Auto-ethnography in qualitative studies of gender and management

This chapter considers gender as a performative practice in relation to the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990, 1993). Gender as a performative practice is not a fixed identity governed by biological sexed bodies that do not change from birth. Gender instead is considered as an iterative practice that brings together an internalised gender identity with external gatekeeping, acceptance and normalisation from other individuals, groups and society where those practices may change. It is not based on some biological feature or medicalised understanding of our bodies but is something we continually practice and express by and through an unfolding process.

Butler (1990, 1993) argues that sex and gender are often considered in binary ways such that there are men/males/masculine on one side of a binary and women/females/feminine on the other. Her concept of gender performativity challenges the idea that biological sex based on genitalia determines behaviour. We instead are socialised to behave in ways that society associates with genitalia and that socialisation can be questioned and may change. Butler’s argument goes further though to suggest that there are potentially more than two, discrete genders. Males may have some attributes associated with femininity and vice versa and some people may not identify as man/male and woman/female. A performative view of gender allows for non-normative gender and recognises the existence of non cis-gender identities. Gender, as such, is not limited to men and women but also includes other, minority identities including transgender women, transgender men, gender fluid people and non-binary folk.

Performativity has become recognised as an important theoretical explanation of gender and in particular transgender people in management studies. Muhr, Sullivan and Rich (2016) presented a study of a transgender woman and manager that demonstrated how gender identity and performance varies situationally. Much more recently there has been a concern that the subjects of research be allowed space to tell their own story, which in turn has led to increased interest in auto-ethnographic and reflexive academic writing particularly where the individual is part of a minority and vulnerable group (Anteby 2013). Autoethnography has increasingly become an accepted, if not the preferred, method to understand gender and lived experiences for minority and vulnerable people because it allows a marginalised and often silenced group a voice in academic discourse.
ETHNOGRAPHY, AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple levels of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739)

Management studies has a history of realist ethnographic research where we tell stories about, or observe, other people’s lives and work including on flight decks (Weick and Roberts 1993), in fire departments (Desmond 2007), on oil rigs (Collinson 1999), factory assembly lines (Delbridge 1998), in Disney (Van Maanen 1990), airports (O’Doherty 2014), public management (Cappellero 2017), security work (Søgaard and Krause-Jensen 2019), charity and non-profit organisations (Lord 2019) and contemporary politics (Vine 2019). Reflections on our experiences as members of those organisations until relatively recently have been presented as gender neutral in the sense that gender is rarely considered as an issue either to, or for, the researcher attempting to study management.

Ethnography, in brief, is important to management and particularly to those interested in its overlap with gender studies because it focuses on the actual lived experiences including those of people who are not the default male. Ethnographic accounts can help centre different gendered and minority experiences of work. Feminist researchers adopt qualitative ethnographic methods to research, for instance, gender power dynamics in organizations (Ely and Meyerson 2010; Ely and Padavic 2007), the sociology of ‘undoing gender’ (Ely and Meyerson 2010), gendered and embodied labour (Hochschild 1983; Pringle 1988). This is not to say that only feminists and/or women and their experiences of work, management and organisations are important. What is important is that ethnography can question the ‘desexualisation of work’ where work is presumed to be normatively male (Burrell, 1984; Sullivan 2014)

Kerfoot and Knights (2020) discuss the importance of recognising that there are a range of masculine performativites rather than assuming that there is a single way of being a male at work. The importance of ethnography is that it helps to expose issues of power and provides space for other voices in a patriarchal academic world dominated by white, often
Anglophonic, male academics (Anteby 2013) whose heteronormativity may often leave them blind to issues of gender and divorced from diversity and the lives of minority people (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). It also provides a space to research issues that may otherwise be missed, or dismissed, in a patriarchal world, for example experiences of miscarriage and profound loss (Boncori and Smith 2019), of being defamed as a female academic researching a controversial subject (Brewis 2016) and gendered bullying at work (Vickers 2007).

