Disappearing up our own backsides: academic introspections on identities

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'The Cobblers children go barefoot and the Doctors wives die young' (Anon)

Introduction

One criticism that might be levelled at academics from a business school researching other academics in other business schools is that we are inspecting our own navels, or to put it less politely 'disappearing up our own backsides'. Perhaps then, by reflecting and writing on our *experiences* as academics researching other academics, we further increase our vulnerability to criticisms of 'gross self-indulgence' (Coffey, 1999:132), narcissism and futility (Delamont, 2009).

This paper is based on co-constructed narratives of two academics reflecting on their experience in undertaking field work within their own professional space e.g. academia. In so doing, the authors have used techniques of 'positioning', a 'discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines' (Davies and Harré 2001:264). In such a 'highly personalised account' we as authors 'draw on [our] own experiences to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture' (Holt, 2003:18), a process of writing which is identified as belonging to the genre of 'autoethnography' (Reed-Danahay, 1997). In autoethnography the authors may legitimately declare their 'own hand', or 'allow the audience to see at least some of the strings of the puppeteer' (Watson, 1994:s86), and we do this intending to illustrate how an 'individual's self interacts with, resists, cajoles, and shapes the organizational and institutional context in which he or she is situated' (Boyle and Parry, 2007:186) and it is our own selves which are the focus of this paper.

We are aware that any 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991:52) is closely bound up with our own identity work in attempting to author constructions and re-constructions which seek to address notions around who-we-are and by implication how we-should-act (Cerulo, 1997). In addition, we are conscious that by employing self-reflexive methods the authors are creating a

(self)indulgent space to revisit the past with perhaps the unconscious intention of 'airbrushing' (Ybema, 2009) out any unwanted flaws or blemishes.

Stimulated by the claim that it was "unusual for academics to expose their doubts, fears and potential weaknesses" (Humphreys, 2005:852) we carried out a within-discipline study exploring the ways in which academics author their professional identities. However, this paper focuses on reflexive accounts of our experiences during this research, and uses a series of vignettes to illustrate the dominant narratives emerging from our individual accounts during fieldwork. In so doing, we seek to understand the interplay and positioning between these themes (Garcia & Hardy, 2007), and aim to explore the potentially challenging nature of simultaneously researching and belonging to the participant group, where related identities and boundaries may be blurred. This makes, perhaps, any quest for the position of 'detached involvement' (Griffin & Stacey, 2005) more onerous, as the construction of participant into the (artificial) role of other is not easily maintained.

Who are they (us)? Identities in academia

In this paper we position identity as a continual process involving work on a set of 'provisional selves' (Ibarra, 1999), which are fluid, fractured and contradictory in nature (Svenigsson and Alvesson, 2003), and result in 'multiple, shifting and competing' notions of self (Alvesson *et al*, 2008:6), rather than as static and enduring entities. We view identity, and identity work (Watson, 2008a) as an unremitting composition in which 'stability appears to be either a momentary achievement or a resilient fiction' (Ybema *et al*, 2009:301). Such resilient fictions are framed by Thornborrow and Brown (2009) as 'aspirational' identities', where people 'work' on their identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Sturdy et al., 2006) to ensure harmony with the 'idealised' image of their chosen profession. As Thornborrow and Brown (2009) indicate, such aspirations are perhaps unrealistic, as most employees embark on a 'journey [that] is perilous, and success not merely uncertain but (for most) perpetually deferred' (p.371), and where it is the 'process of becoming' (or not becoming) that is considered to be of most value, and where Collinson's 'achieved selves' (2003) are always tantalisingly out of reach.

There is extant literature to support the view that identity is 'temporary, context sensitive and evolving' (Alvesson *et al*, 2008:6); as Collinson (2003:533) states an individuals' identity 'can never be fully secured or rendered entirely stable'. Workplaces then become a space where 'multiple insecurities can intersect and operate simultaneously' to perpetuate and reinforce 'organizational power relations' (Collinson, 2003:530).

