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The 1st International Conference on Family Business and Entrepreneurship

DOING RESEARCH AND RUNNING A BUSINESS IS IT JUST TOO MUCH?

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ABSTRACT:

It can be great fun to do research, but it is also exhausting at times. Therefore, I seek to explore in this paper the benefits and downsides of engaging in auto-ethnography as an entrepreneur. Besides looking at the contribution to knowledge that auto-ethnography could make I will also investigate what researchers might learn for their managerial practice.
I run my own construction business for almost 18 years now, and I am on a PhD-program since 2012. Using examples of my research practice, I will try to highlight some of the advantages for me of doing auto-ethnography.
Since the auto-ethnographer studies his or her own environment from a distinct perspective – the view from inside – is possible. Through this research is possible to access thoughts and feelings first hand. This direct access offers a different perspective than other research methods (e.g.; ethnography or interview research) can provide. For the researcher, auto-ethnography offers a unique learning opportunity. Auto-ethnographers inevitably learn from and perhaps more importantly for their own practice.
However, this comes at the price of an immense workload. I face multiple demands from running a company, doing research, and being a parent. The question I seek to investigate here is whether the learning for the individual is worth the effort or if it is just too much to be both researcher and entrepreneur.
In doing so, I try to establish if, for entrepreneurs who want to do research, auto-ethnography is a suitable research method and what commitment and return on this commitment one can expect.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurship, construction industry, auto-ethnography, real world research, practitioner research*

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1. Introduction

One Thursday morning in early 2012

"This morning, I took the Berlin metro to the coaching session. It was a half past eight, and I was on the line U1 direction Warschauer Straße. My eyes scanned the waggon as I always do. What kind of people are around, what do the advertisements promote? One of these adverts grabbed my gaze 'Part-Time Doctorate in Business Administration'. Wait a minute, I thought, wasn't my now retired professor back in 1998 or so suggesting to me to study for a PhD? I declined back then. Is this your second chance? I took a picture with my phone."

In some way, this morning on the metro was the beginning of my auto-ethnographic doctoral research journey which is now slowly drawing to a close. In this paper, I seek to explore two issues. On the one hand, I want to look whether and, if, how my business benefited from the research. On the other hand, I am going to highlight some difficulties I faced while doing research, how I perceived these difficulties and how I sought to address them. But for a start, I have to provide some background so that you, the reader, can position my research. I will introduce the context in which I research and then introduce briefly auto-ethnography as it is the research approach I use.

In 1999, my father and I founded the company which bears now my name. From the company, he worked for before, and which went into liquidation we hired a couple of staff members and started a new business. From the very beginning up until now, we – as company – build structures of buildings from brickwork and concrete. Now almost 18 years later, my company employs some 40 members of staff most of them bricklayers and my father works part-time in my company.

When I started the business, I was still at university studying for my second engineering degree. I did jump – we tend to say – into the cold waters of business life. After a while, I had to realise that being in business is not always easy. I had to cope with different demands but, in particular, form relationships with clients, business partners, and staff members. I talked a lot about these issues with a close friend, who himself is a social worker. At some point, he suggested that I should think about taking coaching sessions. Hence, I sought professional advice from a coach after being some five years in business. I began to see the coach once in a month for an hour. He did help me to turn a reflective eye on myself. We talked about my struggles with clients, business partners and staff, but very often we talked about the demands I faced personally from running a business. We circled the question of how much workload could I bear, which tasks should I delegate, and how could I organise myself more effectively.

Then in early 2012, I saw this advertisement for the doctoral program of my university on the Berlin metro. It is this time and the state I was in back then which I would take as a point of departure for this paper. I would like to take you with me on the journey I made from being a businessman in the German construction industry to the point where I am now – writing up my PhD thesis. I would like to demonstrate some of the benefits and downsides for an entrepreneur in embarking on a research program. Although everybody considering embarking on doctoral programme whilst running their business must understand that it will require compromises, I, for now, would do it again.

At the time, I enrolled in the research program; my research interests were very much practice focussed. I outlined one of my research objectives as following:

"[…] most of the results of the scientific research […] could be applied to practice and tested"

Now, I tend to shrug when I read this. In other sections, the proposal contained words like 'prove', 'correlation', 'system', or 'correlation' reading them now as a qualitative researcher make me itch and raise my eyebrows. But that is the way I thought research would work. I embarked on this program, believing that I would come up with something that I would be able to apply straight away in practice. It also focussed of 'long-term' effects, 'lasting relationships'.

