USING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY TO ENRICH OUR UNDERSTANDING OF STRESS AS IT IS FELT AND COPED WITH.

INTRODUCTION

An emphasis on appraisal (how we personally assess the significance of an event, an encounter or a situation) distinguishes the transactional approach to stress from other approaches by focusing our attention on capturing the personal meaning of the stress experience (Dewe et al, 2010; Dewe & Trenberth, 2004; Cooper et al, 2001). This approach emphasises that stress is not solely an individual factor or solely an environmental factor, but that stress is a process involving both in a changing and adapting relationship (Lazarus, 1999; 1993; 1990). Stress defined in transactional terms, focuses research on understanding this individual/ environment relationship and on researching stress as a process (Cooper et al, 2001; Lazarus, 2000; Lazarus, 1999). The stress process involves: our assessment of the personal significance of a situation, encounter, or event (primary appraisal); our assessment of our available resources to cope with the situation (secondary appraisal) and our deployment of cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage and reduce the stress reaction to situations we appraise as significant (coping) (Dewe et al, 2010; Dewe & Trenberth, 2004; Lazarus, 2003, 1999; Dewe, 1992, 1991; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Folkman et al, 1986). It is the individual who makes sense of the situation as stressful through the recognition that the event is in some way personally significant (Lazarus, 2003, 2000, 1999) and has the potential to impact significantly on personal values, aspirations or beliefs, tax available demands and potentially threaten individual well-being (Lazarus, 1999; Folkman et al, 1986; Parker & De Cotiis, 1883). Appraisal is a function of both the individual and the environment (Aldwin, 2007; Hobfoll, 2004) and there are a number of individual and situational factors which may influence our appraisal of an event including our personal beliefs, attitudes and commitments; the timing and duration of an event (Aldwin, 2007; Lazarus, 1999; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988); and our wider cultural and social context (Aldwin, 2007; Hobfoll, 2004, 2001). 'Stress' is embedded within this wider cultural context which informs our subjective assessment of the significance of events our understanding of the world around us, our

behaviour and ideas, and our knowing what is appropriate and what is not (Aldwin, 2007; Hobfoll, 2004, 2001).

Although at a conceptual level, there is agreement that stress is a subjective and dynamic process informed by individual and situational factors, there has been much criticism that the methods used to research appraisal and coping are too simplistic and have failed to capture stress as it is experienced (Dewe et al, 2010; Aldwin, 2007; Briner et al, 2004; Dewe & Trenberth, 2004; Dewe, 2004, 2003; Cooper et al, 2001; Lazarus, 2003, 2000, 1999, 1993, 1990; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Somerfield & McCrae, 2000; O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994). In particular, traditional self-report questionnaires have been criticised as they are structured in such a way that they deconstruct the stress process into its constituent parts: the individual and the environment, resulting in 'bits' of the stress process being taken of their relational context (Aldwin, 2007; Arthur, 2004). Using the analogy of the blind men and the elephant, Arthur (2004) suggests that there is a tendency for stress research to compartmentalise but that only if we examine the whole, 'will the gestalt of the elephant appear' (Arthur, 2004, p158). This compartmentalisation has led to much stress research focusing on the extent to which a stressor is objectively present rather than if the stressor is indeed a stressor for the individual concerned and if so, why they have appraised it as such (Aldwin, 2007; Briner et al, 2004; Newton, 1995). Appraisal is the critical dimension in this process and failure to explore its significance, impacts our understanding of the subjective nature of stress (Dewe et al, 2010; Cooper et al, 2001; Lazarus, 2000, 1999; Dewe, 1992). What some may perceive as stressful, others may not and therefore situations cannot be categorised as 'stressors' independent of a person's reaction to them (Lazarus, 1990).

A further criticism of self-report questionnaires is that they capture but a static moment in time and therefore they fail to capture the dynamics of the stress process and how appraisal and coping may develop and adapt over time (Aldwin, 2007; Briner et al, 2004; Cooper et al, 2001; Lazarus, 1990). We have 'histories' and 'futures' which shape our understanding and thinking. Appraisals occur at points between these 'histories' and 'futures' and are therefore informed by what happened in the past and what we anticipate in the future (Briner et al, 2004). Self-report questionnaires cannot capture this sense of history and future (Briner et al, 2004) and therefore fail to capture the dynamics of the process and the context in which appraisal and coping take place (Lazarus, 1993, Dewe 1992) as they assume that any given stressful encounter is representative of an individual's life situation (Lazarus, 1990).

