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An insider's point of view – auto – ethnography in the construction industry

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This methodological work addresses the lack of auto-ethnographies in construction management and highlights how they might contribute to the field. Auto-ethnographers can readily conduct their research without facing entrance barriers since they study their personal environment. Drawing on a conflict with an architect, I explore my emotions and thoughts. I emphasise how reflexivity supported by background knowledge, perspective taking, and self-questioning helps me to explore underlying assumptions and reasons of my thoughts and feelings. Consequently, I argue for disruptive and uncomfortable reflexivity. Doing so, I can develop a more critical understanding of my own actions and emotions. Therefore, this work might help others to advance their reflexive skills. This confessional tale written from the researcher's/subject's point of view is never dispassionate; rather it provides passionate insights to one practitioner's view of managerial practice. It demonstrates how auto-ethnographies can offer deeply personal insight into a phenomenon than most other methods. Thus, auto-ethnographies will contrast outsider's perspectives and offer material for further reflection.

Introduction

In September last year, Martin Loosemore and I stood somewhere in the atrium at Lincoln University. We talked about my research, which is an auto-ethnography on my managerial practice. He said this could also be an interesting approach for some of his part-time students. Dealing with auto-ethnography for almost three years, I thought that it could be very beneficial for researchers on the one hand and practitioners on the other hand. I knew that I learned a lot about my research subject and myself. Later that year I received the ARCOM 2016 call for papers. I recalled our conversation and so the idea for this paper was born.

In construction management research ethnography has gained some momentum during the last couple of years (Pink, Tutt and Dainty 2013). However, for auto-ethnography things are different. Although Löwstedt's (2014) work contains significant auto-ethnographic elements, I am not aware of any explicitly auto-ethnographic research in our field. To this end, I seek to highlight what auto-ethnography offers to construction management research as well as to individual researchers. I will show how I used different approaches to foster and enhance my reflexive thinking. Hence, this paper should at best be regarded as a confessional part of my research (Van Maanen 2011).

Introducing auto-ethnography

Ethnography is often described as the study of cultures (or parts of it) by participation and observation. Therefore, the ethnographer takes part in the daily activities of the group studied - he or she immerses into the field of study. In the field, the researcher usually takes just brief jottings, perhaps only single words, which the ethnographer later develops into longer field-notes. These descriptions form the basis for exploring the culture under study (Van Maanen 2011). To Pink et al. (2010, 658) "a good ethnographer immerses her- or himself in [...] deep learning situations [...] where what is learned goes beyond what could be said in an interview and can only be known by being there, as events unfold."

Usually, ethnographers study cultures they are not a natural part of. Auto-ethnographers, however, explore their own culture. They 'conduct ethnographic research on their "people"' doing 'backyard ethnography' (Wolcott 1999, 170-1). The auto-ethnographer's interactions and subsequent thoughts, feelings and emotions are central in order to understand own experiences (Ellis 1999). An auto-ethnographer will "incorporate own personal narratives" in the research (Reed-Danahay 2001: 407). These studies may have different emphasizes -

either to study the group the ethnographer belongs to or the personal experience of the researcher. Although some are rather critical about the latter - evocative - form of auto-ethnography (Anderson 2006), I think the personal view in which the researcher steps in the foreground offers a lot of insight - first of all, the individual understanding of events.

For ethnographers, getting access, immersing oneself into the culture, and participating in events can be a demanding task (e.g. Sage 2013). Not so for auto-ethno-graphers, getting access and participating does not pose a big obstacle, because the researcher is already there and accepted as part of the culture. It is the researcher's own environment. But this can create some headache for the researcher, especially when it comes to ethical questions regarding personal relations. I will come back on that later.

However, for some researchers - and I think about construction professionals - there is little opportunity to go somewhere else in order to do research. Especially part-time researchers are often unable to enter another setting because of time constraints of their first occupation. They often work full-time, going on leave in order to immerse (i.e. to work) somewhere else is not feasible - they have to make a living (Anderson 2006). These part-time researchers need time to read and write, so there is no time for yet another task. For them, ethnographies at home can provide a welcomed opportunity.

Auto-ethnographers do not need to get acquainted with the community, to learn the respective language and to acquire the special knowledge of this community; they are already familiar with the setting. This familiarity is what researching professionals can offer to the construction management community.

