading the symbolic amongst a mass of information." (Fragment of notebook entry 22nd August 2011)

Encouraged by Van Maanen's (1988) account of impressionist tales in which "the story itself is a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker's way of knowing it so that both can be jointly examined" and that "reflective, meditative themes may develop from the story"(p.102), I began to write down my personal reflections on the impact of the research on me. The generation and consideration of data on the field-worker/observer is not uncontested territory in ethnographic studies, and there are various views and interpretations on it even within the boundaries of organisation studies.

In seeking to develop a reflexive strand to the study, I initially saw this as simply a strand of data which had echoes of Alvesson's (2003) approach for 'close-up' studies. He termed this self-ethnography, characterizing its purpose as a means of "controlling 'subjectivity'" by the researcher. He felt that the highly interpretive way in which ethnographic data is 'constructed', the combination of realist observation and documentation, and reflective self-criticism (p.183) required detailed explication. The aim is ultimately to ensure an appropriate balance has been struck in the data gathering, between social authenticity and academic rigour. However based on Moeran's (2009) conception of the 'observant participant' position, I began to focus on establishing myself, the researcher, as part of the research itself. As Altheide and Johnson (2011) assert, "the 'ethnographic ethic' calls for ethnographers to substantiate their interpretations and findings with a reflexive account of themselves and their methods" (p.587). This is difficult and sometimes quite painful as it requires one to 'crack open' and reveal long sealed away emotions about oneself for interpretive purposes. I have come to characterise the account of my involvement with the community's work and its impact on me, as an autoethnographic one. It has played a much more fundamental role in my research than as a simple data source. Arguably it is proving one of the most powerful elements of the research, pushing me to incorporate all manner of reflective as well as reflexive work.

Boyle and Parry's (2007) introduction to the special issue of Culture and Organisation on organisational authoethnography, proposed "that the study of organizations and culture can be significantly enhanced by inclusion of work conducted and located within the autoethnographic genre."(p.186). "In particular, the intensely reflexive nature of autoethnography as an autobiographical form of research allows the organizational researcher to intimately connect the personal to the cultural through a 'peeling back' of multiple layers of consciousness, thoughts, feelings and beliefs." (Boyle and Parry 2007, p.187). All ethnographic research arguably requires a degree of reflexivity on the part of

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[2] It has also struck me that my and my wife's photographs might also help to convey something equally powerful but I am even more a novice of visual methods than of narrative ethnography

the researcher. "Reflexivity (in ethnographic research) expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects on it. At a deeper level reflexivity involves an awareness of the reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants." (Davies, 1999). In autoethnogaphy however Anderson argues "the…interrogation of self and other may transform the researcher's own belief, actions and sense of self." (Anderson 2006).

Parallel journeys?
The physical and social (and the sensual and visual for that matter) experiences of a change of place has had a profound impact on my intellectual perspective, on my academic practice and on my identity. The change of perspective allowed me to move my thinking forward and to establish its direction with greater clarity. My interest in the concept of community and its relationship to organizational behaviour has become a concrete piece of research. The learning of ethnographic research methods as part of my practice has caused me to question and move my understanding of knowledge and its construction into the previously uncharted (and possibly risky) territory of researcher identity. The impact of this on my own self-image is quite challenging for me personally. Until now I have thought of myself as at least a peripheral part of various communities. What this study has begun to reveal is the underlying sense of alienation I have experienced in relation to the professional communities I have so far attempted to belong to. My involvement in my new community's organizing activities in our annual festival have both surfaced this and enabled me to start to deal with it.

Journey metaphors and narratives have been close to my professional reflections for some years. I have been, and still am, a transient between different professional communities who has thought quite deeply about them from a learning perspective. My realised sense of alienation has, in a way, equipped me fairly well for ethnographic research, particularly that characterised as 'realist' ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988), with its undercurrent of objectivity. It does however continue to prevent me from complete engagement in a community and its practices. Autoethnographic methods may provide a mechanism for exploring how this tension between critical distance and engaged participation can be managed as part of my future research work

Ellingson(2011) talks about autoethnography as "research, writing, story and method that connects the autobiographical to the cultural, social and political through the study of a culture or phenomenon of which one is part, integrated with relational and personal experiences." (p.599). The intellectual journey she advocates is one through the "vast middle spaces" between art and science, between rational analysis and emotional evocation is one which holds an appeal for me. It allows me to maintain the sense of critical objectivity which my feelings of alienation have nurtured, while at the same time to explore the emotional fields of my identity formation as a researcher. It is a way to both connect and observe my relationship with the community I strive to understand.

The personal impacts which autoethnographers incorporate into their work, in terms of changed meanings, perspectives and practices happen over a much longer period than the period of their initial fieldwork. The 'journeys' I have written about here are narrative

metaphors about a portion of my own life, sometimes twisting and turning through a tangled maze of paths of physical, emotional and intellectual change. They have been straightened in my rational imagination to become three separate 'parallel' journeys only through my writing. It is often "over many years, even decades where the long passage of time itself produces new or altered understandings of past 'facts'"(Altheide and Johnson, 2011,p.584). So I am determined the journey will continue.

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