At that time, I was very much focussed on solutions. That had to do with my education and occupation. I am a trained carpenter, civil and industrial engineer. Central to all professions is the quest to solve problems not to create problems. This attitude of solving problems is very widespread within my peers in the construction industry. It is to some extent the basic assumption of doing business. A client approaches us with some idea how to change their house, and we start searching for a way to make it happen.

This idea of problem-solving was, therefore, reflected in my research objectives. I was bothered by the question of what measures does it need to build long lasting and cooperative relationships with business partners. And I must admit that by now I am still bothered by this question. I know now – and perhaps suspected back then – that there is no simple answer to that question.

Of course, the straightforward problem-solving approach does have its place in my life. I am a civil engineer; defining whether or not a concrete beam is sufficiently reinforced by steel is a positivist matter to be answered by a decisive ‘yes’ or ‘’no’. However, when it comes to human interaction – managing a construction business surely falls into this category – I adopt a different position. The way I make sense of the world around me is socially formed by interactions with others and is therefore fundamentally different from the way others make sense of their world (Lévinas, 1961). Hence, I understand my environment only in a subjective way, and there is no way to avoid that. After reading some literature and especially with the background of some years of coaching, I became more and more convinced that social reality is not ‘out there’ to be uncovered but constructed by oneself and the people around one.

2. Auto-Ethnography

Within this process of moving away from positivist thinking, when a senior lecturer suggested to me adopting auto-ethnography – honestly, I had no clue what it meant. Auto-ethnography is ethnography – cultural observation – in one’s own backyard (Wolcott, 1999), researching one’s ‘own people’ (Hayano, 1979, p. 99). When running a business and having a family, as in my case, auto-ethnography becomes one of few options one has to in order to do research. Because I do not have the opportunity to go anywhere, I do not have the time left to do so; I have to research at home (Anderson, 2006). I pursued opportunistic research – I investigated my own environment (Riemer, 1977). I observe my environment and myself acting in it. I write field-notes about my daily business, what I feel, what I think, what I experience. I sit down in the evenings and write about what happened that day. It begins almost as simple writing a dairy. But while writing, I start to reflect and interpret the experiences I made. I began to write about a broad range of experience but then following Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) narrowed my focus.
To researchers, it is essential to narrow down the scope of their work otherwise it becomes just too much to deal with. As a researcher, I may answer one or two particular questions with a research paper. The problem of scope is not unfamiliar for the practitioner. I cannot tackle all problems and issues in my company at the same time. If I would try, I would not even address one problem appropriately. After starting too many projects in my business, I ended up struggling to finish even one of them. However, when I address one issue in my company I must have the wider picture of my corporate environment in mind – everything in my business environment is contingent.
When I write for research purposes, I do try to limit these contingencies. I seek to concentrate on a particular problem and accept the limitations of what I am claiming to have discovered. This is well-established practice in research. However, although this approach is scientifically sound , the narrow limitation attached to research findings render them almost inapplicable to practice. Bartunek (2007, p. 1226) laments that implications for practice – the very advice for practitioners – are ‘typically suggested in a decontextualized, distant way.’ To her, research papers do seldom offer ‘rationales for intended actions.’ (2007, p. 1226) But when I sit down in the evenings I seek exactly for this advice. I want to understand what was going on that day and what I could or should do the next day.
That is the difference in auto-ethnography. Since I am dealing with my personal issues; they are naturally not decontextualized nor distanced. I can apply the understandings I develop almost directly to my managerial practice. I can test them right away. Sometimes, it works very much straightforward like the following example shows:

Summer 2014

It’s been one of these typical days. In the morning, I did some work on the desk, had lunch, went to a meeting with a client in the afternoon, later back to the office. Now, I am at home, trying to write some field-notes about the conversation with the client.
I noted that we had a disagreement and tried to settle it, but we couldn’t find a solution this afternoon, which I found frustrating. At some point, I sought to record what the client’s point during our conversation was, but I could not remember. I realised that I had throughout the conversation sought to convey my point of view but paid little or no attention to what he had to say. Apart from saying that he favoured another solution than I did I was unable to say what his reasons, what the background was why he wanted to do things differently.
Two weeks later, we met again. This time, I said to myself ‘shut up and listen!’ Let him talk; I asked some questions to keep him talking and explaining. Of course, I knew what I wanted and what I did not. But slowly I could see it fit into what he had in mind. After like 20 to 30 minutes of conversation – well, him conveying his message – I felt ready to propose something that reconciled our interests. He almost immediately accepted my offer.