For academics, identity construction is 'particularly complex, comprising multiple layers of disciplinary, departmental and institutional cultures' (Winberg 2008:354), involving a presentation of coherent selves to multiple 'publics' (Taylor, 1999) whilst conducting diverse sets of activities (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) such as: research; publication and conference presentation; securing research funding; executive education; administrative duties; management and teaching - 'a conception of self in relation to others' (Trowler & Cooper, 2002:225).

We see identity then as 'a matter of claims, not character; persona not personality; and presentation, not self' (Ybema 2009:306), so reflexivity and introspection are fundamental to authoring versions of ourselves or to 'positioning' our accounts of who we are. Identities and identity work revolve around and intersect at important junctures; providing a bridge between individual and society; and similarly between agency and structure. In this paper we explore how we were constructed as both subject and object, and the ways in which we felt we were 'positioned by another speaker' (Dyer and Keller-Cohen, 2000:264). We are aware that 'through narratives an actor also constructs the identities of others' (Garcia and Hardy, 2007:366) as the self is positioned with reference to those 'other' actors who are often portrayed as, dissimilar, weaker and less attractive than 'us'.

Who do we think we are? Reflexive researchers

Muncey (2005:7) suggests that 'autoethnography celebrates rather than demonizes the individual story' and perhaps salvages much of what would otherwise escape – the reflexive inner voice. If we accept the arguments made earlier (and we do) that identity is not entitative

(Hosking and Morley, 1991), but is rather made up of fluid, fragmented and contradictory selves, then the notion of the reflexive self may be problematic; it implies an authentic essence. In fact Harding et al (2010) talk of the 'agony of confusion about how to be reflexive' for just this reason as 'the self I am at one point will speak somewhat differently from the self-reflecting upon itself at another point in time' (p.160). In addition, we felt that in crafting this paper the (re)construction of ourselves and our writing into a conference paper format was both fraudulent and ironic, because as Muncey (2005) notes any 'research is a messy business belied by the neat conception of it in its written form' (p.3). So, the 'real' experience of constructing this paper consisted of times of despair, anxiety, insecurity, some (albeit) brief moments of joy, and constant rounds of editing and re-editing. But this inner experience - even in autoethnographic papers - is nowhere to be found, as we present you, the reader, with a reasonably coherent and cohesive written narrative.

It was at times difficult to remind ourselves that 'no one right form of knowledge exists' so that 'in an autoethnography, the researcher is not trying to become an insider in the research setting. He or she, in fact, is the insider' (Duncan 2004:3). For us, this less orthodox researcher position (this is our first autoethnography) was outside our experience, a form of writing we were not socialized into, and one which was further complicated because our main study of academia meant that we *were* the insiders, who were seeking to maintain an artificial position of inside 'outsiders' or 'others'. At the same time our research participants often reflected on the strangeness of their own role, not as the researcher in the interview process, but as the researched. Simultaneously then both researcher and participant were in the role of artificial 'other' which disrupted and reshaped well practiced identities.

Who do we think we are now? Reflective and reflexive observations from the field

Identities are arguably 'temporary, context sensitive and evolving' (Alvesson et al. 2008:36); there may be enduring implications therefore in oscillating between routine academic work and 'insider' fieldwork in provoking intensified and shifting notions of self-as-academic. For example, in exploring the identities of our peer group we have become increasingly sensitive to

the way we participate in and pay attention to narrative themes in our own working environment. We suggest that this makes it harder to 'turn a blind eye' (Steiner, 1979) to the 'often inconsistent sensemaking frameworks' (Clarke et al, 2009:341) we employ around our own practices, and within a profession where we have a vested interest and significant 'side bets' (Watson, 2001) in maintaining a well-authored account of who we are, and what we do. We agree with Boyle and Parry's notion that 'intensely personal process(es) of identity construction' are 'best documented through an autoethnographic approach' (2007:188), although we accept that this may not always be possible or desirable in every context, and that it can be a 'very difficult undertaking' (Wall:38). In our original field work the main focus of attention was identity, where UK academics authored and constructed their professional identities in the current HE context. This process constantly prompted us to reflect on our own academic identities, and ourselves positioned in the simultaneous roles of researchers (object) and researched (subject), so the 'self over here considers it reflection over there, but it is equally over there, reflected and reflecting' (Harding et al, 2010:163).