Within the workplace, the majority of stress research has been conducted using self-report questionnaires which present individuals with *a priori* lists of work characteristics and then measure the individual's interpretation of these characteristics as stressors (Briner et al, 2004; Jones & Bright, 2001; Newton, 1995). However, there may be other more salient causes of strain than the job characteristics presented on a questionnaire and traditional stressors may no longer have the same contemporary significance (Dewe et al, 2010; Briner et al, 2004). We cannot assume that stressors are 'out there' and completely external to the individual as this assumption fails to acknowledge the agency we have in 'crafting' our jobs by our own activities (Briner et al, 2004). Therefore, presenting an individual with a list of work characteristics and inferring the individual's interpretation of these characteristics as stressors, fails to capture the individual's experience of 'reality' (Briner et al, 2004).

Lazarus (2003; 2000; 1990) suggested that the most desirable research designs would capture the stress process again and again in the same person so that we could understand stressful encounters within the total context of a person's life. I therefore suggest that autoethnography may offer a valuable alternative to traditional self-report questionnaires in developing our understanding of stress as a process. Although autoethnographies vary in their emphasis on the self (auto), culture (ethnos), and the research process (graphy), they provide an effective technique for gaining a deeper insight into broader social and cultural phenomena through an analysis of the personal experiences of the self (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Autoethnography enables not only this cultural connection with self to be investigated (Chang, 2008) but the technique also provides direct access to meaningful and intimate information thus allowing a subject to be investigated in greater depth (Holt, 2003). This personal nature of investigation has led to criticism that autoethnography can be too focused on the 'auto', the self, rendering the research narcissistic and self-indulgent (Chang, 2008; Wall, 2008; Duncan; 2004; Holt, 2003; Coffey, 1999). The graphic exposure of the self , the 'digging' deeper into personal experiences, without a wider cultural or societal analysis and interpretation, results in a self-exposing story of one's life, a memoire, a journal entry, but not ethnography (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004). In order to address a research question, it is not enough simply to 'tell a story', to evoke emotion, we need to reflect on the personal experiences within the context of broader theoretical concepts. This wider cultural analysis and interpretation will extend our understanding of a particular discipline and contribute to analytical scholarship (Chang, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Analytical autoethnographers therefore suggest that various sources of data should be gathered to add richness to autoethnographic accounts and to complement the

data generated from the researcher's memory (Chang 2008; Anderson, 2006; Muncey 2005; Duncan, 2004; Holt, 2003). This counsel has been taken into consideration in the development of this autoethnography and I have been sensitive to the need to have a balance of 'auto', 'ethnos', and 'graphy' in my reflection of the personal and environmental factors that have influenced my experiences of stress in the workplace over an eight year period spent as a manager in a large general further education college.

METHOD

I structured my study in three stages. Firstly, in order to develop an understanding of my 'history' (Briner et al, 2004) and the wider cultural and societal factors that have influenced my values and beliefs (Aldwin, 2007; Hobfoll, 2004,2001), I charted my cultural membership and identities (Chang, 2008) and prepared a literature plan (Chang, 2008) to explore these wider cultural influences. Secondly, I charted a chronology of work history and life events (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004) and from this analysis, I identified five key stressful incidents. I then prepared retrospective field notes (Ellis, 2004) in the form of a personal narrative for each of these stressful events and coded them using a coding template (King, 2008; 2004). I will now discuss each of these stages in more detail.

Stage 1: Charting my cultural memberships and identities

We are made up of a parliament of selves (Mead, 1934), a multicultural web of self and others (Agar, 2006), a little bit of this and a little bit of that (Agar, 2006) and so therefore the 'present self' is made up from multiple cultural perspectives (Chang, 2008). In any situation we 'craft a self' based on our cultural labels (Agar, 2006) and the first stage in this research process was to develop a visual 'Culture-Gram' (Chang, 2008) of my key cultural memberships based on nationality, religion, and family membership. For each of these cultural memberships, I then added my own subjective identifier of self within that dimension (Chang, 2008) and reflected on my experiences of that 'self' and how membership of this cultural group had influenced my values and beliefs (Hobfoll, 2004) [Table 1]. I then summarised these experiences under four themes: Politics; Tradition; Inferiority Complex; and Familial Hierarchy. This summary was later used to develop a coding template for data analysis (King, 2008; 2004). I then performed a literature review to reinforce my findings and connect my personal experiences of my cultural experiences back to established theory (Chang, 2008; Duncan, 2004).