Ethnography is focused on studying the lives and experiences of other people and social groups where the ethnographer spends an extended period of time living with and observing that group. Autoethnography extends this by requiring the autoethnographer to reflect on their own experiences of being a member of a group. Anteby (2013) argues that management studies needs to be more open to autoethnography as a valid research method because the researcher analyses their own lived experience as a member of a minority where autoethnographers have direct access to their experiences and emotions rather than interpreting someone else’s life. Whiteman (2010) argues that autoethnography is important for management as it provides an emotional account. For Watson (2011) it underscores the importance of context. Boyle and Parry (2007) argue that it is a method that connects the ‘everyday, mundane’ personal aspects of organizational life to broader political, strategic and cultural organizational issues; it links the micro with the macro level of organizational life. As a personal account, autoethnography allows one to reflect on one’s gender and gendered and sexualised body (Dale and Burrell 2000) in a manner different to the body of scientific discourse (Pullen 2018). In a patriarchal and phallocentric world, autoethnography provides women and minorities an opportunity to speak their own truth to power that challenges their marginalisation (Martinez 2013).

A further value of autoethnography is that it may provide an opportunity to research and discuss highly emotive themes that may otherwise be hidden from view. It opens a space for organizational narratives that may focus on otherwise taboo subjects including sexual harassment and sexual assault at work, emotions, vulnerability and embodiment. Ilaria Boncori and Charlie Smith (2019), for example, write of the experience of miscarriage not in the distanced, objective and neutral manner common to scientific discourse but as an evocative autoethnography that reveals the fragility and pain experienced in a story of loss and grieving that provides a ‘kaleidoscopic and insightful understanding of life in organizations’ (p. 75). Margaret Vickers’ (2007) autoethnographic account describes how a confident and outgoing person became frightened by being bullied at work and the
difficulties she had writing and reliving that emotional experience. I have included the first names of these writers to underscore that these are women writing about their experiences as women at work. Autoethnography has also allowed academics to question how a normalised, heteronormative concept of gender pervades much of management in order to call for a more nuanced understanding of male performativity and sexualities (Kerfoot and Knights 2020; Knights, Pullen, and Rhodes 2014; Thanem and Wallenberg 2014)

**AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES**

Anderson (2006) argues that autoethnography may be traced back clearly to the work of Hayano (1979); research prior to this either did not make clear the researcher’s involvement in the subject world they studied or were not sufficiently reflexive. Autoethnography is a form of reflexive autobiography that ‘privileges the self-revelatory subject’ (Coffey 1999, p. 118) in a manner that ‘foster[s] reflection and learning’ (Weatherall 2019, p. 102). Autoethnography includes elements of both autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al. 2011). In the former the writer reflects on and writes about a past experience, or experiences. These experiences are usually considered to be epiphanic; experiences that had a significant impact on the researcher. The latter is a qualitative form of research to study a specific societal culture or group or some aspect of a culture often by participant observation where the researcher immerses themselves in the culture over time. In autoethnography the researcher reflects on their lived experience as a member of a particular group and/or culture and how they may be braided.

Denzin (1997) argues that autoethnography must always provide a voice to vulnerable, disempowered and marginalised people and as such is similar to forms of feminist writings concerned with transgressing traditional forms of scientific writing that establish binaries that promote and legitimise dominant voices. Autoethnography is therefore political both in the choices made of what stories to tell and which voices to foreground but also because ‘it challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other’ (Denzin 2006, p. 422).

In autoethnography the researcher reflects on their own experience usually as a marginalised or vulnerable individual. They are the subject of their own research in a narrative where the researcher is no longer absent and silent (Holt 2003). The researcher draws upon their own
life reflexively to construct an account that is meaningful for readers who may not have had a
similar life or experience. (Blenkinsopp 2007).

