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### **The use-value of self-ethnographic research: insider-researcher, supervisor and external examiner perspectives**

This paper aims to explore the challenges of conducting and writing up ethnographic research with a view to debating its use-value to an employing organisation and business education.

Arising from Masters level research, conducted by the lead author, this paper explains the context of the research and why it was chosen as an area, examines the challenges involved in *doing* and *writing* ethnography and discusses the use-value of ethnographic research to an employing organisation. Arguments relating to whether or not ethnography can or should be 'objective' are also considered.

In 2009/2010 the lead author, Chloe, conducted a Masters level research project which was supervised by the second author of this paper, Aileen. As the lead tutor on research methods, and Chloe's supervisor, Aileen encouraged her students to consider self-ethnographic research as a strategy for their practitioner research projects. Elaine, the third author of this paper has also encouraged the use of ethnography as a research strategy. Both Aileen and Elaine have conducted their own self-ethnographic research projects and have reflected on the potential and pitfalls of this research approach for part-time students, (Corley & Eades, 2006). The process of writing this paper has enabled further reflection and joint sense-making as we question some of our taken-for granted understandings by subjecting Chloe's research process to 'other' questions. We consider issues which arose during Chloe's Masters research process and draw attention to the practical and ethical challenges she experienced whilst conducting and writing up her research. In doing so we address the following research questions:

- To what extent can one avoid taken-for-granted assumptions?
- Are there particular ethical issues/challenges which are unique to self-ethnographic research?
- Is self-ethnographic research useful to employing organisation and business education?

#### **Context of the research and why it was chosen as an area: Chloe's story**

As a female and suddenly of an age where I found myself increasingly subject to questions from both female friends and work colleagues as to whether or not I might be soon considering the possibility of having children and subsequent discussions surrounding the impact this may or may not have on my own career, I had started to take a particular interest in gender equality issues. Having not considered my gender as a barrier to my own career progression as a HR professional working at a higher education institution, I was interested in the experiences and opinions of my colleagues on the topic. I decided to focus my research on female academics, believing that given my position in the University's HR Department I would be able to achieve sufficient access to my academic colleagues while maintaining a level of objectivity and impartiality (as their community would be initially foreign to me; my role being situated in the central Professional Services area of the

University), acknowledging that a potential problem for much ethnographic research is the need to balance closeness and distance (Alvesson, 2003)

Commitment to diversity and equality was cited as a key enabler to the achievement of the University's strategic plan and additional resource had been allocated to the Human Resources Department to expand the Organisational Development team to include Diversity & Equality (D&E) specialists who would focus on implementing equality impact assessment and specific action plans to address D&E areas including disability, race and gender. In view of this, it also seemed timely to examine in detail the management information made available as part of the University's gender equality plan in order to identify the issues the University were in the process of addressing and potential research questions for my own masters research project.

An analysis of the data revealed that while there was an even gender split across the institution, the overall total of academic staff at the University was slightly lower than the Russell Group average. Female staff were found to be in the majority in clerical and manual roles; in the Teaching and Research career path the majority of staff were male indicating that women were concentrated in lower paid roles. With regard to the leadership of the organisation, there was a distinct gender imbalance at senior management level. At the time (accurate for 2009/10) there were no female Executive Pro-Vice Chancellors, female Institute Heads of School/Department were in the minority and the institution had formally recognised a need to increase female membership on influential committees with the aim of achieving proportional representation.

A review of the literature available identified commonly cited barriers to female career progression in academia including: maintaining an effective work-life balance (Forster, 2000; Sinclair, 1998; Simmons, 1996; Schwartz, 1995; Schein, 1993; Lambert, 1990; Frone and Rice, 1987), cultural and structural obstacles (Deem, 1998; Ledwith & Manfredi, 2000; Forster, 2000; Wilson, 2002; Knights and Richards, 2003; Probert, 2004) and a lack of female role models and mentors (Morrissey, 2003; Brown, 2009).

The following research objectives were identified as a result of this initial research: to investigate why there were significantly fewer female academic leaders at the University than male; to assess whether there are specific disadvantages/barriers to being a woman in terms of career progression in higher education; to investigate whether there was a perceived 'glass ceiling' at the University; to examine how maintaining a work-life balance impacts on female career progression; to investigate whether there are cultural and structural barriers affecting female career progression with particular reference to whether the University's Professional Development Review system of appraisals effectively assists female early career academics and researchers in developing their careers; and to make recommendations regarding the development of appropriate supportive initiatives in order to remove barriers to female academic career development at the University where necessary.