After conducting our fieldwork (40 interviews), and presenting two conference papers, we began to reflect on why it was that we had embarked on this study, and how it had changed our concepts of ourselves as both academics and researchers. Is there an argument for knowing too much? It could scarcely be one that could be anything but refuted by academics, but some of the consequences of having a denser knowledge of our colleagues, peers and 'superiors' have been more negative than we expected, and have perhaps disrupted our hitherto held notions of ourselves-as-academics, and indeed our ideas of others-as-academics.

Whilst the dangers of ethnographic researchers 'going native' are well documented, there is less said around the problems of 'being native' and the implications for both participant and researcher, although Boyle and Parry (2007) propose that 'exposing the vulnerable self through autobiographical process can be fraught with personal and professional risk' and may sometimes be 'considered the most dangerous fieldwork of all' (p.186). Indeed, researching one's own profession presents more complex issues than purely one of process; as Brannan et al note:

'Insider' workplace ethnography is hard work requiring constant attention to the phenomena to which one is exposed, as well as constant evaluation and re-evaluation of one's frames of reference '(2007: 400).

We suggest too that the experience of 'being native' may be reshaped and reframed through this 'hard work' of constantly paying attention, of seeking to uncover, position and reposition themes; the unimagined consequences of our research were the effects of this over-sensitisation of our relationships with colleagues; and its persistent influence in shaping the ways in which we felt about the profession we had chosen to join.

Studying our own profession provoked deeper questions for us around agency and structure, and as a consequence we began to imagine how far our academic selves were determined, and therefore rendered powerless by, encroaching managerial structures, a notion that was often reproduced by those we interviewed who asked rhetorically 'but what can we do about it?'. Intuitive feelings and recourse to post-structuralism brought us some reassurance, as Davies and Harré (2001) explain:

> "a particular strength to the post-structuralist research paradigm...is that it recognizes both the constitutive force of discourse, and in particular of discursive practices and at the same time recognizes that people are capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices" (p.262)

Such ideas then continued to support our preferred notions of academics with agency, albeit in a rather (and increasingly) constrained structural context, and perhaps there was a process of 'othering' those who we felt were 'unable' to exercise this.

Reflecting on the Reflexive - Our Study

We have used our 'own experiences in a culture (academia) reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interaction' (Holt, 2003:19) and we have chosen to do this because we believe using ourselves 'as the object of study, facilitates an understanding of subjectivity unavailable through other methods of research' (Harding et al, 2010). By definition then, what 'counts' as

'data' is different to that which is offered by alternative types of studies as we are not only the authors, but also the only pool of resource – both 'subjects and objects' (Harding et al, 2010:163). During the fieldwork phase of our project we interviewed other academics, but also constructed detailed field notes about our own feelings and thoughts, including diary entries. After a significant proportion of field work had been done, the first author interviewed the second author, and vice versa in order to give our own voice to how we were researching our profession, and what we felt about it. In addition, we recorded ourselves in conversation/dialogue with each other, talking reflexively about our different (and similar) experiences, and these tapes were then transcribed for further joint reflections. All these rich resources (diaries, notes, recorded conversations and interviews)- what Muncey (2005) terms different 'fabrications' of a 'patchwork', were used during the writing of this paper.