Autoethnography is commonly considered to exist on a spectrum between analytic (Anderson
2006) and evocative writing (Ellis 1999; Ellis and Bochner 2006). The analytic approach
attempts to convince a reader of its claims by constructing a theoretically based framework
that is evidenced by their reflexive understanding and experience of the social world in
dialogue with others. Dialogue prevents a self-absorption, aids generalisability of that
framework and foregrounds a social, shared world (Anderson 2006). Evocative
autoethnography attempts to convince by establishing an emotional resonance where the
researcher explores their own, specific experiences and feelings in relation to a broader,
social experience. Katila (2019) provides an example of a detailed, evocative
autoethnographic account where her experience is the central focus and the social world is a
background for that personal and internal introspection. This, whilst analytic autoethnography
attempts to convince through generalisability to a shared social world, evocative
autoethnography shares an introspection in fine detail in order to achieve an emotional
resonance with readers. Many autoethnographic accounts lie somewhere between these two
extremes, and in common with qualitative research, the stories told should achieve both
specificity and depth and provide a story that convinces others of their truth. My own
autoethnography falls between analytic and evocative accounts but tends towards the latter as
I prefer to share the pain, sorrow, heartache and joy of my life.

HOW TO WRITE AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Writing, according to Clifford (1986), is one of the main forms of work that an ethnographer
does. For many, autoethnography lies somewhere between anthropology and literary studies
(Denshire 2013, p. 1) and is often referred to as a ‘creative non-fiction’ (Anderson, 2006
accepts this description for evocative autoethnography whilst pointedly rejecting it for
analytic autoethnography). It may draw on memoirs, diaries, letters, remembered
conversations as well as recorded and transcribed ones, field notes, photographs and poetry
(Boyle and Parry 2007, see Denzin 2006 for a discussion).

Autoethnographers evoke both an external social world and their internalised world of
feelings and affect in a way that resonates with readers to ‘experience an experience’ (Ellis
1993, p. 711). Autoethnography allows the writer ‘to actually write the lived experience and not just write about it’ (Meier and Wegener 2017, p. 193). It is often both an audacious and subjective prose that resonates and emotionally moves the reader (O'Shea 2019). It uses thick description (Geertz 1973; Goodall Jr. 2000) to present a layered and nuanced description of an event from the autoethnographer’s perspective and experience. Autoethnographic writing may be polyphonic however and have more than a single subjective viewpoint. It must be plausible to a reader (Ellis et al. 2011) and for many should be a coherent, consistent, convincing and a well-written teleological story ‘capable of being respected by critics of literature as well as social scientists’ (Denzin 1997, p. 200). I question whether an account must be teleological because lived experiences are complicated, often on-going, full of potential dead ends and repetitions: our lives may appear to be teleological when we look back but may not be so simple as we experience them.

Autoethnography is not only judged on its literary merits however but also, and sometimes only, in terms of how well it cleaves to academic criteria for evaluating qualitative research method (Bochner 2000; Holt 2003; Richardson 2000). Ellis and Bochner (Ellis et al. 2011), often regarded as two of the most important evocative autoethnographers, argue for criteria for autoethnographic accounts based on validity, verisimilitude, generalisability and reliability.

For an autoethnography to have (academic) merit the writer’s account should: be valid in that it can evoke appropriate emotions, empathy and a sense that the reader recognises the account (Blenkinsopp 2007) and so avoids self-indulgence (Coffey 1999); it should have verisimilitude so that both the writer and reader believe the account to be true; be generalisable not in terms of how many people participated in the research but how many readers are affected appropriately by the narrative; and be reliable in terms of both the available facts (see Bochner, 2000 for a nuanced discussion of the limitations of such criteria). The concern for common, judgemental criteria for both analytic and evocative accounts is clearest in those positioned as social science accounts that cleave most closely to academic writing practices (Ellis and Bochner 2000) but may not be a concern for those with literary and political aspirations to tell a story from an otherwise silenced minority (Martinez 2013; Moraga and Anzaldua 1981).