My research into previous studies in the area of gender equality revealed a qualitative approach has often been taken (Forster, 2000; Brown, 2000). My attendance at the research methods module, delivered by Aileen, had also made me aware of the potential of self-ethnographic research. I decided to accept the challenges of doing a self-ethnography as I believed that the potential would outweigh any possible pitfalls. My data collection methods included: maintaining a research diary of key observations and conversations; observing a gender equality consultation event run by the University's Diversity and Equality team which was open to all staff and attended by 40 individuals interested in the subject area; examination of University policies; and semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of female academics across faculty areas and at various stages in their careers.

A key problem for much ethnographic research is the struggle between closeness and closure. This can be particularly problematic when researching one's own practice. Alvesson (2003:188) acknowledges that: '*cultural belongingness means a high degree of closure to the rich variety of potential ways of interpreting one's organization*' and cautions that the self-ethnographer must make strong efforts to avoid 'staying native'. One way to avoid 'staying native' is to acknowledge and reflect upon data as constructions and to interpret data from a temporal distance and a fresh theoretical perspective, (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002).

Another process is the involvement of 'externals' as critical friends providing an outsider, etic perspective. This paper is informed by an insider-researcher (Chloe), supervisor (Aileen) and critical friend (Elaine) perspective. Reflecting on Chloe's research process provides an opportunity to examine the challenges of ethnographic research beyond its time-consuming nature. The challenges Chloe identified fall into three broad categories: avoiding taken for granted assumptions linked to challenges associated with balancing closeness and distance; ethical issues and ensuring the usefulness of research findings for her employing organisation. By illuminating these challenges we examine the use-value of ethnographic research within business education and its use-value to an employing organisation.

### **Challenges involved in doing and writing ethnographic research**

Writing this paper has provided an opportunity to employ Phillips & Jorgensen's (2002) advice and reflect on the research process and interpret it with a fresh theoretical perspective. In doing so, three areas for examination and discussion were identified: avoiding taking for-granted assumptions, ethical considerations unique to self-ethnographic research and the use-value of self-ethnographic research to employing organisations and in business education.

#### **Chloe's reflections**

##### Avoiding taken for granted assumptions

Van Maan, (2001:235) asserts that the work of ethnography is to: '*make the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic, to problematise what is taken for granted, to suggest in writing what it is like to be someone else*'. Ybema and Kamsteeg (2009) argue that ethnographic fieldwork calls for a 'dual stance' in having 'an intimate familiarity with the situation' whilst simultaneously viewing it from a distance and with detachment. Powdermaker (1966) describes the ethnographer's role in the field as close to being both 'stranger and friend'.

Alvesson (2003) discusses 'self' ethnography which he describes as a study in which the researcher describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a "natural access", is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants, the intention being to draw attention to the researcher's own cultural context, rather than putting the researcher's own experiences at the centre which distinguishes it from auto-ethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Alvesson highlights the difference between conventional ethnography and self- ethnography by describing ethnography as "breaking in" to a particular research setting by trying to create knowledge through understanding the natives and self-ethnography as "breaking out" of the taken for grantedness of a particular structure and attempting to analyse the responses and behaviours of fellow organisational members from a certain distance.

Aileen encouraged consideration of self-ethnographic research as a strategy for our practitioner research projects. I initially questioned its suitability for my own research as it seemed (by Alvesson's definition) to require a researcher who was an immediate insider to the community being researched; in my case the female academic community at the University, which was actually foreign to me in terms of my work location (in central professional services) and role (as a Recruitment Manager within the HR Department). However, upon reflection, I feel my research was more suited

to a self-ethnographic approach and may have benefited from more conscious awareness on my part of its suitability. While I am not in an academic role, situated in an academic Faculty, I have a number of things in common with the academics I was researching; being a fellow organisational member, an aspiring academic and a female myself with natural access to their community due to everyday interactions necessary as part of my role. I would therefore argue my research qualified at the least, as a form of self-ethnography.