This field-note demonstrates not so much what ethnography and auto-ethnography, in particular, provides for the wider research arena, but it shows how skills necessary to conduct ethnographic research may benefit the researching individual – me. I wrote about the event and learned.

At first, it offered me the insight that I did not listen to what the client had to say. That I did not listen, I only realised when I tried to record the event in the evening. I could not write down what his demands, his wishes, or his position was. Immediately after the meeting, I was not aware of this fact. Doing research somehow forced me to reflect on this event in a particular way – writing about it. “Writing fixes thought on paper. It externalizes what in some sense is internal (or intersubjective); it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world” (Van Manen, 1989, p. 237). It was the moment I externalized my thinking that I began to understand what the nature of the situation was. It was the very distance I needed to see. In coaching practice, “leaving the stage, going to the balcony, and looking at the stage” is a common metaphor. Here this balcony was my writing, my piece of writing resembled the stage, I could look at what I had been doing from a ‘distance.’

Second, the writing regime imposed some discipline on me. One does not need to embark on a PhD program to write a journal or diary; there much different uses as, for instance, Moon (2006) suggests. However, for me, it had an enormously disciplining effect. I need rather clear objectives, doing a PhD is one. Running a marathon too is a clear objective, and I easily find the motivation and the discipline to train for it, which I would not find if I would only run to get ‘fit’. Through disciplined writing, I began to learn which ‘side-effects’ writing had on my business life. All of a sudden, I had a double motivation to do so. I wrote for research purposes, but I understood my own life better, in this case, the negotiation with the client. I had an intrinsic interest to know what was going on. I wanted to solve this conflict with the client. The writing, as Ellis (2004, p. 19) put it, ‘helped me organise my life.’ The research is always directed to my life. Hence, it had relevance to my practice at least. But I believe many practitioners do encounter similar problems as I do. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that auto-ethnographic research has relevance for a wider audience of practitioners.

Writing about the event did clarify that I could not settle the conflict because I did not pay enough attentions to the client’s interests. My field-note writing did, therefore, deliver clear ‘rationales for intended actions’ (Bartunek, 2007, p. 1226) The next time we met I knew I had to listen far more carefully because I needed to understand his point. It led to the resolution of our conflict. Hence, not only did I personally benefit from researching, but first of all the company was the main beneficiary of my better understanding of the situation.

The question how could practitioners and therefore, among others, businesses benefit from research has interested others too Talking about collaborative research, Armstrong and Alsop (2010) say that this form of research may result in cultural change and a “change in the mindsets” of co-researchers. The advantage auto-ethnography offers here is grounded in the fact that the researcher and the practitioner (co-researcher in their terms) are one person. There is no need to communicate findings. Through auto-ethnography, the mindset of the manager researcher changes directly – not mediated by transfer. In my case, one aspect of this change is my turning towards an understanding of constructed realities. That is one of the most important impacts of my way of doing auto-ethnography on my business.

The changes I undergo, of which a different mindset is one, are not only difficult to measure (Armstrong & Alsop, 2010). I would even go one step further and claim that some of these impacts are difficult to communicate in research findings; I do often struggle to cast in words theories I already use to guide my practice and skills I have to acquire during my research.

However, the researcher/practitioner union comes at a price, which stems from the deep involvement with the issues I research. Therefore, auto-ethnography in the way I pursue it, considering my own affairs, is always a subjective affair. One may aim for an analytical stance (Anderson, 2006) but I think auto-ethnography is more powerful in convey its message by means of stories. Here, I am try to tell concrete experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). In this way, readers can relate to my situation, feel with me, and understand how I made sense of my experiences. Auto-ethnographies always contain stories “told by someone to someone at some place” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 75). Therefore, my account is told from the inside. I seek to step back and take a different perspective on my experiences but must acknowledge that this ethnographic distance is difficult to achieve (Sage, 2013). I am still the businessman it is my story, to distance myself is – if at all – only partially and temporarily possible.

Regarding the field-note again, listening was the key to solving the conflict. However, I may have to ask me what in the first place caused me not listening to him in the first meeting. I was probably too much occupied by the urge to convey my position; I was too much seeking to convince the other about my position. It was, of course, important to me not lose money, and the solution during the first meeting seemed to me to convince the other. That did not work. Seen from a little distance – as is writing - (Van Manen, 1989) – I could understand that. By the same token, my negotiation partner could not accept my position without bringing his point across. Then it is not only that I understood what his point was in the second conversation, but it was also that I appreciated his version of the matter. Without saying whether he was right or wrong only by the pure attention I paid to his account, I signalled that I take his version seriously. That might have made it easier for him to listen to me and accept the solution I suggested. However, many conflicts I have experienced in my business, follow a rather confrontational pattern.