But, it is an insider's view and at times, it is difficult to maintain the ethnographic distance (Sage 2013). It is, as Ellis puts it (2004, 128), "[m]y own story - that's what I am involved in". The researcher must be willing to question her or his own practices as researcher and practitioner in a deep and often uncomfortable way (Pillow 2003). But this questioning needs the willingness to disclose oneself on the part of the researcher. The researcher needs to figure out whether he or she wants others to know about certain thoughts and feelings, whether disclosing might have detrimental consequences for the researcher or anybody else. However, practitioner-researchers offer a different although subjective perspective on practices in the construction industry.

The particular knowledge acquired by auto-ethnographers has further implication on the research questions addressed. There is little room for broad generalization, but auto-ethnographers can explore their own personal experiences deeper than most other approaches. This depth is what I am going for in my research.

My research practice

I am a part-time researcher in a PhD program and full-time construction professional. Using auto-ethnography, I investigate how negotiation practices and trust between the actors influence each other. To demonstrate what auto-ethnography can do, I use an event I wrote a field-note about for my research. But in this paper, I put the emphasis on auto-ethnography as a method, not on my research subject itself.

Since 1999, I have been running my own construction business of 38 employees most of them, bricklayers and carpenters. As a business owner, I negotiate on almost a daily basis. Hence, there is an intrinsic interest in the topic. I explore these negotiation experiences in order to learn about trust and negotiations.

Field-notes written about these negotiations are my ethnographic material. These field-notes not only contain a record of the negotiations but also what I thought and felt regarding these negotiations. Often, I use the voice recorder to take initial notes while driving after the event. Later, usually, in the evenings, I sit down and write longer descriptions of my experiences and subsequently reflect on them.

My experience shows that writing itself is not only a way of recording events; it serves as an analyzing technique as well (Emerson et al., 2011; Richardson & Adams St Pierre, 2005). The writing and subsequent reading forms a hermeneutic process of investigating my research field in more and more depth (Van Manen, 1990).

The following field-note deals with an experience I had with an architect I had done business with for some years.

One of the projects we had that winter was to make some changes to an old building. For my company, it was a rather small job, but nice to fill some gap between bigger projects. The house on a courtyard was very difficult to reach. Normally, our suppliers and we use lorries with a mounted crane to bring material on our building sites. But here almost everything had to be unloaded in the street and then carried over 20m by wheelbarrow. The necessary manpower was here the most significant cost driver. Since this was a small job and the building site was difficult to reach the prices per unit (e.g.; one cubic meter concrete) were reasonably high. However, we won the contract.

In the course of the building process, it turned out, that some additional work was necessary. The architect and I went through the things to be done and the next day I made an offer and sent it via email. A couple of days later I got an email response from the architect on that offer.

In the email which he copied to the client as well, he accused me of overcharging the client for the job. Reading this email, I got very upset; I immediately told my staff in the office about it. I was literally boiling inside. I could have exploded. I was very furious, close to throwing a temper tantrum. Then in this mood, I tried to call him. But I was lucky; I didn't reach the architect. Later when I calmed down a little bit, I wrote the email in which I explained my calculation in detail and called him again.

When we talked on the phone, I told him about my anger and that I do not like to be accused in front of the client. I asked him, to discuss issues like that first between us in order to save face. I felt justified to confront him, but at some point during the call, it felt a bit as if I pushed too hard as if he were now in too much defence as if I was about to go too far. After the call, I immediately began to question whether I had argued too fiercely. Did I alienate him?

My reaction to the email points to a couple of aspects of this event.

Emotionality

First, during the event, I felt strongly. To Ellis (2004, 19) "[w]riting notes was therapeutic. The process helped me organize my life, figure out what was going on, and then put away events and feelings in order to deal with what happened next." Dealing with strong emotions was the first thing to do in both of my roles - as a researcher and as a practitioner.

Although the therapeutic aspect seems somewhat overreaching, conflicts in the construction industry are often emotionally demanding if not traumatizing. In the case here, I understood that the accusation in front of the client made me very upset.

Coming to know about my emotions helped me to deal with them. I developed some distance to my emotions. Writing about my feelings helped me to clarify that it is better to calm down. I cannot change my feelings and emotions immediately, but knowing what happens and beginning to understand, what triggers such feelings, makes it easier for me to cope with them. In this example, the embarrassment caused by him accusing me in front of my client was the critical point. He could have sent the email only to me; then it would not have caused these emotions in me.

Regarding my reaction on the mail, I know confronting business partners when in a bad mood or feeling strongly about something is often not a good idea. That is not entirely new, but this event and the writing about it reminded me of how important it is to act reflectively and to try to retreat and think (Van Manen 1995). At this point, writing was my way of retreating and reflecting.