Reflecting on my research from a temporal distance, I would argue for the benefits of adopting a self-ethnographic strategy. One rationale for self-ethnography, which I think is particularly relevant to this research, is that the insider is, potentially, better positioned to reveal “the true story”, than the stranger-ethnographer who will normally experience some access problems, particularly on the level of depth access, i.e. stories on sensitive matters (Alvesson, 2003). As a staff member within the organisation I was researching, it was relatively easy for me to recruit volunteers to participate in the study due to the regular interactions I, and my colleagues within the HR Department, have with academic staff as part of our day jobs. I do however, acknowledge that one issue with being University staff is that I unavoidably entered the research with taken for granted assumptions about, for example, the University’s culture and its impact, and that such assumptions had the potential to influence my participants (an area I cover in more detail in the next section) and colour my research objectives and outcomes. I would therefore stress how important it is for the self-ethnographer to both: acknowledge their own assumptions as part of the process and, to make a conscious effort not to allow such assumptions to guide/dominate the research process and/or influence participants. Should a self-ethnographer consciously or unconsciously allow their own ideas to dominate the research process it is likely to impact the reliability and credibility of the research and consequently, its use-value to the organisation.

This is not to say that I believe self-ethnography either can or should be objective. Self-ethnography requires an insider-researcher who will inevitably enter with an insider-perspective and within this a certain bias. Silverman (1989;2001) talks about the ‘subjective world of interviewees’ which will be determined by their beliefs, attitudes and psychological traits and this is equally true of researchers and presents even more of an issue for self- ethnographers due to their knowledge of and exposure to the context they are researching.

My view is that it is vitally important within self-ethnography for the opinions and experiences of my participants to be central to the research and for the personal experiences and emotions of the researcher to be excluded as far as possible in both ‘doing’ and ‘writing’ ethnography. However, in ‘doing’ ethnography, in particular undertaking one-to-one interviews, I found the concept of remaining impartial and objective challenging and found myself instinctively sympathising and empathising with my participants. To balance this I employed a variety of techniques to counter the effects of my instincts on the research; I was careful not to verbally disclose my opinion and to use open, rather than leading questions when asking about perceived barriers and consciously made attempts to exclude my personal experiences and emotions when writing up findings. In spite of my efforts I was aware that my participants may have assumed a bias on my part and sympathy towards barriers they might be experiencing perhaps due to: my gender, the fact I had chosen this subject area and non-verbal clues I may have given particularly during the interview process such as sympathetic body language. Upon re-reading my interview transcripts to test this, repeated use of phrases such as “You know...”, when a participant introduced an idea or as an opener to illustrate a particular point implying an assumption of shared understanding of the opinions and perspectives being expressed struck me as telling. Personal references to my understanding and perceived sympathy were common despite my input within the interviews being largely confined to posing questions indicating that a lack of objectivity or perceived lack of objectivity on my part was detectable.

With the benefit of hindsight, I reflected on the impact of the presence of my own taken for granted assumptions and perceived lack of objectivity on the quality of my findings. I would certainly argue for the benefits contextual knowledge on the part of the researcher can offer the research process. Whilst I had not worked directly with any of my participants prior to this research, I believe my position as female, fellow staff member and student at another HEI provided me with the advantage of an immediate mutual understanding of certain aspects of university life which would not have been possible for an outsider. For example, on a practical level, when I asked interviewees to discuss their view of the University's appraisal process, all correctly assumed knowledge on my part of the way the process 'should' work according to University policy, and so spent the majority of our discussion time focussing on the detail of their actual experiences. My experience supports Alvesson's view that an advantage of self-ethnography is the possibility that a deeper and more profound knowledge of a setting may lead to theoretical development that is more well grounded in experiences and observations than is common. Compared to studying settings which the researcher, even after months of research work, still has a relatively limited knowledge of, the study of settings which the researcher really is familiar with may be productive. In support of this, entering the research with a clear understanding of University's structure, policies and procedures also increased efficiency in the sense that it eliminated a requirement for me to spend significant time researching these areas in order to facilitate my understanding of the context in which my participants were working which, in turn, allowed me to spend more time discussing and analysing associated issues and their perceived impact on female careers.

I would suggest that in the context of this kind research the most important advantage and one that has the potential to elevate self-ethnography over more conventional ethnography is the potential build an immediate trust between researcher and participants and reduce anxieties associated with, for example, an interview process, resulting in open and in-depth discussions. Openness is something I was fortunate enough to experience with almost all of my participants and this resulted in detailed discussions around the nature and causes of barriers to career progression and practical recommendations which either supported or built upon areas for improvement already identified by the organisation. I would suggest that in this context trust was generated as a direct result a number of shared taken for granted assumptions about the research context and perhaps even at times, participant perception of bias towards a particular point of view on the part of the researcher. It is possible that the same level of openness would have been elicited had a male and/or outsider-ethnographer undertaken the study however I would suggest that building a similar level of trust would have been more of a challenge for an outsider.