Table 1 - Charting my Cultural Memberships and Identities

Diversity Dimension	National Culture	Religious Culture	Family Culture
My Self Identifier	'Norn Iron' Northern Irish	NI Catholic	**'Baby' in a large traditional Irish catholic family**
Experiences of that Culture	Living with war / conflict / the Troubles / living with fear and hatred Living in a political environment – politics part of everyday life and every aspect of everyday life – politics and religion – obsessed – religious / political cues Isolated from other cultures – very introverted cultures – caught up in self Protectionist over cultural group – we are right / they are wrong Living with traditions / rituals / and visual expression in ritual (murals / marches/ etc) Living in a volatile environment – riots / bombs / shootings – never knowing when – always anticipating them – knowing when to get out quick – questions later Living with poverty – knowing you were considered the thorn in the crown Living with stigma – hated by GB & Ireland and feared by the rest of the world!	Reserved – emotional control / taboos / shame if you break the taboos – fire and brimstone Control / order / regulation / hierarchy Poverty / minority status / inferior status Ritual and traditions Protectionist – need to preserve the culture and identity Emphasis on what others think – outward expressions of holiness / perfection Critical – no mistakes – mistakes hidden	Order / hierarchy / control / I was the baby – they still call me the baby Protectionist – care what others think – look after the family – don't bring shame on the family Politics / conflict / negotiations / compromise Change – life changes and daily hassles – always a drama Never on your own - always someone there to help and support Never any freedom / clear space to be alone Traditional family – attitudes to motherhood / sex (eg stay at home mums) links with religion

Stage 2: Charting my chronology of events

Relying on memory alone can be fickle as our memory can be selective (Chang, 2008; Muncey, 2005). To 'unravel' my memory, I therefore charted the chronology of work and life events (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004) over the eight year period I spent as a manager at the college using my curriculum vitae and personal diary entries to order the events in the correct sequence. I then presented these events on a on a visual timeline (Mazzetti & Blenkinsopp, 2010) and added in other significant events including changes in line manager, changes in office location, and periods of sickness and extended absence. I also attached other textual and visual artifacts including newspaper clipping and personal photographs (Muncey, 2005). I then reflected on stressful periods I had experienced during my time at the college – events which were personally significant (Lazarus, 1999), because for me, they had the potential to impact significantly on my values, aspirations or beliefs, tax my demands and potentially threaten my well-being (Lazarus, 1999; Folkman et al, 1986). I identified five stressful encounters and these events were added to the timeline and positioned chronologically on the timeline within the context of life and work events.

Stage 3: Writing and coding my personal narratives

For each of the stressful events, I then prepared retrospective field notes in the form of a personal narrative (Ellis, 2004). I focused on why I had found the event stressful, how the event had made me feel, and how I had coped with the stressful encounter. In order to maintain the link with the cultural (Chang, 2008; Duncan, 2004), by exploring how my 'histories' (Briner et al, 2004) have informed my cultural values and beliefs (Aldwin, 2007; Hobfoll, 2004), I then applied a coding template [Table 2] to code each of the narratives. The narratives were coded and analysed using template analysis, a process of thematically organising and analysing data which enables researchers to take a structured approach to data interpretation (King, 2008; 2004).

Table 2: Initial Coding Template

1. Politics
  1.1. Conflict
    1.1.1. Negotiation
    1.1.2. Compromise
  1.2. Embedded into everyday life
    1.2.1. Able to pick up on cues
    1.2.2. Everyone knows the game
  1.3. Protectionist
    1.3.1. Look after own group
    1.3.2. Don't show weaknesses
    1.3.3. Preserve the culture of the group
    1.3.4. Don't bring shame on the group
	2. Tradition
	  2.1. Regulation and control
	    2.1.1. All know the traditions
	    2.1.2. Shame if you break with traditions
	  2.2. Public expression of traditions and ritual
	  2.3. Protectionist – need to preserve the culture and identity

3. Inferiority Complex
  3.1. Knowing you are not as 'important' as others
  3.2. Not liked by others because of identity
  3.3. Fight for better rights
	4. Family Hierarchy
	  4.1. Know your place
	  4.2. Changes happen
	  4.3. Never on your own - always someone there to help and support
	  4.4. Never any freedom / clear space to be alone

FINDINGS

My cultural memberships and identities

Three key cultural identities emerged as being significant in the development of who I perceive myself to be. It became clear at this stage that each of my key cultural groups were inextricably linked to each other. It was difficult to separate my identify as being from 'Norn Iron' (Northern Ireland) from my identity as a 'Norn Irish Catholic', from my identity of being the 'Baby' in a large traditional Irish Catholic family. Each of these cultural identities shared many similarities that have informed the key values and beliefs that underpin my 'present self' (Chang, 2008). I was born in 1966 and as such, all these identities developed in a society characterised by discrimination and violence (Muldoon, 2004), the 'Troubles' which started in 1969 and lasted until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Muldoon, 2004) and during which time over 3,700 people were killed and over 40, 000 were injured (Davidson, 2010). Although there have been differences in opinion regarding the impact of the 'Troubles' on young people in Northern Ireland ranging from early research in the 1970s which highlighted the significant impact on mental health as a result of exposure to trauma and violence, to a later view in the 1980s that there was little or no impact and that young people were coping quite well (Davidson, 2010; Gallaher, 2004). This later view has since been challenged for overstating the normality of everyday life in very abnormal circumstances (Gallagher, 2004) with factors such as migration, denial, and habituation to the conflict, being put forward as possible factors influencing the lack of reporting of the psychological impact on young people (Davidson, 2010; Gallagher, 2004). The current view is that the 'Troubles' had a significant impact on young people (Davidson, 2010) and for me, growing up in the 'Troubles' was certainly a significant temporal dimension influencing my sense of who I am, what I perceive to be stressful, and how I cope.