What are the objections to such a methodology and methods? There are many and usually of a similar nature. Autoethnography is one method which legitimises the otherwise lost voice of the researcher by allowing it to be 'placed firmly within the 'play' itself (Butler, 1997)' (Humphreys, 2005:842), enabling the author to connect 'the personal to the cultural' through their own experiences (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:739). As a method it purports to challenge the 'dominant scientific paradigm' by making space 'for other ways of knowing' (Wall, 2006:3), yet Delamont (2009) argues that it 'cannot meet core social science objectives'. In 2004 Duncan stated that 'autoethnographic research has not yet enjoyed the popularity and respect of its ethnographic predecessors' as it has been 'criticized for being self-indulgent, introspective, and individualized' (p.2). Although the six intervening years may have sought to address and defend such criticisms, there are issues that are yet to be resolved, not least its inability to successfully take on a more central methodological role, as Boyle and Parry (2007:187) remark 'this might be the right time for autoethnography to start making a substantial contribution to organizational studies', an aim that we fully endorse.

Perhaps Holt's (2003) autoethnography on publishing an autoethnographic paper can partially enlighten us his work was 'received with a significant degree of academic suspicion' (p.25) by those peer reviewing his paper. Those objections came not only from positivist researchers,

but also from qualitative researchers who believed that autoethnography 'contravenes certain qualitative research traditions' (ops.cit). Holt remarks how 'it is quite ironic that the method itself becomes marginalized by the academic review process' (2003:p.25), an experience reinforced by Wall who claims that there 'continues to be significant issues in the legitimacy granted to autoethnography and the credibility of this genre as scholarly work' as '...they are not logical or scientific' (2008:46/47).

We argue that autoethnography is a highly appropriate method for our research, as it is a way of providing reflective insights in researching a subculture to which one has previous (or current) links (Chang, 2007). Autoethnography is also an attempt to 'write differently' and create an opportunity to offer 'a reasonably lucid and decently honest statement of authorial position' (Grey and Sinclair, 2006:447), whilst taking a diversion from Muncey's metaphorical 'superhighways' of mainstream research which she claims 'stride across the country by passing the lived experience of all the small towns and villages'(Muncey, 2002:10). Our intention then is to include some 'small town' lived experience and reclaim our authorial voice as a legitimate and valuable resource worth sharing.

However, we agree that no methodology is flawless as 'autoethnography does have its problems' (Boyle and Parry,2007:186), and whilst the defences against these accusations have been well documented elsewhere (Sparkes, 2000; Holt, 2003; Duncan, 2004; Muncey, 2005; Wall, 2008; Harding et al, 2010) we would like to resuscitate two of the issues here. Firstly, is autoethnography self-indulgent? Perhaps to a certain extent all research is, for it is usually the researcher who builds the stage, casts the actors, and writes the outline of the plot, or as Fineman says 'does the looking, listening, points the camera, edits the tape recording, [and] holds the pen' (1993:222).

However, we argue that sometimes we may not be indulgent enough, as our own interest in looking at academics started from the notion that the cobblers children often went barefoot, and that in the field of organisation studies in particular we are so preoccupied with the analysis of other professions that we as 'academics have tended to neglect [our] own labour process' (Ogbonna and Harris, 2004:1186). That is not to say however, that excellent research

on the 'gaze' of the academy has been absent (see Willmott, 1995; Pritchard and Willmott, 1997; Henkel, 2000; Worthington & Hodgson, 2005; Fisher, 2007; Grey, 2005/2008), it is just not prolific. Ironically it is even less prevalent in business schools that purport to bring their expert gaze on the experience of other organisations.

But what does autoethnography tell us in this study that our main qualitative study omitted or obfuscated? We will attempt to answer this with reference to a second challenge to autoethnography – those relating to its sample of one (or two in this case), (Sparkes, 2000). We must agree with Boyle and Parry's simple defence that ' 'the critical 'n' factor in much organizational research is the number of people who read the research, rather than the number of people who are the subjects of the research' (2007:188). In adopting this less is more approach, our experience tells us that it is perfectly possible (and likely) that large samples of people may tell us very little about a broad range of things, but often as readers we are not intimately connected with their experiences in reading empirical accounts, indeed such accounts can be experienced as disembodied. Are we not more interested in the story behind their story? The story that autoethnography tells, which would 'otherwise be shrouded in secrecy' (Ellis and Bochner, 1996:25)?