The level of openness from participants did however, cause issues in that whilst all were willing to disclose instances where they had experienced barriers to career progression, some specifically requested I did not report examples provided either within my dissertation or to colleagues within the HR Department (despite my re-assurance of confidentiality). Such requests presented me with a number of ethical issues which I will cover in my detail in the next section.

Whilst my own experiences lead me to concur with Alvesson's view that an advantage of self-ethnography over traditional ethnography is that a self-ethnographer may be able to stimulate more in-depth discussion and therefore depth to the research, I would also highlight additional challenges that come as a by-product of this. If, as I suggest above, increased openness and in-depth discussion are stimulated as a result of trust built on assumptions around shared contextual knowledge and even shared bias, self-ethnographers must enter their research with an increased awareness of the potential for such factors to imbalance their findings and employ distancing techniques whilst 'doing' and 'writing up' their ethnography to counter this. Researching within my workplace resulted in in-depth, frank discussion however the details disclosed within those discussions were often sensitive and could not be presented as findings due to confidentiality and/or ethical issues. I would therefore support the potential for in-depth discussion to occur within self-ethnographic research

whilst questioning its ultimate value to organisations if findings but cannot always be either recorded or utilised for the benefit of the organisation and its employees.

### Ethical issues

*'Precisely because ethnographic research depends upon human relationship, engagement, and attachment, it places research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer'*

*-Judith Stacey (1988: 21-27)*

At the research proposal stage I thought of research ethics as simply a matter of obtaining the 'informed consent' of my participants, however, the 'inequality and potentially treacherous' (Stacey, 1988: 21-27) nature of the relationship between researcher and those being researched and the potential for exploitation became uncomfortably clear during the process of reflecting during writing this paper. A number of ethical issues cause me concern, and seem of particular relevance to the self-ethnographer who, unlike traditional ethnographers, will remain a part of the community they are researching long after the research project is complete.

### **Obtaining informed consent**

In obtaining the consent of my interviewees I attempted Fine's (1980), 'explicit cover' strategy by making explicit to each participant the goals and hypotheses of my research at the point of recruitment and again at the start of each semi-structured interview without considering the impact of this behaviour on my participants and the outcome of my research. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see the very clear potential for influencing my interviewees' towards identifying career obstacles in their responses by openly referring to my research objectives and previously identified themes in the literature.

Informed consent is made more complex by Glas and Strauss's (1967) 'grounded theory' which I used as part of my research strategy. 'Grounded theory' requires a good ethnographer not to know what they are looking for until they have found it and while the importance of researching previously identified themes identified in the literature is not questioned, the potential effects of making research objectives known to participants is worth acknowledgement.

Reflecting on my objectives and the intense nature of the one-to-one interview, I would suggest that although within my objectives I communicated the broader aim of identifying perceived barriers (if any) to female academic career progression, creating an opportunity for participants to refer to their own unique experience, the act of referring to my objectives, which I used to base open questions to focus areas of discussion at the start of each interview certainly had the potential to influence participant responses in favour of previously identified issues in the literature. I am more concerned about the potential for this in some of my participants than others. Some interviewees came with clear views on the topic and guided the discussion, setting the pace and flow of the interview, while others appeared less confident in their ideas, offering shorter responses and occasionally appearing to struggle with elaborating on some of the issues raised. In these cases, I see a greater potential for researchers to influence responses. Here, I felt pressure to guide the discussion, inevitably making additional reference to previously identified themes and issues. My experiences support Fine's assertion that the more directive ethnographers are in encouraging informants to talk, the more they increase the risk of leading the informant responses.

I attended the University's gender equality event as an observer and obtained consent via a senior colleague within the HR Department. I made clear my aims and objectives to this individual who granted me permission to attend. However, as attendees were not asked to make themselves known to HR prior to the event, I was not able to inform them that I would be observing and the details of my project until the day itself. As such, the attendees did not have the same period of time to

consider my research aims and objectives and, on reflection, I have considered the possibility that they may have felt pressured into giving their consent (although none reported this) as it was requested in a group setting. As they had very little time to consider my objectives in detail, there is also a risk that they may not have fully understood the implications of allowing me to observe and report on their views.