The 'Troubles' were not evenly distributed geographically and therefore location was an important influence on your experience of the 'Troubles' (Davidson, 2010; Muldoon, 2003; Trew, 2004). We lived in a large predominantly Protestant town on the outskirts of Belfast and this contributed to my sense of self in two major ways. Firstly we were geographically close to the 'Troubles' therefore shootings, bombings, armed and paramilitary patrols, characterised our everyday life (Muldoon, 2004). We lived opposite the main hotel (at that time) in the town which was a frequent target for bombers. We would often get that stern knock on the front door which signalled the command to evacuate our home (if they had no

time to perform a controlled explosion) or to open the windows, close the curtains, and hide out until the all clear was given (when controlled explosions could be performed). I remember as a small child peeking from behind the curtains and watching the 'robot' defuse the bomb. It was strangely sinister and strangely fascinating all at the same time. Even when not physically close to the conflict, the local 'News' which was always on in our home, brought us half hourly reports of horrors from around the province. The news was an important source of information for young children (5-8 year olds) as the televised reports of civil unrest were a constant reminder of difference and distinctiveness (Trew, 2004). Living in a predominantly Protestant town also emphasised the fact that as Catholics, we were a minority group (Muldoon & Trew, 2000) which heightened our sense of danger and awareness. We were surrounded by the visual symbols and rituals (Trew, 2004) that emphasised our difference from the dominant group; curb stones and lampposts painted red, white and blue; political flags – the union jack, the red hand of Ulster, and paramilitary flags; political murals proclaiming ownership and righteousness; and regular political marches through the streets. Furthermore, our town also garrisoned the British Army Headquarters during the 'Troubles' and security and protection were highly visible in the town. Armed patrols, physical searches, and vehicle checkpoints ruled the streets (Muldoon, 2004) and helicopters ruled the sky. This heightened sense of vulnerability resulted in my parents being overprotective and authoritarian and our family was characterised by control, particularly for me as the youngest girl in the family (Nye et al, 1970). My mother's warnings: don't go near any parked cars (they had a tendency to blow up); don't make eye contact with the soldiers (they might shoot you); don't pick anything up (it will explode), made going to school each day an event in itself and was a lot for a six year old to take in. However, this socialisation made me very sensitive to my surroundings and from an early age, I developed a strategic awareness of my wider environment which was vital in surviving the day without getting into trouble.

Although religious group membership was central to the division in Northern Ireland (Bull, 2006; Muldoon, 2004), the division was much more multidimensional based on a combination of historical, national, religious and economic factors (Muldoon, 2004). Religious denomination was embedded into all aspects of Northern Ireland society and determined where you lived, the school you went to, the sports you played, even the football teams you supported (Muldoon et al, 2007; Bull, 2006). Crucial in the transmission of this multidimensional identity was the family and in particular the parents who had a key role to

play in shaping their children's attitudes (Muldoon et al, 2007). 'In-group' 'out-group' identities were consolidated during childhood (Muldoon, 2004) and from a young age, children were thinking about their identities in very complex ways and capable of invoking the strategic use of group identity to suit their needs (Muldoon et al, 2007). Even though the more visual cues of racial identity, for example skin colour, were absent (Gallagher, 2004), through the process of 'telling', it was still possible to determine someone's group affiliation by using a series of institutionalised cues (Gallagher, 2004; Trew, 2004). These cues were learned in childhood, and by asking someone their forename or surname, which school they last attended, where they lived, which sports they played you could determine to which religious group they belonged (Trew, 2004; Gallagher, 2004). Telling was used not only to determine religious denomination but also to protect you from breaking the unwritten grammar rules of not entering into conversation on contentious topics such as religion and politics with those from the other denomination (Gallagher, 2004). Growing up in a Protestant town, these cues were of particular importance to minimise unnecessary conflict and at times, also for my everyday safety and survival. This strategic reading and using of cues was also important for me at home. Growing up in a large family with a large extended family, there was always some significant event to deal with and as a child I learned very quickly to read the mood of my parents and siblings and to know when they needed support, humour, or leaving well alone.