For example, in writing this paper the first author came across Humphreys (2005) autoethnographic work on his academic career. After reading this she had found solace in, and felt reassured by another academic sharing her feelings of self-doubt (after all if there is one, there are possibility more!). This paper was especially pertinent because just like in Humphrey's account, the first author had also recently been 'gonged off'. Such benefits of autoethnography have been documented by scholars such as Holt (2003) who suggests that 'autoethnography can encourage empathy and connection beyond the self' and Harding et al (2010) who claim that employing the self as a data resource ' facilitates an understanding of subjectivity unavailable through other methods of research'…which 'urge(s) readers to…reflect upon their own experiences' (p.161). In a similar vein, we believe that if whilst sharing and informing others of our own experiences we can emotionally connect with, and indirectly

empathise with the situation of another reader, we will consider this to have been a paper well worth writing.

Cobbling together a well-polished narrative

In writing this paper we – the two authors - draw on our diaries/journals, field notes, recorded conversations and interviews with each other as we seek to author a narrative that may be comprehensible to others (as well as ourselves) from the "messy complexity" of our everyday experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994) as academics engaged in the research of our own profession.

The journey towards this piece began well before our research study. For both authors, academia is a second career. We are both women and one still has school age children at home. We embarked on our research project from a position of friendship and a shared interest in critical poststructuralist perspectives, emotions and emotion work, whilst recognising that within this broad church we have developed through different academic traditions. Surfacing and working through these conceptual differences has sometimes been challenging, and we believe it is an important ingredient in our reflections that encourages a deepening of reflexivity (Boje and Tyler, 2009).

We have conducted interviews with more than 40 academics and this paper focuses on the experience of conducting them, rather than directly on their content, and on our own conversational themes. We focus on Carol's narrative; on Caroline's interview/narrative; and on our shared conversations around some of the themes that emerge from them. In this way, we hope to breathe some life into the 'silent' and 'public' conversations (Stacey, 2000) that lie beneath this autoethnographic retelling, whilst meeting the demands for brevity demanded by a conference paper.

Boyle and Parry (2007: 189) position autoethnography as one way of introducing a "hyper-reflexive component" to organizational research and suggest a "central feature of autoethnography is the use of an aesthetic style of text" (ibid: 186). Carol spends a lot of time

listening to music which she selects to suit her mood and needs, and her journal narratives reflect this; Caroline's interview uses a compelling metaphor to make sense of her experience; whilst stories of disruption and distraction are ever-present in our shared conversation.

Carol's Narrative

> Work is love made visible.
> And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better
> that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and
> take alms of those who work with joy.
>
> Gibran (xxxx: yy)

I'm not sure growing-up in my first family, which was valued most: work or education. I am sure though that both were to be pursued with passion. I was the first in my family to go into higher education so when I found myself nearly thirty years later faced with an opportunity to work as an academic in the field of organization studies, I felt the gods were smiling on me (and much of the time, still do).   Through my work as a consultant and completing my PhD part-time, I had already uncovered the thrill of discovery that threads through the emotional rollercoaster of researching experiences of organization and organizing and surprised myself by how much of a buzz I got from teaching – and to find that I was good at it. Joining a large group of organization scholars many of whom are enthusiastic, committed and willing to give time to conversation and sharing ideas after two decades of working alone for much of the time felt like something of a homecoming. This is not to say everything was rosy: my journal entries around "playing with ideas", "banquette conversations", energising teaching and engrossing research are interspersed with some dark stories of betrayal, of careless disregard, of overwork and the encroaching demands of the 'greedy organisation' (Coser, 1974).

> *So where are you now*
> *With all those illusions*
> *Fallen dreams and charity*
> *If faith restores you*
> *And truth delivers*
> *Then don't tell me that I'm standing*
> *When I'm on my knees*

Two years on I got a promotion to Principal Lecturer and with it a significant administrative role that brought me into increasing contact with other parts of the organisation and the broader administrative structures. My workload grew, along with the tensions and contradictions associated with trying to do something different in an organization whose systems are designed to ensure procedural fairness and to limit exceptions. The passion and the playfulness in my journal entries begin to give way to snippets and bullet pointed lists prefaced by phrases such as "I'm too exhausted to write much now but wanted to catch it before I forget …."