Subconsciously, I may have reacted with caution to this private, unspoken concern. In reviewing my research process, I noticed that in collating my findings, I chose to report, in the main, on information provided by members of the HR team during the event (feeling confident that these individuals fully understood my presence and purpose) and used very few direct quotes from participants. This was also partly because, unlike my semi-structured interviews, I did not tape record and transcribe the data I collected; instead relying on my research notes which. I was mindful of Fine and Shulman's (2009) advice that problems occur when relying on field notes taken to recall observations which is something I experienced when choosing the data to present as my findings. Conscious that relying on field notes may result in some subconscious moulding of the recalled words of others for my own purposes, I used only direct quotes from transcribed interview data in my findings which I at least felt confident were actually spoken. The choice to largely omit my observations due to consent issues may have had a damaging affect on my findings in that they may have gained additional depth and colour from the potentially contrasting views expressed in a less formal group discussion.

As a self-ethnographer the issues around informed consent seem of particular importance. As an organisational member and HR professional the importance for my personal and professional credibility of demonstrating understanding around issues such as confidentiality is paramount. As a University staff I continued to work within the organisation I was researching following completion of the project. In order to perform effectively it is absolutely vital that I maintain positive professional relationships with female academic colleagues I encounter as part of my day job. The implications of my participants perceiving a breach of trust on my part could be profound for my career at the University. I therefore see obtaining informed consent as precarious and a particular challenge for self-ethnographers who will be required to demonstrate greater judgement in communicating their findings than outsider-ethnographers who have the advantage of disappearing from view on completion of their research, escaping any adverse impact.

### ***Missing information, exploitation and betrayal***

Stacey (1988: 21-27) claims that as author, 'an ethnographer cannot (and should not) escape tasks of interpretation, evaluation, and judgement' and in doing so significant ethical issues present themselves: the impact of excluding potentially important information; exploiting informants and even their betrayal.

I concur with Roth (1962; 283) who states that all research is 'secret in some ways' and highlights the process of selecting and presenting data to present research themes and outcomes is entirely within the power of the researcher and outside that of the researched. It is in this space that personal choices are inevitably made in relation to data selection and herein is the potential for crucial information to be excluded or misrepresented at the expense of the research and its informants. This is a particular challenge for the self-ethnographer who, as an insider, will need to consider wider implications of information disclosure on their working relationships and careers following research publication.

Fine and Shulman (2009) talk about an 'imperfectly observant ethnographer' and the research process as sometimes stressful, requiring concentration and physical endurance. In view of this they highlight the potential for ethnographers to quite unintentionally 'miss' crucial information which in turn goes unreported. My own experiences support this point. I found the semi-structured interview process at the start exciting, gripping and fascinating and by the close at times exhausting, gruelling

and even frustrating. I interviewed less than 10 individuals but each semi-structured interview took between 1 and 2 and a half hours and I lost count of the number of painstaking hours it took to transcribe interview data in preparation for analysis. I greeted my first interviewees with enthusiasm and felt fully engaged in the interviews and transcription process. I attribute this largely to the fact that at this stage (and owing to this being my first research project on this subject) the information they were providing felt fresh, new, intriguing and surprising. By the time I reached my final interviews I had seen many of the issues raised repeated and, happily, a number of common themes emerge. While my perception at the time was that I concealed my increasing fatigue from informants and displayed the same enthusiasm and appreciation for their participation, internally, the repetitive and lengthy nature of the interview situation was beginning to frustrate me and I found myself attempting to crush a desire to rush to the finish. Reflecting on my reactions I am concerned about the impact of my emotions on the quality of the research findings, in particular, whether my tiredness during the latter interviews and transcribing process may have led to me giving less attention and consequently weight to the views of these informants. In undertaking future projects I would suggest emphasising the importance in planning a research strategy of ensuring continuing awareness of the impact of fatigue.

Fine and Shulman (2009) claim ethnographers are sometimes motivated to 'give voice' to groups or individuals in organisations as a form of social justice advocacy yet in doing so may expose information that is harmful to the organisation and informants themselves; a point that had particular resonance for me, as a self-ethnographer, when reflecting on my own research experience. Such issues throw up questions about how candid an ethnographer can or should be in writing up findings. A self-conscious researcher may censor certain information for a number of reasons: to ensure informant anonymity or for reasons related to the preservation of their own career and position in the organisation; the latter being particularly relevant to self-ethnographers who must maintain their careers and professional relationships post project completion.