Even though we lived in a Protestant town, we went to Catholic schools characterised by staff and student religious homogeneity (Trew, 2004). Schools generally tried to be non political and act as 'safe havens' away from the conflict of everyday life (Gallagher, 2004). And for me, in many ways, school, especially in my teens, was my refuge, a place where every day I learned new and interesting things. I went to a Grammar school in Belfast and although the 'Troubles' were never openly discussed in school (Gallagher, 2004), they regularly impacted the running of the school. Our school had different start and finish times from the local Protestant school in order to prevent fights between the schools and often during times of racial tension we were advised not to wear uniform. I remember one time when racial tensions were so bitter we had to take an alternative route to school and go in 'civvies'. I took a different bus route to school, a route through the 'safer' areas and for the whole journey I had that terrible feeling down deep in my gut – fear. Once inside the school gates, however, we were safe. We could discuss style and fashion without actually mentioning the reason why we were all wearing our ordinary clothes that day. In many ways, school enabled us to

engage in a strategy of avoidance to get away from the conflict going on in our wider society (Gallagher, 2004). For me, school also provided escapism from my family. Growing up in a large family there was rarely any peace and as the 'Baby' in a family of six children, I had to 'obey' not only my parents, but my older brothers and sisters as well (Baskett, 1984). My 'Baby' status resulted in well-developed social skills as I frequently had to alternate between communicating with my siblings as peers and communicating with them as adults. (Baskett, 1984). There was a strict chain of command in place and I was at the bottom. I quickly realised that to get listened to or noticed, I had to stand up for myself and assert my rights but that there was no point in doing this with lower members of the hierarchy. I would often successfully circumvent the hierarchy and go straight to the top, to my parents to assert my rights. However sometimes this was not an option especially during times of significant sadness for my parents, and it was at these times in particular, that education became my solace. Our family rules and regulations were also strongly influenced by the Catholic Church teachings and religious values and rituals were an important part of our daily lives (Greenberg, 1998). Embedded in these teachings was the desire to be 'perfect', not to show weakness, and to not bring any shame on the family or on our wider religious group.

My stressful work events

After preparing a visual timeline and chronology of work events, I identified five stressful encounters during my time at the college. For each of these events, I prepared a retrospective narrative which I then coded using a coding template. After coding a sample of narratives using the initial template [Figure 2], I included two additional lower level codes (solace in study, and family tradition) and I then applied this amended template [Table 3] to code all five narratives.

Table 3: Amended Coding Template

1. **Politics**	2. **Tradition**
1.1. Conflict 1.1.1. Negotiation 1.1.2. Compromise 1.2. Embedded into everyday life 1.2.1. Able to pick up on cues 1.2.2. Everyone knows the game 1.3. Protectionist 1.3.1. Look after own group 1.3.2. Don't show weaknesses 1.3.3. Preserve the culture of the group 1.3.4. Don't bring shame on the group	2.1. Regulation and control 2.1.1. All know the traditions 2.1.2. Shame if you break with traditions 2.2. Public expression of traditions and ritual 2.3. Protectionist – need to preserve the culture and identity
3. **Inferiority Complex**	4. **Family Hierarchy**
3.1. Knowing you are not as 'important' as others 3.2. Not liked by others because of identity 3.3. Fight for better rights	4.1. Know your place 4.2. Changes happen 4.3. Never on your own - always someone there to help and support 4.4. Never any freedom / clear space to be alone 4.5. Solace in study 4.6. Family tradition

As I added the stressful events to the timeline, I was confronted with an ethical dilemma as to how to present my findings. I was presenting an autoethnography and therefore I was publically revealing my identity however, it soon became very clear that by charting my story, I was also charting the story of others. Others whose story I did not own and therefore whose identity I needed to protect (Chang, 2008: Wall, 2008).   Even if I had used pseudonyms, the fact that I was presenting a chronology, would have exposed the identity of those connected to my story if not to a broader audience, at least to my smaller circle of acquaintances (Chang, 2008). I summarised the stressors and coping strategies by stressful incident [Table 4] and selected two events which were notable because of the range of stressors and also coping strategies. I therefore decided to present these two events in more detail. Some of the details, for example names, roles, and dates, cannot be shared, because they are so intertwined with the identity of others who have not entered into meaningful consent to be represented in my story (Wall, 2008) and who would perhaps tell a different story to mine.