Blenkinsopp (2007) argues further that an autoethnography must attend to ethical considerations concerned with what is and is not included in the account. The writer must
make choices as to what memories they include. An epiphany may impact their recollection of events in order to provide an account that meets the criteria for a social science account, or an epiphany may be needed for a researcher to question their motives for involving themselves in a research study (Goode 2002). Researchers must also consider how, if at all, they maintain confidentiality and anonymity of other people in their account: Goodall Jr.’s (2006) account of investigating his father’s clandestine CIA employment could hardly anonymise his father (see O’Shea 2019, where I discuss the difficulties I had writing an autoethnography that featured my father but without ‘monstering’ him.) I will return to these issues when I provide my autoethnographic vignettes below.

Management literature has discussed the issue that trans people face with regard to being out at work about their gender identity. This literature focuses mainly on the effect that this has on the trans person’s career, salary, relationships at work and employment (Schilt and Connell 2007; Ozturk and Tatli 2015; Muhr, Sullivan and Rich 2016). With few exceptions (Thanem 2011; Thanem and Knights 2012) what is not discussed is how the trans person feels in the situated contexts they encounter either as ‘out’ or being ‘outed’. What follows is a brief autobiographical account of my experiences of being ‘outed’ at work that provides an illustration of an evocative form of autoethnography.

**VIGNETTE 1 - TRANSGENDER AND BEING ‘OUTED’ AT WORK**

I had completed my social transition and had been in medical transition for a number of years when this situation occurred at work. I was and am quite open about my gender identity as a non-binary person. In the words of my gender clinic, I have ‘socially transitioned’.

It was a cold Friday at the end of term and attendance for both my 9 am seminar and a male, senior colleague were low. We conferred and decided to team teach a combined seminar group. My seminar students know that I am nonbinary as I tell them at the start of term and so give them time to transfer to another should they so wish. I don’t wish to offend someone because of my gender identity since, apart from anything else, it would not make for a conducive learning environment.

We took a coffee break midway through the seminar. Most of the students left the room but a few remained. ‘Saoirse, you’ll appreciate this as a transgender woman. I was in a meeting outside of work and I spoke in favour of trans people and highlighted the difficult lives that
many of you have,’ And with those words all the students looked at me. I blushed. I didn’t want the attention and I mumbled something along the lines of ‘Thanks for being an ally.’ But I’m not sure what I mumbled as, composure spent, I was embarrassed and reacting to a situation not of my making.

The seminar restarted and I took my seat. I could feel my face flush once more but not from embarrassment but annoyance. How dare he think it was OK for him to out me! How dare he assume that he had the right to use me to demonstrate his supposed political correctness. How dare he get my gender wrong! But in amongst my annoyance that had moved to anger I felt guilty because I was annoyed over something that is not supposed to matter to me. I am out and make no attempt to hide that I am nonbinary at work. But my annoyance turned again – he had manufactured a situation to make himself feel and look good at my expense where if I was to call him out I would be seen as unreasonable and ungrateful for questioning an ‘ally’. He had also got my gender identity wrong because he lacked the courtesy to ask and check his understanding, he just presumed he knew. In a cisgender dominant world he just assumed all transgender people to be the same.

<A REFLECTION ON VIGNETTE 1 <|>

This brief autobiographical vignette may be read in terms of gender and how one person assumes that the other may be spoken to and in particular spoken about. Reflexively it challenges me to question myself why I cared, and still do care, about being outed and about getting my identity wrong. This vignette enables me to both voice and reflect on my feelings of being objectified by him, reduced to an object for his use that he cares so little about that he didn’t bother to check his understanding of my identity, where he lacked the courtesy to discuss it and thought nothing about potential negative consequences for me. (I have been physically and sexually assaulted because of my gender identity.) I was, and remain, upset, annoyed and angry by his lack of care and respect for me.