In more than one of my interviews, informants explicitly asked that I did not use examples of discrimination and bad practice they had been exposed to either in my research findings or when reporting to the HR Department. Being exposed to this information led to a number of personal and practical issues. From a research point of view my reaction was one of disappointment not to be able to relay what I saw as crucial examples of barriers to career progression in support of my aims and objectives. Equally, out of concern for the individuals I thought it important that I was at least allowed to report what I had heard to relevant members of the HR team so issues could be addressed directly or supportive initiatives applied by relevant members of the HR team. I felt a moral dilemma in the sense that I felt that the reason individuals had requested my silence may be a fear of reprisals and a sense that such incidents should be reported in order for the situation to improve for the individuals concerned and for the greater benefit of the organisation. In the end, out of respect for my informants I omitted a number of issues raised from my research findings which I feared may have limited the potential for me to demonstrate a weight of evidence to support my recommendations.

I see censorship issues as more likely to arise within self-ethnographic research. Where a researcher is perceived as an 'insider' with in-depth understanding of a particular organisational context s/he is more likely to inspire trust and encourage openness in participants; this was certainly my experience. Increased trust will often lead to increased disclosure of sensitive issues, leaving the self-ethnographer, whilst grateful for the provision of information, in the potentially hazardous position of selecting appropriately and presenting findings for organisational benefit whilst maintaining confidentiality and respecting and protecting the position of informants. I would suggest that whilst it may be possible for an outsider-ethnographer to experience similar disclosure of sensitive information, it is less likely given their position as a stranger to the research context and informants.



## **Is self-ethnographic research useful to employing organisation and business education?**

### **Chloe's reflections:**

Conducting ethnographic research requires time and commitment on the part of the researcher and the organisation and therefore, it is understandable that employers want to be sure that it is a task worth undertaking and is both useful and valuable. Ethnography and self-ethnography may provide the researcher with a depth and breadth of fascinating research material in terms of findings however, our own experiences lead me to question the use-value of such findings to an employer where: ethical considerations prevent findings being disclosed for the benefit of the organisation and; there are questions as to whether the content of the findings and conclusions represent the views and concerns of a representative group beyond the research sample.

A major concern of mine when completing my dissertation which resulted in my submitting the recommendations to the University's Equality and Diversity team was the impact of information omitted due to ethical considerations on the ultimate use-value for my research to the University. Whilst I omitted some findings and presented only elements of others, when reviewing my conclusions and recommendations for organisational response, I asked myself the question, would they have been any different had I been enabled to reveal more? My findings would undoubtedly have been more interesting and potentially uncomfortable reading for the organisation. However, the consensus on the barriers faced by female academics which supported or built on those identified in the literature remained the same regardless of whether the more sensitive, detailed and controversial information was included or not.

There is an argument that the information I was forced to omit may have added weight to the research and, in presenting it to the organisation provoked a greater urgency to react. There is also an argument that it would have had a greater immediate use as the organisation may have been able to act upon and potentially resolve local issues having a particular impact on effective implementation on policy and procedure. However, in terms of the aims and objectives of the research, the purpose was not to seek out and expose the detail of individual issues but to draw conclusions and make recommendations to address common barriers experienced by the University's female academic population and in this respect I believe my objectives were met. I believe my experience supports Fine and Shulman's (2009) perspective that organisational ethnographers may exclude information from published material as their task is to contextualise events in a social system within a web of meaning, then name the cause, excluding other patterns and causes. Despite the exclusion of some personal experiences disclosed by participants, my approach enabled me to successfully identify commonly perceived barriers to career progression. From my organisation's perspective I was able to meet its request to name potential causes of limited female career progression which proved valuable in that recommendations supported or added to existing equality plans and as such have the potential to benefit the organisation in recruiting, supporting and retaining high quality female academics.

Silverman (1989; 2001) stresses the value of interview statements in particular, are in many cases limited in terms of their capacity to reflect the reality 'out there' as well as the subjective world of the interviewee (beliefs, attitudes, psychological traits) partly because the statements are liable to be determined by the situation and related to the interview context (also Dingwall, 1997; Potter, 1987, Shotter and Gergen, 1989;1994). Alvesson (2003) supports this view by suggesting that there are always sources of influence within an interview context that cannot be controlled or minimised and highlights the difficulty ethnographers may experience in separating 'distortions' from 'authentic experiences' or 'correct information'. When reflecting upon my own research I questioned not only my interviewees' capacity to reflect the reality 'out there' within the organisation but also my own capacity for accurate reflection in my role as researcher (as detailed within the Ethical Considerations section of this paper). I was conscious of the relatively small interviewee sample of just 6 female academics I used and their ability to reflect the wider concerns

of the University's female academic community. I attempted to balance this by varying the level and ages of my sample and ensured it contained representatives from the 3 University Faculties. In selecting my interviewees I used a mixed approach of identifying individuals via my colleagues within the HR Department who have regular contact with academic departments and were able to recommend individuals who were willing to participate. I also used a recruitment training course I run as an opportunity to ask for volunteers.