Background knowledge

Second, I did not understand why he accused me of overcharging. He had not done so before, and I did not see how he came to conclude my prices were too high. On the contrary, we have had worked together for a couple of years and so I thought he should have known that my prices are reasonable. If he thought otherwise, there should have been no need to accuse me of overcharging in front of the client. I could not understand the situation I was confronted with (Adams 2012). The possible reasons for him acting this way were manifold; exploring some of them helped me to make sense of his action.

Usually, the house owner pays the architect as it happened in this case. Hence, he was supposed to defend the house owner's interests. This email could be understood less like a message to me as one to the house owner - saying to him 'Look, I am fighting for you.' Only to think in that way - although this was only one of many explanations - made it possible for me to adopt a stance of forgiveness. I could, then, be much calmer

when talking to him.

Personal transformation

Third, I realized that my positivist education as a civil engineer is of limited use in a complex social environment. Through my training as a civil engineer, I learned to distinguish between right and wrong. I could assess whether the amount of steel reinforcement in a concrete beam is sufficient to sustain the load it has to bear or not. In other words, technical questions can be answered in a right-wrong-scheme. These objective criteria might still apply to social interactions with others, but they are only one (limited) dimension. We need to look beyond this technical dimension to find help to tackle questions regarding social interactions.

I cannot say whether the architect accused me of overpricing was right or wrong. He may have thought so; I did not. However, I am not in the position to judge who of us was right or wrong. These categories do not apply. It would have made a big difference if the architect had asked for an explanation of my pricing without blaming me in front of the client. But at the same time, he may have regarded my offer as so overpriced by his measures that it was an affront in itself. He may have felt right and justified doing what he had done. And I did as well when sending the offer and later when confronting him on the phone. At that point thinking in right-wrong-schemes does not provide much help. I learned about social complexity which does not fit with positivist understanding.

During the research process, my thinking gradually transformed. Starting from the right-wrong-scheme, I slowly but constantly came to understand (or believe) that there is no such thing as universal truth. We cannot know the other we are interacting with nor can we know ourselves. All knowledge is constructed and can, therefore, be deconstructed. It is only a tiny piece of our environment that we can know, and we know it just from a particular point of view (Berlin 2013).

Overestimated knowledge combined with a belief in right-wrong-schemes and strong emotions pose a specific danger. In the belief to know (about prices for construction work) and to be 'right' mixed with my strong feelings I talked to him, luckily not immediately after receiving the email but still aroused. In retrospect, I have to admit I could have easily ruined our relationship. I only accidentally avoided falling into this trap.

And therefore again, writing about it helped to illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon (Adams 2012). Writing is the tool I used to explore my experiences. However, the underlying pattern of being a practitioner and researcher is what provides the value for me. It is important to recognize that I wrote out of a research interest but inevitably wrote about an incident that had importance for my business life. Both worlds, that of the researcher and that of the practitioner, merged in my field-notes.

Ethics

Löwstedt (2014: 250) admitted that his "worker role occasionally grew out of proportion, to an extent that it inhibited the grand purpose of the study." In my case, it is my daily work, the job I make a living off, that sometimes overwhelms me and leaves no place for being a researcher. However, the constant back and forth between being practitioner and researcher was similar to Löwstedt (2014) my biggest resource. But I will not leave my research arena after a phase of immersion. I will stay there; this is my life and the job I want to keep.

By all its benefits, as auto-ethnographer, I have to be careful what I write because I want to interact in future with the persons I am writing about. Therefore, my guiding principle here is not to hurt anyone (Spicker 2011). Although "writing often feels isolating, the writer never acts in isolation" (Colyar 2013, 273). One constantly has to think about the consequences of publishing research - for others and oneself. I did continue and still work with this architect. Although he knows about my research and that I write about us, I still bear responsibility. So I went back to the field-note - I don't know how many times - trying to omit his identity, trying to obscure details, and writing it in a way that should not do harm to him. Actually, I asked myself, what would he say if he reads this.

But still I want others to know what happened and what I felt in a particular situation; however, I need to select thoughtfully what feelings I want them to know about. I cannot pick situations beforehand, since the very process of thinking through this situations, "figuring out what to do, how to live, and what [my] struggles mean", and composing text about it is the research process of auto-ethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2006: 111). Unless I investigate the meaning of an experience, I cannot make any decision about whether and how to write

about it. Therefore, auto- ethnography when properly done is 'ethical practice' in itself (Ellis 2009, 317).

