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Davies, Julie

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## **DBA impact statements as self-research methods: PhD plus or practitioner frolic?**

**Dr Julie Davies, University of Huddersfield, j.a.davies@hud.ac.uk**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores autoethnographic research methods based on a pilot content analysis of personal impact statements completed by students on the Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA). In particular, the case studies illustrate the benefits and potential pitfalls of autoethnography (AE) as a tool to make sense of professional doctoral research journeys. We contribute by providing guidelines to inspire doctoral candidates, supervisors and examiners on how self-reflections in autoethnographies might be crafted in terms of choices relating to evocative, analytical and political forms. We also reflect on issues of stories well told, ethics for the story teller and epiphanies in being socialised into academic cultures as applied researchers with multiple identities in increasingly marketised organisations. The drama of personal adventures, vulnerabilities and crises in processes of self-discovery are offset by the intellectual transformation of individual researchers contributing to scholarship and organisational impact while using autoethnography to theorise their emotions to higher levels than expected in traditional PhDs.

First, we highlight the aims and types of autoethnographic outputs. Second, we consider the potential and pitfalls of autoethnographic approaches. Third, we investigate students' experiences in crafting impact statements to complement their DBA theses and publishable articles. On the one hand, some view the mid-career professional doctoral student's outputs in a practice doctorate as somehow inferior to the traditional PhD as some kind of personal frolic to enhance personal status. On the other hand, the DBA may be perceived as a 'PhD plus' that neatly combines theory and practice with a clear sense of organisational and personal impact. We call for greater appreciation of the value and risks inherent in autoethnography to complement more orthodox reflections on self-research in doctoral programmes. Finally, we recommend further research to understand the processes involved in autoethnographic research methods and how doctoral programmes expose professional doctoral candidates to think autoethnographically about and situate their approach within a business school context.

### **Keywords**

*DBA, impact, research methods, autoethnography*

### **Introduction**

This article considers how autoethnography (AE) is used as a method in the impact statements of professional doctoral students in business schools. It contributes to insights into a black box of mechanisms to track identify shifts in the doctoral journey and socialisation into academia. This paper begins with an outline of the purpose and types of writing based on autoethnographic methods. We reflect on the benefits and limitations of autoethnography (AE). These issues include valuable self-discovery through enriching theory emotionally as well as the risks of over-exposure and reputational self-harm in a public forum. We argue that autoethnography in professional doctorates requires candidates to articulate their self-awareness and resilience beyond insights expected from a traditional PhD student. From an analysis of DBA impact statements, we propose greater appreciation of the potential and perils of an autoethnographic lens to yield interesting insights into transitions into the role of an applied academic researcher. We discuss the implications for supervisors and doctoral students and conclude by recommending further study into the processes entailed in drafting ethnographic outputs for publication.

The focus of this article is on the question: 'what are the possibilities and pitfalls of autoethnographic methods for practitioner-doctoral researchers?' The performativity of everyday self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) is offset against the depth of learning gained from taking time to reflect on one's research capabilities.

### **The purpose and forms of autoethnographic approaches**

Autoethnography (AE) is defined by Reed-Danahay (1997: 145) as 'research (graphy) that connects the personal (auto) to the cultural (ethnos), placing the self within a social context.' This is quite distinct from positivistic approaches (Holt, 2003). Chang (2008: 43) contends that autoethnography most focus more than just on self-narrative and

interpretation, it must also include cultural analysis. Denzin (1999: 512-513) suggests that ethnography is inevitably political and he calls for 'an enabling, interpretive ethnography that aspires to higher, sacred goals' (ibid: 519). At the same time, autoethnographers should protect the dignity of participants: 'our primary obligation is always to the people we study' (Denzin, 1989: 83). Denzin argues that critical literary ethnography should be artfully written, with cultural and political matters clearly identified, based on 'a politics of hope' using symbolism and rhetoric.