However, despite my efforts to vary the sample to represent female academics at various levels and locations across the University, I found (via the interview process and observing those attending the gender equality event) that many of my participants had an already firmly established interest in equality issues and views on barriers to female career progression and were enthusiastic and willing to participate in order to voice these. While this benefited the research in that participants were willing to talk openly and in great detail about their perceptions, I was concerned that my findings and conclusions may be imbalanced as a result, reflecting a disproportionately negative picture of female academic experiences at the University and barriers to female careers in general and may not represent the views of the wider female population. I was also concerned that as a self-ethnographer, my own pre-conceived ideas about University culture and structure and the impact on female careers would, despite my best efforts to prevent this, seep into the research, adding to the imbalance. In terms of use-value to the organisation, I was concerned that the organisation may feel compelled to respond to barriers perceived as significant by only a small number of individuals with a particular agenda which may not necessarily represent the views of a wider sample.

It has been highlighted that ethnographers are often 'beggars rather than choosers' when it comes to gaining access to participants and may not always be able to recruit their ideal sample (in terms of size and composition) which reflects my experience. While gaining access to an 'ideal' and representative sample may be an impossible aim, I see it as vital for self-ethnographers to acknowledge any perceived imbalance within the sample that causes concern as part of the research so the organisation is fully aware of the context and make active attempts to counter this. With the aim of achieving balance in my own research, I kept a research diary to record more informal interactions I had during the process with female academics I encountered more randomly within my day job in order to expose a wider range of thoughts and opinions within the University's female academic population. Through these interactions I was re-assured that the opinions and views of my participants were echoed to varying levels by a wider sample and therefore my conclusions represented the real concerns of female academics at the University and therefore of use and value to the organisation.

In defence of the value of ethnographic and in particular self-ethnographic research, I would argue that where an organisation approves and supports this kind of research it sends out a strong message that it values concerns and issues expressed by its employees by demonstrating a willingness to spend a significant amount of time observing, listening and analysing problem areas with a view to planning and implementing supportive and problem solving initiatives. The use of an 'insider' or self-ethnographer to undertake the research should add to the perception of an organisation's longer term commitment to understanding a particular issue. In my own case, as a staff member in the HR department, my contribution to highlighting and addressing gender equality issues has extended beyond this particular research due to my ongoing employment within the University, which has allowed me to take my increased knowledge into interlinking policy and process areas within my day job and influence the University's gender equality agenda. In contrast, the use of an outsider-ethnographer may be perceived as more of a gesture on the part of an organisation than longer term commitment. The researcher is likely to disappear from view at the end of the project, leaving participants behind and taking knowledge with her/him.

This was certainly the view of many of my participants. I received a significant amount of positive feedback in relation to organisational support for a project looking specifically at barriers to career progression for female academics and particularly for the use of a University HR team member,

familiar with organisational culture and structure offering a personalised approach to examining the issue. The value of an organisation sending out a message that it cares to take time to sit and listen to the in depth experiences of its employees should not be underestimated as it has the potential to positively impact organisational image as a supportive and respectful employer which has the potential to benefit the organisation in recruitment and importantly retaining high quality employees. At this point in time I see this message as particularly important in the Higher Education sector given the movement in recent years to the 'hard' management practices identified by Deem (1998) and termed 'new managerialism' which have changed the focus in HE away from knowledge and towards productivity.

I would also argue for the value of recommendations emerging from self-ethnographic research. Within my study, recommendations came about as a result of both participant experiences and my own detailed knowledge of the University processes and procedures as well as institutional expectations for implementation. Background knowledge on the part of participant and researcher provided the opportunity to discuss and develop recommendations with the practical context of the University in mind. The result was a largely realistic and potentially achievable set of recommendations which were immediately usable for the organisation. I would suggest that an outsider ethnographer would experience greater difficulty stimulating discussion resulting in usable recommendations due to the need gather basic knowledge around organisational context. I would also suggest that the use of a quantitative survey approach would not have elicited such in depth and useable recommendations as asking respondents to, for example, write down their thoughts may be problematic. Time may be an issue and affect depth of response as well as fears regarding anonymity and confidentiality which may be more significant within a participant when dealing with a faceless online or paper survey as opposed to an individual who is able to stimulate conversation, gain trust and explore ideas.