So when six months later over a coffee Caroline and I began the conversation that this paper emerged from, the question are we "practicing what we teach?", really struck a chord that has continued to reverberate ever since.

Seven in the morn' step on the floor
Walk into the kitchen and you open the door
There ain't much left in the bottle of juice
Because the seeds that you planted never reproduced
Computer still runnin'
But your mind has crashed
Because the plans that you made never came to pass
(from Michael Franti & Spearhead's 'Everyone Deserves Music')

As our fieldwork and the findings emerging from it begin to take shape, I find myself struggling to stay with the plotline and any sense of my academic self. This coincides with a period of significant restructuring in the business school in which I work, not to mention across the higher education sector as a whole as it readies and responds to a reduction in Government funding and student numbers. I am simultaneously empathetic with and irritated by the themes that are emerging, for example: the RAE is almost universally condemned as a distortion and a narrowing of what it means to research – and one that we comply with and feel powerless to resist; many of our participants note the importance of, and their desire to provide, a stimulating teaching experience yet find themselves squeezing it into the margins – either getting by on a wing and a prayer or hiding the time spent on preparing their materials from colleagues in case they are seen to be neglecting their research. And looming large over it all

the roar of a lion in the face of an encroaching managerialism, coupled with the meekness of a lamb when it comes to acting. I hear my grandmother's voice whispering in my ear "don't worry about him, he's all mouth and trousers".

Phrases like "with my consultant's hat on" make more frequent appearances in both my journal and my conversation - perhaps as the process of (not) 'becoming' or achieving an aspirational identity (Thornburrow and Brown, 2009) is an increasing struggle, I am drawn back towards a 'resilient fiction' in which I am more practiced (Ybema et al, 2009).

The ambivalence of the word "academic" is a growing preoccupation …..

That's me in the corner
That's me in the spotlight
Losing my religion
Trying to keep up with you
And I don't know if I can do it
Oh no, I've said too much
I haven't said enough
(from REM's 'Losing My Religion')

Caroline's Interview

As part of our research, we used the same semi-structured questioning route to interview each other, as with our other participants. We felt that this might give us some insight into the researched, as well as the researcher position in relation to our study. We also found it a useful opportunity to say all the things we found ourselves wanting to say in our role as insider researchers, but which the orthodox research approach discouraged us from doing. I (Caroline) found this quite cathartic, as I am a person who doesn't always know what I think until I say or write it. Now reading what I said helps me to view it from a different position, although I also read it back and experience the same feelings as when I read anything I have written – a feeling of being a stranger; did I say that, I don't remember. How did I choose my words? – would I choose the same words now?- if not is it all just random? Reflecting on reflections does indeed constitute some 'agony' (Harding et al, 2010)

The interview was a timely reminder that whilst I talk about 'falling into' lecturing and the academic life I am really passionate about it and although I initially dreaded the idea of teaching I've experienced it" as really enjoyable and really interesting." I suppose that such notions were disrupted by those who did not share my passion, for some it was described as 'a necessary evil' (male professor) a response that saddened me, and forced me to view those colleagues as in some ways similar to me, but in other ways very different. Although the 'art' and practice of teaching after 5 years as a researcher has been a pleasant discovery, it has come with a price tag – I perceive both teaching and research as intertwined in my notions of what it means to perform as an academic, but all the pressure and rewards are only attached to meeting the criteria for being 'RAE-able', which is not perhaps the same as being excellent at research:

> What's happened is scholarly activity has become divorced from furthering understanding I think; of doing something that universities were famous for, which was being quite different, you know, stepping-out, being bold, being innovative, being original, finding things out that no-one has ever found out before, if you like. and I think that's reduced. For some it may even have stopped because people are scared they won't get published and they perceive that journals only want to publish safe sort-of incremental pieces of research, which very few people read. "