3. How did the business benefit from my research?

The German construction industry, as far as I experienced it, is not a place known for deep reflection. Managers attending coaching or supervision sessions are the exemption, not the rule. The industry is male dominated and technically focussed. Unlike in the areas of social work or education, reflective practices are not well known and seldom practiced in the construction industry.
However, social complexities and moral dilemmas that managers face are not disappearing by not paying attention to them. Therefore, management education in general but also in the construction industry has "a responsibility to develop and promulgate a view of their practice that is more appropriate to the social realities and moral dilemmas that managers face." (Reed & Anthony, 1992, pp. 609-610).
It is one of these social realities that make up the following field-note. Each person had a constructed reality of the event they to a different extent participated in – they made up their own particular truth.

Last year we built a concrete floor in an industrial compound which should have some very special features. Therefore, we need not regular concrete but a very special concrete mixture. Once the concrete arrived on the building site, an engineer from an external laboratory checked and tested the concrete as to whether it was suitable for the intended purpose. The first charge of concrete – one mixer lorry – was deemed okay by the engineer. But the second lorry he refused to approve. The supplier reflexively contested this view which meant huge costs to the concrete supplier. When the following charge arrived, the first part of the floor which we had laid approximately two hours ago was already getting stiff. Once we finished the work, one could easily spot the difference between the two charges of concrete in the finished floor, which looked quite unsightly. Unsurprisingly, the client was not happy.
I first talked to my staff about what happened, then to the engineer, and last to the supplier. All of them had a different story to tell. When I had the supplier on the phone to talk about compensation for the damages, he insisted on his position, but not too fiercely. I reminded him that the others had another take on the story, explained their understanding, and said that we could argue about who is right or wrong for hours and that if there is any truth, it lies anywhere in-between. He agreed on the last point, and I suggested we should rather talk about a possible solution which means some reconciliation and that is what we sought to find from then on.

When listening to their accounts, they do only report a slightly different course of events. The 'factual data' is only a little disputed. But where they differ is the interpretation and the necessary consequences. Before allowing the concrete to be used the engineer requires relevant documentation and if this documentation is not provided on arrival, the concrete could be refused. The supplier held the opinion that he could have allowed the concrete because the supplier would have provided the documents later. It is at this point, where the differences in interpretation of the events begin. In the case here, the documentation was not provided on arrival. The supplier argued that the engineer should not have refused the concrete since the quality of the concrete was suitable. To the supplier, it was just an issue of printing them out and sending it with the next charge. If he had not provided the documentation at all, the engineer could have refused the approval afterwards. Essentially, he would deny a positive result in the final report by the end of the project. No construction company nor a concrete supplier likes to risk that.

Talking to the supplier left me the impression with that the supplier felt the engineer had been acting inappropriately.

In principle, the engineer appears to sit in a very strong position of power towards the concrete supplier. This perceived power stems from their seeming ability to, freely and without fearing any possible consequences, refuse a charge of concrete based on the documents provided and the tests conducted. However, there is a flipside. Every construction company can choose from a pool of accredited laboratories with which to work. Hence, the laboratories have an interest to get the work run smoothly.

They usually seek to support suppliers and construction companies to meet the requirements as for instance by offering training. On the one hand, they have to check the concrete properly, on the other hand, they are not keen to cause trouble by rejecting charges because it means extra work for them to and anger on the side of their business partners. Hence, the engineer needs a good reason to reject a charge. So, in order to justify his actions, the engineer in the case here had a slightly different story to tell.

When I talked to the engineer, he told me that, of course, the papers had not been not there, which was not a too big problem for him. He however acknowledged that, it shouldn't have been a problem to print them and pass them to the lorry driver. However, he said, it wasn't just about the papers as the supplier said. The concrete had been already 1.5 hours in the mixer truck which is without extra additives too long. He thought the concrete was already on the brink of getting stiff and therefore the workers could or should not use it anymore.

Whether the concrete was already too stiff or not, I can't find out retrospectively. Or more precisely, whether my workers would have been skilled enough to use this particular charge of concrete remains unanswered. Formally, the engineer was right to refuse the concrete but whether the concrete was unfit for use apart from formalities remains disputed.

Writing about this event clarified to me the complexity of the situation. It was, on the one hand, about the relation to the laboratory and the supplier; which were both long-standing and ongoing cooperation which I did not want to jeopardise. On the other hand, it was about the client whom I was supposed to deliver an acceptable result to.