That also implies that unpublished field-notes can contain everything for the purpose of investigation. Hence, in my field-notes, I write and think about many things that bother me. What part of the field-notes become part of a publication and in what form they might appear is a completely different matter (Ellis 2009). I regard field-notes also as a form of journal writing. Writing field-notes, similarly to journals in order to publish them unedited, would take away from them a lot of their reflexive power because the anticipated audience would restrict the writing (Moon 2006). But the reflexive exploration of my experiences is the most important part of my research for me as researcher and practitioner. Therefore, some naïve playfulness has to be maintained in field-notes. Knowing that they do not go public unedited is the safeguard.

Advancing reflexivity: perspective taking

In order to be more reflexive one has to adopt different perspectives (Pillow 2003). That may be the research's and practitioner's perspective, but also the perspective of the persons I interact with (which is a common coaching practice). This perspective-taking may sound somewhat abstract, but writing down in my private field-notes how the other person might have seen me in a particular situation is the first step. Hence, I tried to see myself with the other's eyes (Pillow 2003). I thought about the architect's mail again. When he wrote it, he might have regarded my offer as overpriced.

Accusations of overcharging are not unfamiliar in my business environment. Some seem to do business on the assumption that okay is what one can get away with. But apart from that claims about overcharging often arise because architects have different knowledge than we, construction managers, have. It is our daily business to calculate offers and to fix prices - it is our specialist knowledge. Architects lack some insight about that because it is only a small part of their job. Hence, he might have thought our prices were too high. If so, he felt right in being disappointed about my actions and had a justification for that email. If I were in his situation, I might have felt almost betrayed, and I would perhaps have reacted in the same way. So, how could I be angry with him? Rather, I had to question my own actions in the first place.

The architect estimates prices and subsequently budgets a project before kick-starting it. However, in order to realize these prices, he relies on the offers construction companies like mine make. When the prices are above the expectation, the architect finds himself in an uncomfortable situation. He had to explain to the client that the project exceeds estimated costs. In fact, he had to say that he was wrong. Architects (and everyone else too) find themselves trapped in multiple interdependencies - here the architect between the client and me. Perspective taking gave me an idea of how he might have experienced it.

Given the overrunning costs, he could also have acted in an anticipatory fashion. He might have assumed that the client regarded my offer as too expensive (or even the client told him so). Therefore, he might have felt an urge to confront me.

Some observed a "macho culture" on building sites (Löwstedt 2014, 253), and, given my experience, this is not the exception. I experienced the construction industry as a very competitive environment, where admitting failures or mistakes is usually regarded as weakness. When I explored the situation from the perspective of male dominance, the architect acted as the strong person, and I reacted by being outraged in a similar vein. Hence, the macho culture, the possible anticipation of the client's thoughts, and different knowledge about price building might have been ingredients of this conflict. If so, although I did not realize it back then, by calming down I somehow might have broken that vicious spiral of male competitiveness which was about to take off.

Here my background knowledge made it, at least, easier for me to take the architect's perspective. Throughout my years in business, I had talked to numerous architects about their struggles with clients and contractors and their respective sandwich position between them. Without this knowledge, I would have certainly struggled to see these explanations. They are the very mirrors needed in order to maintain a reflexive stance.

Advancing reflexivity: intriguing questions

Another way I foster reflexivity is to ask myself intriguing questions. For example:

Why did you react emotionally on this email? - Because he accused me of overpricing in front of the client. Charging unfairly high prices is not how I do business. How dare he to give the client this impression. - So is it the overpricing or the affront? - It's the affront. It's to be in the defence, having to fight this suspicion of overpricing. - Why that? - Because I worked hard to be regarded as a fair business partner. Now this impression of myself is destroyed or, at least, severely weakened. I feel I've to resurrect it and that is even harder to do as to build it from scratch. It's this uphill battle against suspicion. - So why all this effort? Why is this impression of being a fair partner so important to you? - Hmm, difficult question. Perhaps because I want to be treated fairly as well. - Do you really believe in this reciprocity? - Well, most the time. At least, I feel I act in a just way. - Ah, you're claiming moral high grounds ...

This inner dialogue could go on for almost eternity since critical reflection has no logical endpoint (Moon 2006). But I stop here because this amount of disclosure seems sufficient; ethical considerations are looming - I need to safeguard others, but also myself. Although this inner dialogue is a very brief example, it demonstrates the fast pace I came to underlying reasons and, therefore, uncomfortable questions (Pillow 2003). In this example, questions are asked from a rather distant, dispassionate position, in almost interrogatory manner, but the ways to frame such dialogues are manifold. By taking other's points of view or asking myself intriguing questions I am forced into reflection. To be reflexive is difficult to teach (Moon 2006) - but as demonstrated here, by constant exposure one learns how to become reflexive.