I listen to and read myself describing the hollowness of these thoughts – indeed it ironically provokes the question of whether such thoughts would ever get published? Does writing an autoethnography attract star rated journals? I very much doubt it! I   also wonder how much of my thought is original/ how much of this have other people said to me in my 'other' role as researcher– I can no longer retrieve my thoughts before we embarked on the research – have I been unconsciously colonised by others' narratives? As both researcher and researched, object and subject, the endless reflections feel as though I am in a hall of mirrors at the fairground – where does it end and where did it start? Others feelings on the role of an academic are diverse, eclectic, but definitely are 'hard work' (Brannan et al, 2007) because they disrupt and challenge my 'idealised' and perhaps naively aspirational (Thornburrow and Brown, 2009) view of academia.

In a part of the interview I talked metaphorically about straddling Tower Bridge as it starts to open. I outline three groups of academics in my post-1992 business school: the first group are ambitious and typically 'passing through', getting some teaching and a couple of publications before moving on; the second are "not dominated by what makes a successful academic ….. less concerned with marching to the RAE tune"; and then:

> I suppose, maybe, you've got a third group which I think I'd put myself in , who really are a bit bewildered and probably might want to have a foot in each of those camps but I suppose if you thought about the analogy of standing on … Tower Bridge, I 'd say this is what I feel like now standing on that bridge as it starts to open and getting to a point of it opening where you realise that you can't do both, , that you're going to have to go one way or the other.

> So I think for those people who are on one side of the bridge, the instrumental, publications side, it's very, very clear. I think for those people on the other side who are maybe later in their careers or they just love teaching or whatever, again it's very clear. I think it's for those people who are standing on the opening bridge who are the most troubled and I would count myself in that group, I get frustrated in asking – why am I in that position? Why is that bridge opening for me? Why can't I do both? Why is a successful academic not rewarded on all those things?

The image of being stretched to breaking point haunts and chafes, a metaphor of paradox that helps me make sense, not only of my own situation, but also of the 'others' who I have interviewed, who were constantly positioning and 'othering' me, sometimes similar and sometimes different who I think I am – or who I want to be. My final excerpt includes a sense of hopelessness:

> it's a paradox isn't it? ...they want you to be a brilliant teacher, but they discourage that by not giving you enough time to prepare. They want you to be a brilliant researcher but they don't give you enough time to take your research hours. So, in a sense, I think they discourage everything by making it blinking hard to do. I don't think they mean to … so I suppose it attracts mediocrity in all things.

Yet, if I really think it is hopeless then how or why would I carry on as an academic? Perhaps, I may go over to the 'other side' – but which side? Perhaps, structurally the bridge may cease to open, where the different facets of the academic role could exist without disruption? Is this a fantasy that my dilemma could be resolved by more structural rather than individual shifts.

Themes from our shared conversations

Our shared conversations are an important strand in our idea development and writing of this paper. The quality of our pre-existing relationship (Stacey, 2003) has helped us to create a 'safe space' to explore the different ways we have made sense of our experience of 'insider research' and its influence on the way we have situated ourselves in the social and cultural context of the academy and our organisation, bringing a different dimension and challenge to our individual reflections.

Carol – insert something on similarities and differences

Whilst the conversations themselves have been rewarding and stimulating, the experience of making them happen has been far from easy and many of the disruptions and distractions we note in our everyday experience of working in academia have shown up in amplified form.

Stacey (2000: 343) notes that "people cluster around their similarity". However, where the quality of conversation permits them to emerge, beneath the surface, unofficial ideologies exist and through a process of 'carnival' (Bhaktin, 1986) official ideologies can be subverted. Carnival uses humour, parody, the grotesque and the sensuous to give a voice to those at the margin and to create the ambiguity and fluidity required for change to occur. When we did get together, our conversations typically began with an exploration of 'sameness' – the things we felt most confident we would agree on, such as our collective failure as academics who study organisations to practice what we teach and the unrelenting workload that is imposed upon us and that we impose upon ourselves in the pursuit of academic excellence, not to mention swapping of the highlights of our fieldwork since we last met. We would explore each others metaphors and see what different sense we could make of them and after the similarities came any specific challenges we were each facing, with the data or making sense of our response to it. Only then would we get to our differences and what really mattered to us, to get beneath the 'surface harmony' to disrupt and restory our narrative themes.