Autoethnographies allow 'the self and the field become one' (Coffey, 2002: 320) as the subject and object merge to reveal crises and epiphanies. They are distinguished, particularly in analytic autoethnography, from autobiographies and memoirs by the examined life (Socrates) being analysed theoretically. Spry (2001: 709) commends the 'emotional texturing of theory' that AE provides. Doty (2010: 1050) highlights the advantages of AE helping scholars to become public intellectuals, observing that 'one of the most exciting promises of autoethnography is the potential it has to change the way we write...mak[ing] writing more accessible to wider audiences, less dry and boring to read.' Ellis (2004: xix) comments that evocative ethnography 'usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection.' Wyatt's (2005) evocative autoethnographic story of his father lacks any theoretical underpinning. Anderson (2006: 377) criticises such evocative autoethnography for conveying 'emotionally wrenching experiences' that are novelistic and lack analytical rigour. Hence, our concern that autoethnography in professional doctoral programmes may be perceived as a self-indulgent frolic, to create gripping accounts of doctoral journey struggles for dramatic effect. Ellis and Bochner (2006: 440) defend these accusations, arguing that 'a story analyzed [is]...sacrifice[d]...at the altar of traditional sociological rigor.' Denzin (2006: 422) advocates that autoethnographers 'want to change the world by writing from the heart.' The latter is also a feature of political and radical autoethnography (Holman-Jones, 2005). Novice researchers need to appreciate the different types of autoethnographic methods and the potential benefits and pitfalls of this approach.

### **Benefits and risks of autoethnography**

Gilmore and Kenny (2015: 57) suggest that researchers of organisations have tended to neglect their own emotions even when they research other participants' emotions. Denshire (2014: 845) indicates that as an antidote to this, 'auto-ethnography demonstrates the potential to speak back (and perhaps differently) about professional life under prevailing conditions of audit culture so as to make and remake ethical relations in contexts of professional practice.' It provides space to pause and reflect on fragmented researcher identities (e.g. Kondo, 1990), and the boundaries between professional, student and personal life. DBA students can examine dichotomies and 'hyphen-spaces' (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2011) as practitioner-researchers and their academic and organisational responsibilities. AE can mitigate what Pelias (2003: 369) suggests is a feature of university life with 'academic tourists who only manage to get to the surface of any inquiry they pursue.'

Autoethnography demands the same ethical respect for self as it does for others. Bell and Bryman (2007) have explored the potential for harm to the management researcher in organisations as distinct from medical research ethics. Autoethnographic methods not only carry the burden of authorship (Behar and Gordon, 1995) and 'reflexivities of discomfort' (Pillow, 2003: 187), but there are real concerns about the potential for self-harm for autoethnographers and the individuals implicated in their highly personal narratives. Tolich (2010: 1610) makes an important point that the writer should '[t]reat any autoethnography as inked tattoo by anticipating the author's future vulnerability' which is indelible once in the public domain. Ellis (1995) believes that the autoethnographer must assume that anyone mentioned in the text will one day read it. Personal accounts are characterised by risk and vulnerability (Spry, 2001). Is it fair for a novice autoethnographer to publish their impact statements together with their doctoral thesis about issues that may potentially stigmatise their careers? Jago's (2002) account of her 'academic depression' exemplifies this long-term vulnerability and uncomfortable reading. Moreover, autoethnography is potentially fraught with issues of misery, regret, and intimacies that must be framed in an academic context which requires higher standards of ethics than in journalism. Tolich (2012: 1600) reminds us that 'other people are always present in self-narratives, either as active participants in the story or as associates in the background' and the well-being and prior and full informed consent of those involved can be problematic, even with pseudonyms (Chang, 2008). Autoethnographers have different levels of risk aversion and individuals may feel that stories disclosed in private are not for public consumption if the doctoral impact statement were to be published. How do doctoral supervisors deal with the

intensity of emotions generated, perceptions of naïveté and any embarrassment rather than empathy experienced by the readers of students' autoethnographic research? Supervisors must caution students about the risks of autoethnographers sensationalising their experiences and overdramatising their lives merely to engage audiences.

Denzin (2003: 137) reconciles some of these dilemmas. He suggests that autoethnographic writers will 'strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with professional title and position...to make themselves accountable and vulnerable to the public.' Most importantly, however, Medford (2006) reiterates that autoethnographers must act ethically to safeguard confidential data that the people involved would not want others to read – even if they are anonymised.

### **AE in management research**

In considering their academic peers' views on performance in Finland, Kallio et al. (2016) entirely ignore any discussion of their own sensibilities and biases. By contrast, Clarke et al. (2012: 7) acknowledge that 'prior to the research we (as academics employed by a UK business school) held ideas about the concerns with identity amongst our academic colleagues...and these informed the construction of our interview schedule.' Clarke and Knights (2015: 1870) explain that they avoid going native or being unreflective as a result of 'continuous interrogation of our findings between ourselves and with other close colleagues', candidly stating that 'we do not pretend to develop constructions of reality that are either politically or morally 'neutral.'"