Table 4: Summary of Stressful Events

Stressful Event:				
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Approximate Duration of Event:				
6 months	**4 months**	**3 months**	**6 months**	**3 months**
Stressors Identified:				
1.2 / 2.1 / 4.1 / 4.3	4.1 / 4.3 / 4.6	1.1 / 4.1 / 4.4	1.1 / 1.3 / 2.1 / 4.1 / 4.4 / 4.5 / 4.6	4.1 / 4.6
Summary of Stressors Experienced:				
Lack of knowledge of the new culture, environment and family I had joined. Not being able to pick up the political and family cues.	Preparing to leave my new 'family' to go on extended maternity leave. Having to turn down an offer of promotion because of a conflict in family and work values.	Returning to work to a new family where there was significant conflict until matters were resolved.	Taking on a new role and experiencing conflict with my line-manager. Family and work conflict. Giving up study.	Conflict in family and work values. Leaving my college 'family'
Coping Strategies Used:				
1.3 / 3.3 / 4.3 / 4.5	4.5	1.2 / 1.3 / 3.3	1.3 / 2.2 / 2.3 / 3.3 / 4.3	1.3 / 3.3
Summary of Coping Strategies:				
Protecting myself by not showing my weaknesses and fighting back. Striking up an appropriate alliance / friendship. Study.	Embarking on a new study programme.	Using my strategic alliances to fight for a better outcome.	Protecting myself by not showing any weakness and fighting back. Breaking with tradition to protect myself. Seeking the support of a close colleague.	Protecting myself and my values by fighting for something better.

Stressful event number 1

This event relates to my first six months at the college during which time I struggled with my lack of knowledge and understanding of the college culture. This was not my first management position or my first time performing this particular management role. In many ways, I had performed a much more complex role with my previous organisation, but in the context of a very overt culture with few rules and regulations, with a clear chain of command, and with few sanctions for the violation of the rules. The culture in a further education college was much more complex and political with lots of explicit and implicit rules and protocols that had to be followed, and in the critical culture, there was great shame when you broke with these protocols (Mazzetti, 2009). On joining this new culture, I felt very exposed as it seemed that everyone else knew the rules except for me. I wrote in my narrative, '*I felt very vulnerable. The place seemed so complex. How would I ever learn the rules?*' Interestingly as I became accustomed to the culture I realised that there were many who did not know the rules and the politics and many others naively unaware that such rules and politics even existed. Linked to my lack of knowledge as to how the culture worked, I had no concept of my new family's hierarchy. Although there was a formal organisational structure, this one dimensional chart did not tell the story of who really had control and power in the college. Who should I run to when I needed things sorting out? Who should I run to if I needed support? Who should I strike up alliances with? Who should be ignored? I wrote in my narrative, '*I didn't know how this strange and alien family worked.*' This made coping complicated and I comment in my narrative that '*coping was difficult during this period as I felt very alone and isolated.*' A recurring theme in my coping style is the need to protect myself by not showing any weaknesses and fighting back. However, as I comment in my narrative, '*I hadn't learned to cope in a college acceptable manner. I didn't know the cues, the rules, the protocols*', and therefore my behaviour was perceived by others as aggressive and in some cases inappropriate. I decided to embark on a vocationally relevant Masters degree to improve my understanding and knowledge of my role. Study provided a place of solace, as it had done since my childhood. Fortunately I also developed a relationship with one of the directors who '*took me under her wing*'. She became my friend, confidant, and mentor over the next few years at the college. Just as my Mother had socialised me to survive the 'Troubles', my colleague was a vital support in my initiation into the college political culture and was also high enough up the hierarchy to make things happen.

Stressful event number 4

I had been at the college for six years at this point and was well-embedded into the life and culture of a further education college. This event describes a difficult transition to and from a more senior position that I had been asked to perform initially on a temporary basis with the expectation that I would subsequently apply for the post on a permanent basis. This event needs to be set in the context of previous decisions I had made regarding applying for a more senior position. I had been asked twice before to apply for promotion, and both times I had declined, once because I was preparing to go on maternity-leave and the second time because the role was outside of my area of interest. In this career obsessed culture (Mazzetti, 2009), I felt somewhat pressurised to go with this offer as not to do so, was publically admitting that I was not ambitious and that I did not want to progress my career at the college. At the same time however, I felt flattered, I wrote in my narrative '*This showed that they respected and valued me'*. Interestingly I had adapted and 'college' culture had now become an additional and significant influence on my appraisal of events and the options available to me to cope with these events.

My line manager during my temporary promotion was very authoritarian and 'ruled' me in a very controlling and patronising manner, in many ways I felt like the 'Baby' again but with all of the negative memories I had of that identity and none of the positive. This led to me constantly asserting my rightful (in my opinion) higher position in this family hierarchy and conflict increasingly characterised our day-to-day working relationship. Much research has highlighted the stressful impact of poor working relationships with line managers (Dewe et al, 2010; Cooper et al, 2001) and I note in my narrative ' *I spent the unhappiest 6 months of my life in this job'*. The job was demanding and the hours were long and about three months into the role, I had to make the difficult decision to suspend the Open University programme I had been studying since I had gone on maternity leave. I had been achieving distinction grades so far and to give up, as I noted in my narrative, '*gutted me'*. The long hours were also starting to cause conflict at home. Coming from a traditional Irish Catholic family with tradition attitudes to women, marriage, and children (Greenberg, 1998), I was breaking with the family tradition, and for the first time I felt torn between being a good mother and pursuing my career. It was during this period that I started to lose 'my faith', (Blenkinsopp, 2007) with the college. Working at this level I had fewer confidants as I did not want to publically highlight that I had a problem to my peers or my line manager. On the advice of a close colleague, I arranged a meeting with the Director of Personnel to seek some advice. The