Critical reflection is to question underlying assumptions, to investigate their influence and to explore emerging new perspectives. Therefore, one cannot follow some set of questions or protocol. That would pose "pre-theoretical commitments" and any understanding would inevitably "conform to these discursive limits." (Jinks 1997, 522) The process of questioning must stay open. It rather requires a skeptical stance as to ask oneself: "How come you think so?" One needs to challenge constantly what may guide one's thought. It "is the necessity of an ongoing critique of all of our research attempts" (Pillow 2003, 192) what is needed.

Being reflexive, one inevitably uncovers uncomfortable realities (Pillow 2003). The architect just questioned the impression I wanted to give of myself - being a fair partner. But he questioned this picture I wanted to give of myself. Then it is rather a matter of wounded vanity than of a substantial dispute about prices. The architect unintentionally just targeted a vulnerable spot in me. That may explain my emotional reaction to a great deal. It also helps to understand why I pushed so hard - tried to avoid similar situations in future. This touching of a vulnerable spot is the very uncovering of uncomfortable realities Pillow (2003) talks about.

These uncomfortable realities are located not only in my research practice but also my professional conduct. Hence, the challenge for the auto-ethnographer is to be critically reflective about not only the research process but the daily professional conduct of her- or himself as a practitioner. For me, that means to question what I do in business. I could have explained my prices upfront; I could have anticipated the architect's reaction. In every interaction, I have choices to make, and therefore, I take responsibility which route our interactions follow. To admit that I was wrong or, at least, could have taken another more appropriate choice is sometimes quite hard and uncomfortable. To find out that I am a bit vain about the impression I give is uncomfortable too. That is the challenging part. But rewarding is the feeling I get when I understand my own environment a little bit better; when I find new ways of dealing with conflicts when I create new choices for myself. Hence, "[r]eflexive ethnography is a uniquely challenging, yet rewarding, way of understanding" (Sage 2013, 104).

However, as I have shown above, apart from all learning and understanding, I also have to acknowledge my own limitations. I cannot possibly know all the reasons the architect had to write that email. I learned, what I perceive and understand is only a tiny piece of the social environment I am acting in (Berlin 2013). Hence, I should be careful not to jump too fast to conclusions (Weick 2006).

Therefore, I think that auto-ethnography is a very good fit for emphasizing the social character of our

relationships on construction projects (Löwstedt 2014). Auto- ethnography points out the limited value of positivist thinking (Pink et al. 2010), helps the practitioner to understand the situations, their complexity, own reactions, and emotions better (Adams 2012) and to learning from experiences for better future actions (Brookfield 1995, Ellis 1999). But an auto-ethnographer can only tap these resources when reflexively exploring his or her environment.

Reflexivity requires others in order to mirror myself (Chiseri-Strater 1996). Only when taking different perspectives on the event, when trying to step into the shoes of the other, I begin to understand the complexity of the situation and how others could understand my actions (Pillow 2003). That is what auto-ethnography is about.

For a practitioner like me, being constantly forced to reflect on my own professional conduct is an invaluable source of learning. I can apply and, therefore, test the newly acquired knowledge right away and it makes different insights possible since learning takes place in one and the same person - me the practitioner-researcher. In inner dialogue, for example, the researcher is very much aware of the issues the practitioner feels not at ease with. Hence, the researcher can direct the questions very much to the crucial issues - the researcher can immediately go where it hurts most - in my example this is the impression I want to give of myself.

Summary

For it is difficult to do this "back and forth between an insider's passionate perspective and an outsider's dispassionate one" (Van Maanen 2011, 77) I could not easily switch off feelings and be dispassionate. Here, the overlapping of subject and tool becomes evident. A deeply involved, emotionally laden perspective, however, will offer a view an understanding, of an event different from a distanced, white collar view. This view is a biased, particular view of the event. Taking a postmodern stance, I do not think there is an unbiased, objective, neutral view of the event. Hence, I honestly offer mine and seek to explain how I came to understand the event in my very particular way.

It is the easy access to my own environment, the insider's knowledge, the depth I may reach, and personal involvement that can make auto-ethnographies worth reading.

But auto-ethnographies have their limitations and risks. I may try as hard as I could yet I will never be an outsider to myself. There is the danger of being too inward looking or as Wolcott (1999, 175) noted, we do not see what is happening because the ethnographer does not "get out of the way." However inward or outward looking the account may be, it is a contrasting perspective to that of conventional ethnographies. I provide my personal insider's view of an event which provides a very different view compared to researchers using other methods. But my view might give another researcher's thinking a new spin.

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