At the time I was shocked in to silence by his behaviour and said nothing. Once my initial shock died down I still remained silent at work. I work in a ‘desexualized’ organization that collects statistical evidence about gender but where I often feel that I am viewed as a problem to be managed and where my concerns are considered as unimportant because statistically I am insignificant whereas my male colleague is the norm.
My example is a form of evocative autoethnography rather than analytic. If it was the latter I might support my vignette with references to relevant literature and also refer to the legality of ‘outing’ an employee in relation to the UK Equality Act 2010. An analytic account might emphasise that although the senior colleague may know that I am a transgender person, he had no right to tell others at work. Such an analytic discussion would consider the objective, structural issues of gender identity and employment, the diverse identities deemed to be part of the transgender umbrella, how they may differ and the legal protections that trans people have at work. The vignette is instead more an evocative autoethnography appeal to readers to put themselves in my position and to feel the emotions I experienced and so validate my account.

I know what I felt and experienced by being outing – this is a true account of my experience and that has not changed on reflection, I am still annoyed and indeed angry. In terms of gender my account achieves a generalisability because many of us who are female or not normatively male have experience of being talked over and talked about in a patriarchal system.

**VIGNETTE 2 – OUTING MYSELF AT WORK**

I started my social transition a decade ago. One of my first acts was to inform my then employer and as part of that I asked for and was given permission to ‘out’ myself to the students whom I taught. One of my dissertation students contacted my School and copied me in to their email.

‘I no longer want to be supervised by Saoirse.’

Up to this point I had supervised this student for many months from their proposal to where they were currently writing up their empirical research. Up to this point this student had requested and received far more time than that officially allocated for supervision. My School emailed the student to ask why and for any evidence that I may not have fulfilled my academic duties. The student replied:

‘I don’t want to be supervised by Saoirse. I will not say why.’

I told my School that I would prefer not to supervise the student if they did not want me to. My School told me that I had no say in the matter and had to provide supervision. And then it
went quiet. The student didn’t contact me and ignored my offers of supervision. The School responded to me when I logged this by saying that I had to provide supervision. I was never given the final dissertation to assess, if indeed the student submitted one. I didn’t see them congregate for graduation with their peers or at subsequent graduations. I never heard from them and was told nothing about them after that brief email exchange.

A reflection on Vignette 2

In total I supervised to successful completion over 500 postgraduate dissertation students for that employer. I received awards from the University Student Union in recognition of me as a dissertation student supervisor. All of that is diminished for me however by this experience. I was left feeling disappointed and hurt that the student no longer wanted me to supervise their work and sorrow for them that the position they took may have prevented them from completing their studies. I still do not know why they decided they did not want me to supervise but I hope that it was worth the possible consequence for them.

Reflexively why should I care that approximately 0.2% of my dissertation students decided that they did not want me to supervise them? Is it because I feel guilt that their decision may have been precipitated by my coming out? Why should I even feel any guilt if their decision was because I came out and they subsequently felt in some way that I was no longer suitable to supervise them? Do I care too much because I didn’t care enough not to out myself to them? I did care enough to ask my School if it was OK to out myself and was assured that it was OK and they would manage any potential adverse reaction. Did I then over-rely on the School to do this and so abrogated my responsibility to them?

My reflection on both of the vignettes

My two vignettes twine around each other because both consider issues of the care we have for ourselves and for others. In the first I was not cared for and in the second I did not care enough. Autoethnography has to be honest, true and achieve verisimilitude but it also needs to be reflexive. I feel more objective and ‘distanced’ from the second vignette than the first and in terms of the spectrum between an analytic and emotive account the first vignette is more emotive than the second. I need to learn from my experiences and not just be hurt by them.
Autoethnography is generally meant to be presented as a teleological story that moves in a coherent manner towards an end (Denzin 1997). That end, moreover, offers a point for reflexivity not just so that the autoethnographer may understand their journey but also so that they may understand and find some form of closure – autoethnography as therapeutic as one of the editors of this volume astutely put it. In this brief vignette I have however yet to find closure and perhaps may never do so. My life is lived forward and I can not foresee all the consequences of my actions. Gender performativity is an iterative process (Butler 1990) and because of its iterative nature, gender and how we understand it may change in ways we may not foresee.