advice offered was procedurally accurate and sound, but I could not help thinking rather naive given the culture that we worked in. I decided to '*keep my head down*' and keep going to the end of the temporary period but that I would not apply for the job on a permanent basis. I did not discuss this decision with my line manager or anyone else and I knew this would be breaking with college tradition and would be a great insult to my senior managers, and it was. Nevertheless, this seemed the only coping strategy left for me as fighting back was just causing more conflict. In hindsight this was a mal chosen coping strategy as a few weeks later, a senior post in my area of expertise was advertised which I applied for and did not get. In an organisational culture in which the organisation always comes first (Mazzetti, 2009), I had broken with tradition and very publically proclaimed that I was going to put myself and my family first, and this was not acceptable.

Appraisal and coping - adaptation and development

The coding summary [Table 4] highlighted some interesting patterns of appraisal influencing subsequent appraisal, adaptation of coping strategies depending on context, and examples of coping influencing future appraisal.

Appraisal: Initially my lack of knowledge of the college environment and family hierarchy was a major stressor when I joined the college (Event 1) as I adapted to the college environment and became fully embedded in the college culture, politics and family, however, this full emersion into the culture and family subsequently influenced my appraisal of events as I prepared to leave the college for an extended maternity leave. The stressor was now my anticipation of 'dropping out of' my college family. Also at this point my personal circumstances changed, I was now preparing to have a baby, my own family, and my traditional Catholic upbringing was starting to influence my values and beliefs about mothers and children. These feelings of conflict influenced my decision at this point to turn down an offer of promotion. This decision however, then significantly influenced my appraisal of events on my return from maternity leave as I returned as deputy to the role I had turned down. My feelings of conflict between my family and career values increasingly influenced my appraisal of events as I made transitions to a variety of demanding roles in the college until eventually I had to make the decision to leave to try and establish some balance between the two roles.

Coping: Although there is some consistency in the coping strategies used (in particular 'protectionism' and 'fighting for better rights') how these strategies were applied and their

effectiveness varied and adapted over stressful episodes. My lack of political knowledge when joining the college, significantly restricted the coping options available to me. I was unable to 'run' to the head of the family to sort things out for me, and therefore my fighting for better rights to protect myself was perceived as inappropriate because I was fighting with the wrong people. Once I had established the hierarchy I was able to take my fight to the right people who had the power and authority to take action. For example, I was able to cope with the conflict and political problems I encountered when returning from maternity-leave as I had the coping resources available to effectively deal with the problem.

Coping influencing future appraisal: Similarly my decision to publicly break with college tradition in order to cope with my decision not to permanently apply for the more senior position I had been performing (Event 4) directly influenced the stress experienced when I was not appointed to the subsequent senior post for which I had applied. This 'loss of faith' with the college subsequently influenced my future appraisal of events and trapped me in a cycle of mal chosen coping until I finally made the decision to leave the college two years later.

DISCUSSION

This paper set out to explore if autoethnography is a suitable research method to enhance our understanding of workplace stress appraisal and coping. This autoethnographic process highlighted a number benefits in adopting the technique, and also the inadequacies of the more commonly used self-report questionnaires

Chronology and sequence and the crafting of a story

As I charted my chronology of work and personal events, using factual data (CV and Diary entries) I identified a sequencing 'error' in my interpretation of events. I had always attributed my 'loss of faith' (Blenkinsopp, 2007) with the college with a particularly stressful period in my personal life following the death of my Mother however, this 'loss of faith' had actually occurred about a year earlier during a transition to a more senior position (Event 4). Why therefore had I convinced myself that it had been events in my personal life that had led to this unhappy period at work? Looking back, it became apparent that the transition had presented me with a challenge in that it had raised the issue of discontinuity (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005). Up until that point my CV had shown a natural progression and had made career 'sense'. This transition disturbed this 'sense' as it highlighted the fact that I had worked at a more senior level and then had '*gone back down the ladder*' again. I found it particularly difficult to craft a successful story for this transition because to do so, meant that I had to tell the truth which was that my work and family values had come into conflict. I was capable of doing the job but with a small child, the timing was wrong. To emphasise my sensitivity to this conflict in values further, a few weeks after I had made the decision not to stay in the senior post permanently, a similar post was advertised which I applied for but did not get. For my managers, the transition had raised doubts as to my dependability and commitment to do the job, but rather than admit that and bar myself from going for any future promotions, I crafted a different story, a different sequence of events, and in the process I had convinced myself that this revised sequence of events was the truth (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005). A self-completion questionnaire cannot capture this chronology and sequence, the 'histories' and 'futures' (Briner et al, 2004) of my career choices that had influenced this crafted story.