By paying attention to the informal in organizational life we were able to challenge both our own dominant discourses and to resituate ourselves in relationship to the organizational and cultural context.

Discussion: Academic introspections or introspecting academics

The title of this paper aims to capture something of the ambiguity we felt on embarking on this autoethnographic account: was our exploration a 'purely academic' self-indulgence? Or would we find our "own *troubles* also happen to correspond to wider issues" (Blenkinsopp, 2007:255 emphasis in original) and in so doing "evokes in the reader an emotional and empathic response" (ibid)?

Our experience of writing this paper supports Boyle and Parry's (2007) contention that autoethnography encourages a form of hyper-reflexivity that can bring an additional element to organizational research and we note the contribution that engaging with the method and authoring this account has had on other publications we are working on from this research project. As with any 'deep learning' (Biggs, 1999), this hyper-reflexivity does though come at a price – through it we make a deeper and, perhaps, more compelling sense of the richness and messy complexity of our everyday experience of academic life that challenges us to reframe and re-story the quality of our own participation and the contribution we make to conversational themes (Stacey, 2000). However, it is extraordinarily hard work (Brannan et al, 2007) and like other forms of reflexivity there are times when we feel exposed and vulnerable.

By being native the stories that others share with us constantly scratch and itch at our own insecurities, and the choices we make, which in turn shape and reshape our own narratives, in a constant spiral of checking and rechecking who we are and what we do. If identity really is a 'matter of claims, not character' (Ybema, 2009:306) then offering academics a chance to construct their own narratives enables them a certain freedom in authoring who they are. However, as a native, their liberty perhaps encroaches on our own – because in authoring themselves they select out, edit, and airbrush their blemishes in order to focus on 'presentation rather than self' (Ybema, 2009:3060). Well presented selves (especially so-called 'successful' selves) can be intimidating as the doubts and insecurities are hidden away in a private place, purposefully obscured from vision.

Perhaps this has contributed too to the anger we have sometimes felt towards the academic 'other', for whilst individual interviews and interactions have typically been characterised by the warm bath of empathetic dialogue, the overall experience of researching our own profession has more often felt like a cold shower of passivity and inaction. Our enquiry was sparked by the observation that "the cobblers children go barefoot and the doctors' wives die young" (anon) that encouraged us to reflect on whether as academics in a business school we practice what we teach.

Trying to make sense of this tension has led us to explore the ambiguity inherent in the word 'academic' itself. For example, whilst the Oxford Reference Dictionary entry for 'academic' as a noun reads " a teacher or scholar in a university or institute of higher education" one of the entries for academic as an adjective is "abstract; theoretical; not of practical relevance". The cherished academic as a person of ideas, of passion and of intellect; the othered academic as an irrelevance, not of the real world, talking back to him/herself.

As we situate ourselves within our organizational context, we observe an irony: the key measure our increasingly managerial (real world) universities use to establish our 'success' as academics – the RAE/REF with its focus on publishing in the 'right' academic journals – encourages us to talk back to ourselves with increasing ferocity, perhaps to disappear up our own backsides. Whilst the more outward-looking, dissemination of those ideas to others is cast into shadow.

Perhaps then by casting our gaze inward through the hyper-reflexivity autoethnography permits, rather than 'academic introspections' our positioning as 'introspecting academics', has brought back into light, something of the cherished academic. We have begun to reframe the 'academy' as an organisation in the 'real world' and the role of 'academic' as a job that is as different and as alike as those others we study, rather than perhaps an idealised vocation. We suggest that this reframing has important implications for how we as academics pay attention to our relationships with the academy, with our organizations, with our students, and with our colleagues, an activity which should perhaps be thought of as less of a luxury and more of an essential.

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