<C> Autoethnography and Ethics <C>

Academic research needs to be conducted ethically and autoethnography is no exception to this. It deals with personal and very often emotional issues where the researcher talks about themselves and in so doing also other people. People generally have a right for their privacy to be protected in a way that they should not be identifiable and are not maligned by a story that is inaccurate but those rights need to be balanced with the rights of the autoethnographer to present an account of an event that is meaningful to them.

The two vignettes are as ethical as I can make it, I have provided as little information as possible that may identify my male colleague but the difficulty with auto-ethnography is that my account contains autobiographical material. A reader can look me up, see what university and department I work for and from that identify the 40 or so male academics in my department. I do not believe however that there is sufficient information here for a reader to identify the individual. Is it however ethical to write an account where other people may be identified?

Goodall (2006) and I (O'Shea 2019) have written autoethnographies that include family members as major characters and, at least in my case, been critical of them. Autoethnography is not a neutral, anonymous account (Ellis and Bochner 2000) but one where others may become identifiable as the account becomes more personal: I cannot write an autoethnography of my childhood without talking about my relationship with, and identify, my father. What I can do however is discuss how my feelings, whilst true to me, are mine and may not provide a full account of the event. My colleague in vignette 1 may have acted in a way that he thought was inclusive and supportive of me. He was acting quickly and offered
to combine classes because he no doubt thought it would make a better learning experience for the students. His assumption that I identify as female is a mistake that many people make when we gender people based on very little information and presume that there are only two genders. Autoethnographers should consider how neutral an account is and whether they allow room for alternative explanations and voices in addition to the accuracy of their account (O’Shea 2019) whilst still maintaining the focus on their account.

**WHERE ARE WE GOING?**

The current state of autoethnography tends to focus on an analytic-evocative binary and attendant demands that the autoethnography be well written, is concerned with generalisable or situated truth and knowledge, and achieves reflexivity concerned with either method and/or experience. Arguably both these ostensibly different forms presume that the autoethnographer has reached a point where they are able to look back on and briefly step away from their on-rushing life to extract some form of learning and understanding from an important but now concluded event.

Does an autoethnography need to be well written in academic terms to have merit? Academics concerned with gender, race and ethnicity have raised questions about who gets to tell a story and how stories are told. As Martinez (2013) argues there is a need to hear the experiences of minorities told in their authentic voices and not restricted by issues of style. An evocative autoethnography written by, for instance, a woman of colour in their authentic voice may well convey meaning and have a depth that would be lost if presented in ‘academese’ (Martinez 2013). Resonance is not only achieved by stylish writing that evokes a generalisable experience, it may also be achieved by the emotional power and anger expressed by the writing. The various narratives in Moraga and Anzaldua’s (1981) collection resonate for me more because of the raw emotions, including anger, that are expressed than an evocation of a generalisable, shared world that I, a relatively privileged person in the developed world, frankly have limited experience of. The brute power of the emotion helps to close the gap between two very different worlds.

But what of analytic autoethnography? Does it need to be stylish or does a concern for style take too much away from a concern for objective analysis more common to academese? What may be more appropriate is for analytic autoethnography to present a powerful account coupled to a more objective analysis. These two distinct forms of writing might be achieved
by co-writing similar to Boncori and Smith (2019) where one writer presents their memories of a highly emotional experience and the second helps provide an analytic account. For those of us, including me, who struggle to provide both a powerful and objective analytic account co-writing may provide a future for autoethnography.

In this chapter I have presented a brief history of autoethnography and explained why there is a need for it. I have also described what autoethnography is and how it may be measured in terms of academic concerns for quality. I have presented two brief vignettes concerning how we care for each other as examples of autoethnographic writing and discussed them in relation to concerns with academic writing, how autoethnographic accounts are judged by academics and the ethical concerns surrounding autoethnographic methods. In a patriarchal world where management theory and stories are often desexualised or presented as gender neutral autoethnography provides a means where women and minority gender people may be able to speak truth to power in their own words.

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