I could have, of course, put all the blame on the supplier and sought full compensation, but one could easily imagine what consequences such an approach would have had for our relationship. I could have also paid the whole bill – which would have cost me a considerable amount of money. Paying the cost would have set a quite difficult example as it would have suggested that I did not hold the supplier accountable for what he delivered. I was supposed to strike a balance between both extremes and integrate the view of the supplier and that of the engineer as, for example, illustrated in McGregor and Cutcher-Gershenfeld's (2006) work. Although their work originates from a different context – human resources – their approach to reconciling interests can be applied here, too.

For this integration to be possible both versions of the event had to be treated as valid accounts. In this case, my job was to convey the engineer's version to the supplier in a way that would make him accept it. In this situation, I found myself in a double role. On the one, hand I was a negotiator, separately in both relationships, when considering our contracts. On the other hand, I was a mediator seeking to reconcile their differences.

To that end, auto-ethnography was of great help. First, it helped me to grasp to the complexity of the situation (Adams, 2012) and forced me to investigate my own actions; I needed to question my own actions reflexively. Reflexivity requires another person through whose eyes the auto-ethnographer seeks to see her- or himself (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). As in the first example, I began to understand how the client might have seen me and how I had to act amidst of the engineer, supplier, client, and my staff members. In this situation thinking the other, taking the other's perspective helped me to anticipate others' responses to some extent. In such situations, I will never completely know what the response of the other is going to be, but I can anticipate the possible trajectory of the situation and thus begin to navigate. Trying to walk in someone else's shoes makes it easier to find common ground.

In the case here, I departed from the right-wrong- schemes I used to think in before starting the PhD and sought to incorporate different points of view. In the end, I explained my dilemma – my sitting between two similarly valid or invalid interpretation – to the client. In the end, he helped to solve the conflict by not fiercely sticking to his demands. Although my understanding helped to ease the conflict and I am able to name some impacts, there is, however, learning beyond of what I am able to communicate.

4. What are the challenges?

In conversations with staff members throughout my PhD program I was confronted with the question why am I doing it? Followed by what will you do afterwards? Members of my staff then raised a very profound concern. Will you close the business and pursue an academic career? And what will be the consequence for us?

I would be lying if I claimed I am researching only for the business' sake. It would contradict my initial statement and would disregard how long I had some subtle, unconscious wish to do a PhD in me. However, the benefits for the business move more and more in the foreground as I explained above. Still, I struggle to express them. In particular, I have difficulties to explain research impacts to people not familiar with research in general and especially not familiar with social research as my staff members are. How should I go about to explain postmodernist thinking to laypeople? The way I seek to convey ideas is the use of anecdotes (Van Manen, 1989). I talk about situations from our common business practice to illustrate concepts. I tend to avoid convoluted academic language; I seek to talk their talk. Often, I have the impression my messages come across at least to some extent. However, this approach has its limitations especially since I am not able to articulate some of the benefits at all.

It gets even more difficult since the question and doubts incessantly come up again. I do explain to my staff that my whole research would fall apart without the 'data' from doing business, I do insist that most valuable asset I have got is the insider's point of view (Grosse, 2016). But with my staff members, I have the impression, in their minds remain a mixture of discomfort because of an unfamiliarity with research and some phantasies about being let down by me leaving the business.

But apart from these questions, the researcher has to invest a considerable amount of time on doing research. I am now a very frequent visitor to the library. Fridays and Saturdays I am almost always there and not seldom on other days of the week too. Of course, I answer professional emails from the library too, and I make some phone call also, but I am not present in the office or on building sites. To be present, physically present, is very important. Staff members even did tell me that if I am in the office the mood there is different. To be absent from the office, not to be involved in action sometimes, is what a manager must be willing to accept. It goes hand in hand with relinquishing powers to others. Not being present may certainly contribute to the above-mentioned phantasies. It then becomes even more important to put effort into communicating what the research is about and how the business benefits.

5. Summary

It is about striking a balance between acting as researcher and acting as a practitioner. One need time for research and time for doing business which does put the researcher under a strong time constraint. So, one may anticipate a tremendous workload. But despite the challenges, I would recommend doing auto-ethnography in one's own business. The explorative nature of the research method might hold valuable surprises for the practitioner. As I learnt about my failures to listen, about taking the other's perspective, and about embracing different, constructed realities among many other things I did not mention here, others pursuing auto-ethnography too may find interesting and valuable insights into their very personal business practice. These learnings can provide ideas to develop their business practice in yet unanticipated ways further.

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