### **Doctoral programmes and AE**

Typically, doctoral outputs must demonstrate critical analysis and argument; sound methodology, structure and presentation; scholarship; a contribution to knowledge; originality and creativity with a degree of risk taking and a confident, self-critical approach. In traditional PhDs, the latter may be discussed in a section on the limitations of the research and in qualitative inquiry in the research methods section with reference, for example, to notions of the researcher-as-instrument (Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 2002: 109; Janesick, 2003: 47). A potential problem in completing, supervising, and examining professional doctorates (PDs) is the application of non-traditional methods and outputs that strive to demonstrate criteria for originality and creativity that test narrowly worded regulations and conventional expectations (see Dolowitz and Sambrook, 2011). As the highest level terminal qualification, the candidates for doctorates must evidence excellent standards. In the UK, however, there is much greater scope to embed requirements to demonstrate the impact of excellent research in doctoral training programmes. Currently, research council funding does not support the Doctorate in Business Administration, possibly on the assumption that employers and working practitioners will be self-funded.

The UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE, 2002: 62) defines the professional doctorate as: 'A programme of advanced study and research which, whilst satisfying university criteria for the award of a doctorate, is designed to meet the specific needs of a professional group external to the university, and which develops the capability of individuals to work within a professional context.' Gill and Hoppe (2009) suggest that professional doctorates are a vital element in the wider research ecology and should not be viewed as a poor substitute for a PhD. In the business school context, Lockhart and Stablein (2002) emphasize the importance of DBAs for enhancing practitioners' research capabilities and connecting academia with practice without compromising outputs from either.

The UK's 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) was the first to evaluate research impact which HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council) defines as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.' To its surprise, HEFCE discovered that individuals rather than employers are funding professional doctorates in England (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016). Business school directors of research who are searching for impact case studies to submit in future REF returns could be encouraged to explore the potential contributions of working executives who are completing professional doctorates which usually illustrate the influence of research findings on organisational change. Moreover, there is scope for funding bodies to work with employers to encourage executives to see the DBA rather than the MBA as a terminal degree, reflecting a trend in Germany for company directors to hold doctoral qualifications. We argue that the policy issues of professional doctoral training and the research impact agenda present an important area for

attention in the talent pipeline that does not appear to be addressed currently in the literature. In this study, we suggest that impact statements written autoethnographically as part of professional doctoral programmes are important public relations collateral to promote the importance of research in management education.

### **AE and management research**

While autoethnography is widely used in anthropology, sociology, communications, education studies and healthcare, it has been applied only to a limited degree in business and management research. Notable examples include business school scholars advocating AE as an unorthodox method to generate novel empirical data based on their experiencing fragmented identities at academic conferences (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012). Ostensibly, it is relatively easy for business and management academics to reflect on the emergence of scholars based on their own experiences. Bell and Clarke (2014) explored business school researcher identities using undergraduate students' focus groups and free drawing methods of animal metaphors to represent images of opportunistic loners compared with social systems of participatory researchers. Doloriert and Sambrook (2011), a supervisor and student pair reflected together on the hurdles in producing an autoethnographic doctorate in a traditional business school. They note that innovations in research methods for doctoral theses can be problematic as institutional academic regulations tend to discourage stifle creative writing processes (except perhaps where there is a strong creative arts and design doctoral programme where performance and physical artefacts may be acceptable) despite the requirements for originality and contributions to knowledge. Business school professional doctoral student voices are rarely heard. Curiously, some DBA candidates have completed their theses about the DBA (e.g. Charity, 2010; Williams, 2011) without exploring autoethnographic research methods.