Duration of stressful events

For both of the stressful events presented, I was describing my feelings and experiences events over a six month period, but is important to clarify that not every day during this time

was stressful and on certain days, I may have been more sensitive to certain stressors. For example on a Wednesday, our management meeting day, I may have been more sensitive to my lack of ability to 'tell' the cultural cues in my attempts to interpret the glances and gestures between allies across the table. A self-completion questionnaire cannot capture this 'whole' of the situation only temporal 'bits' in the process (Arthur, 2004). Furthermore, given my heightened sense of vulnerability at this time, would I have considered myself stressed or would I have disconnected the private self from my public presentation (Aldwin, 2007) because to admit that I was stressed would have been an admission that there was something wrong and an admission of weaknesses in my ability to cope with it. As time progressed I also became increasingly more normalised to the environment, and so, similar to my habituation to not passing any parked cars, or picking up any strange objects, 'objective' stressors became the routine and as such, I no longer considered them stressful (Aldwin, 2007).

Cultural influences

Self-report questionnaires may capture the 'tip of the iceberg' but they fail to capture the deeper meaning, the culturally shared norms, which have influenced our appraisal process (Hobfoll, 2004). For me, this process highlighted the importance of wider cultural and societal values, including nationality and family influences on the stress appraisal and coping process (Aldwin, 2007). But does this mean that every Northern Irish Catholic would experience the same stressors as me and cope with them in the same way? Interestingly, many studies into national cultural differences in stress appraisal and coping have used self-report questionnaires with *a priori* lists of stressors based on established cross cultural difference models therefore making the assumption that everyone in a given culture will experience their culture in the same way and will experience the same stressors. But this is a very monolithic view of culture and does not account for individual difference (Aldwin, 2007; Lazarus, 1999). Culture is never singular but always plural (Agar, 2006) and so within any given culture, there will be a number of mazeways and also different paths within the maze for different subgroups, thus stressors and coping strategies will be not be uniform across the culture, but influenced by the path an individual has taken and their position in the mazeway (Aldwin, 2007; Wallace, 1966). For me, a number of temporal and geographical factors influenced my values and beliefs: growing up during the 'Troubles'; living in an area geographically close to the 'Troubles'; living in an area where we were a minority group; and being surrounded by visual reminders of our minority status and our difference from the

dominant group. In addition, my family was an important influence: being brought up with traditional values particularly in relation to women and children; being the youngest; and being part of a large immediate and extended family. Finally, there are also the individual choices I have made and these choices have determined the 'paths' I have taken, the experiences I have had, and my encounters with new cultures that now form part of my identity.

Adaptation and change

Appraisal and coping are adaptive and change over time and context with coping influencing subsequent appraisals and stress intensity (Lazarus, 1993) and analysis of the coding templates, highlighted a number of examples of appraisal and coping development. Self-report questionnaires cannot 'tap' this process of change in strategies over time (Aldwin, 2007) and therefore fail to capture the 'histories' and 'futures' that have informed appraisal and coping (Briner el al, 2004). My appraisal of events and available coping options also changed as I adapted to the college environment and became more influenced by the college culture. Further education now became enmeshed with my religious, national and family identities and influenced my values and beliefs, my knowing what was acceptable and not (Hobfoll, 2004).   This cultural context cannot be captured in a self-report questionnaire and so therefore the impact of organisational power structures and their influence and constraint over how workers think and act, is often ignored (Wainwright and Calnan, 2002; Jones and Bright, 2001; Newton, 1995). Organisational culture defines what is normal and abnormal, what we are allowed to do and what we are not allowed to do (Schbracq et al, 2001) and cultural themes may therefore shape our appraisal of potential stressors and the coping options we have available to deal with them (Wainwright and Calnan, 2002).

CONCLUSION

I embarked on this research project to explore if autoethnography could be adopted as an appropriate alternative to traditional self-report questionnaires in the study of workplace stress appraisal and coping. I suggest that autoethnography offers a number of benefits in our exploration of the meaning and context of stress. Autoethnography provides an opportunity to explore the 'depth' of the cultural and individual factors that influence our appraisal of stressors and our available coping options (Aldwin, 2007; Hobfoll, 2004; Lazarus, 1999) through direct access to meaningful and intimate personal information (Holt, 2008). This study has enabled me to identify patterns and developments in appraisal and coping and to

better understand how appraisal and coping can change and adapt according to both individual and environmental contexts. Stress is a complex process, a complexity which cannot be adequately captured or understood using 'pencil-and-paper' (Aldwin, 2007) techniques. To contribute to and to develop our understanding of this complex process, we therefore need to take up the gauntlet and test new and innovative alternative methods.

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