### **Stimulus for interest**

The impetus for my interest in autoethnography in DBA programmes in particular is generated by a particular context of working in a university where all full-time faculty must hold doctorates (or be registered on a doctoral programme). My interest in autoethnography was sparked by teaching DBA candidates who are required to submit a personal impact statement as part of the final thesis submission alongside a publishable piece of work. I teach a course that requires the DBA students to write an assessed case study narrative on an organisational or leadership issue where the writer is one of the protagonists. In drafting this piece of work, one of my own academic team members was very candid in sharing their work with peers in the doctoral cohort. While I felt privileged to see such open self-exposure, I was alarmed that I had not provided adequate guidelines about emotional boundary and identity work in academia. Additionally, as participants on the programme were colleagues within the university in their roles as doctoral students, academics or senior managers, very real concerns emerged about ownership of stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In particular, issues were raised about 'relational ethics' (Ellis, 2007), autoethnographers' responsibilities to (in)visible characters (Chang, 2008) such as balancing the representation of close family members (Wall, 2008).

### **Research design and initial findings**

This pilot study is a content analysis of three impact statements produced by three students who completed their professional doctorates.

Tables 1 summarises three vignettes of DBA students' impact statements based on the aspects discussed in the section above of the benefits and pitfalls of autoethnography. Evocative, analytical and political autoethnography is evident in the authors' statements of how they have adjusted to practitioner research on their doctoral programmes.

<b>Doctoral Student:</b>	<b>D1 - Private Care Sector (female, self-funded)</b>	<b>D2 - Public Sector Marketing (female, employer funded)</b>	<b>D3 - Public Sector Lawyer (male, self-funded)</b>
<b>Fragmented identities</b>	'There is nothing special about me except that I manage to balance different activities without derailing.'	Identity as a female humanities graduate in private sector with male senior managers with financial/legal backgrounds.	Document chronicles public service vocation and diverse interim experiences.
<b>Learning journey</b>	Learning for the job then learning for life.	Moving out of comfort zone, more democratic leadership style.	Commitment to lifelong learning.
<b>Personal change and resilience</b>	Resilience, emotional intelligence, self-determination, pragmatism, energy management, focus, ability to deal with critical feedback, tenacity. Openness, courage, embracing new practices.	Delegation to team members at work to reduce overload in full-time job while completing doctorate part-time.	Public service ethos, ability to link theory and practice. Valued the need for leaders to develop soft skills in setting the tone of an organisation. No real sense of self-doubt expressed in the impact statement.
<b>Learning insights</b>	Frankl (1946: 135) 'when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.'	Importance of maintaining a learning journal for personal and professional insights.	Reflections shaped by profession, education and personal experiences.
<b>Motivation</b>	Intellectual challenge, recognition, autonomy, competence, to make a difference. Dissatisfaction with marketisation in current role.	Encouraged by boss to register for the DBA. Concern about the impact of policy changes on income generation.	Government policy changes, New Public Management reforms. Professionalisation.
<b>Transitions</b>	From imposter to confident researcher.	Imposter syndrome, discussions of lack of self-confidence. Self-esteem gained during the doctorate.	Transition from a specialist employee to an interim legal services researcher on the public service ethic.
<b>Critical incidents</b>	Completely reframing the proposal was a key milestone. Recalibrating values and mental attitude. Quantitative assignment.	Appreciation that she needed to 'let go' at work and trust others so that she could cope with the overload of work and study.	Yr 1: understanding paradigms and philosophy. Clarity around own learning styles. Yr 2: settled on a paradigm. Yr 3 literature and empirics.
<b>Political AE, affirming values, morality, ethics</b>	Desire for intellectual challenge after working in a job that increasingly focused on shareholders amidst political turbulence overseas.	Personal struggles in working in the public sector that is subject to intense marketisation.	Questions personal public service ethic in an environment forced to adopt business-like practices.
<b>Transformative outcomes, discovery</b>	Self-rediscovery. 'We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time' (Eliot, 1943: 39). Recovery of own voice. A healing process.	Reached stage seven of Kitchener and King's (1990) reflective judgment model: willingness to re-evaluate the adequacy of one's judgments as new data or new methodologies become available.	Enhanced research skills, original contribution of practical relevance.
<b>Action learning set cultural experiences, relations with others</b>	'Psychological nudge' (Deci and Flaste, 1996). Valuable peer support and feedback. Increasing mutual self-respect for each other's work. Inspiring intellectually. Regularity, momentum. Critical friends.	Very valuable mutual support. Discipline of taking time out to think, challenge assumptions, reframing. Time to step back is a necessity and an integral part of the learning. For problem solving (Moon, 2002).	The value of Rolfe et al.'s (2001) framework for reflexive practice and Revans' (1980) focus on collective learning in action learning.
<b>Emotions –</b>	Fear, despair, daunted,	Self-doubt, anxiety because of	Enjoyment conducting

<b>evocative AE, self-disclosure, discomfort</b>	demoralised, lost confidence, disorientation, exhilaration.	soft discipline background with quantitative colleagues, greater confidence.	interviews, interesting, revelatory experience.
<b>Research insights – analytical AE</b>	The value of coding frames.	Temporal contextualisation. Acceptance of own interpretivist stance in conversations with positivists. Theoretical framing of managerial experiences	The value of questions, organisational culture and critical incidents.
<b>Post DBA identity, aspirations, self-value</b>	Facilitating research workshops, policy work, consulting, bridging practice and theory. Changed job out of a high pressurised 'rat race.'	Remained in same role. In the same institution.	Continue to research data and work in interim roles. Bridges local government and legal professional role. Not focused on career advancement.

**Table 1. Examples of professional learning in impact statements**

### Discussion and conclusion

The self-commentary provided in the impact statements analysed indicate a need for supervisors and students to exercise caution when analysing DBA adventures. There was a particular lack of theorising in terms of framing how to compose an impact statement. In assessing the self-evaluations we might ask whether students have or should students rationalise and sanitize their accounts to avoid appearing emotionally 'immature, primitive, or even pathological' (Lutz, 1988: 41)? Should they temper their accounts to avoid the audience's potential embarrassment? Or should they critique their fears and make their angst public as they experience discomfort in shifting into new identities as management researchers? Table 1 illustrates that practitioner doctoral students gain confidence over time in re-defining themselves as they transition between their affiliations with different milieus as executives and students. AE helps them to verbalise their insecurities and anxieties about finding their own voices. This requires skilful storytelling and literary skills that take time to develop in appreciating their own progress and the new academic culture they are becoming part of. The individualising focus on the 'I' in autoethnographic writing is complemented by the camaraderie of professional doctorate cohort programmes (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016: v) and in the case of the DBA students in this research provides them with an empathetic audience. Nevertheless, supervisors must take responsibility for professionally 'containing' doctoral students' emotions which can drain the resources of the key stakeholders involved. Doctoral impact statements serve a useful purpose in going far beyond what Gilmore and Kenny (2015) note is often seen as tokenistic researcher self-reflexivity written mechanically in so many research methods sections.

The personal experiences of full-time senior practitioners/academics in their roles as part-time doctoral students provide insights into crossing into a professional applied research culture. The vignettes offer inspiring stories of resilience, hope and triumph in completing a thesis. In the case studies provided here, there is a strong sense of reclaiming one's intellectual capabilities in or after demanding jobs where market forces have made them question the public value of their work. This sense making and identity work give the subject as object opportunities to reflect on their emergence as professional researchers, finding their voice, new agency and scripts in a series of existential crises. The personal epiphanies and questioning of assumptions at best can be engaging and compelling. However, there are risks of self-narratives being dismissed as navel gazing, confessional, overindulgent and sensational like reality TV diaries. The back staging of being a researcher is revealed as outsiders become insiders in the academy.

How do supervisors assure the quality of autoethnographic research which breaks canonical methods? How are doctoral candidates guided to ensure they respect boundaries, ethical relations and apply high ethical standards to themselves as they confront their emotions and reflect on and contextualise their intellectual growth over time? How do examiners evaluate the quality of autoethnographic accounts? Issues of generalisability, reliability, validity and legitimacy may be replaced by considerations of verisimilitude and resonance and literary skills in telling and showing a good story, as well as the audience's response. What may be cathartic and intimate for the writer may be dull, self-

centred and uncomfortable for the reader and risk the privacy and safety of others. Yet the story telling qualities and cultural insights of some accounts may be fascinating and truly inspiring.

This postmodern research method may present idealised and socially desirable accounts of the writer and so evidence beyond self-report is important. Stories of breakthroughs, on-going conversations that are theoretically framed in written accounts provide valuable artefacts. Further research might explore the extent to which it is appropriate for these impact statements to be published as an appendix within a DBA thesis. Are they merely an extension of the acknowledgement and 'researcher-as-instrument' (Pezalla et al., 2012) type sections found in traditional PhD theses or should they not be made available publicly? Importantly, when will research councils wake up to the value of impact at multiple levels of professional doctorates in management? Autoethnographies provide compelling accounts to support our case.

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