#### **Self-ethnographic research and business education: Aileen and Elaine's reflections.**

Our role in this exploration is fairly accurately described by Powdermaker (1966) 'both stranger and friend'. Elaine has only recently meet Chloe, though they work in the same organization; Elaine as an academic in the management school and Chloe as a HR manager in Professional services. Elaine's research relationship has been with Aileen, Chloe's academic supervisor; we all share an interest in self-ethnography. Both Elaine and Aileen are part of the female academic community which forms the cultural context of Chloe's research. Indeed, Elaine could quite easily have been in one of the focus groups Chloe observed, or even an interview subject. Additionally, both Elaine and Aileen, before entering academia, had a background in HR.

Writing this paper has provided space for further sense-making. Within this section Elaine and Aileen reflect on Chloe's observations in order to explore the use value of self-ethnographic research within business education. We concentrate on Chloe's reflections on, and explorations of, the challenges and use- value of self ethnographic research within her particular context.

#### *Avoiding taken-for granted assumptions;*

Chloe clearly identifies that a perceived lack of objectivity is not in itself a reason to avoid self-ethnography. She tries hard to put as her central focus the cultural context under study, and the views of her participants, rather than her own emotions and instincts. She has trepidation that in her reflections she may not be able to "break out" (Alvesson, 2003) of the taken –for- granted assumptions of a particular context, by the very nature of her role in it. Reynolds (1998:192), drawing on the work of Kemmis (1985) and Hindmarsh (1993) identified three forms of reflecting-Technical, Consensual and Critical. Whilst Chloe expresses concerns that may indicate her reflections as located in the "consensual" (particularly in relation to identifying context as cause, and possibly developing shared commitment to common values) she does demonstrate significant elements of

the “critical” – notably in identifying and questioning conflicts of power and interest, and with an interest in potentially challenging, and changing the wider cultural processes that underpin these.

*Ethical considerations;*

Alvesson (2003:174) describes self ethnography as a situation in which the researcher-author is ‘more or less on equal terms’ with other participants. Chloe’s HR role is different to the academics interviewed- though arguably they have similarities. But are they on equal terms? In one sense Chloe is in a position of some power and influence- particularly in respect of which aspects of the research she chooses to include or exclude. In another sense, though, she is in a weaker position- she has to ‘sell’ her proposals, at a later date, to her superiors, and she has to produce a ‘professional’ report which will be valued by its sponsors. An academic who identifies a major issue and then requests this is not used in the report leaves this ‘monkey’ on Chloe’s back- how is she to resolve it? In Corley and Eades (2006) we describe our concerns that as academics and researchers, in relation to our Masters students, (who are assessed by us!) it is hard to claim that in any sense there is an equality of position and status that puts us ‘on equal terms’. The potential inequality in Chloe’s case is I believe far more complex.

*Use-value of ethnographic research for the organization;*

‘Close up’ research (Pritchard and Trowler, 2003) arises from the daily practices and concerns of practitioners, and appreciates the complexity and historical/cultural context of human practice as it is played out. To that extent, Chloe describes a cultural setting to which she has a ‘natural access’ and an issue or problem that her employer espouses a desire to address – namely gender inequality. An insider understanding of the organizational context and procedures is potentially a double edged sword – it would be impossible for Chloe in her HR Role not to be aware of the nature both of the perceived ‘problem’ and its potential solutions, as viewed by the organization. However, if, as she suspects, her insider status allows her to get to a deeper level of trust, and a greater depth of debate and analysis, does this compensate? From an organizational perspective, if this leads to a greater degree of insight into the nature of the issues which impact on gender inequality, it could be argued that the potential for bias may be a price worth paying. In any case, the subjects here- female academics- would be extremely likely to be have already come to conclusions, or at least have some views, on the issue of barriers to gender inequality.

Of greater concern, in relation to use-value, is the forced suppression of stories, incidents and insights based on the experiences of those who wanted these kept confidential. Whilst it may be argued that this research was one focused on culture and context rather than individual cause and effect, if the prejudices and/or behaviour of a particularly influential or powerful individual had been identified as significant, an inability to tackle this, due to confidentiality, would have potentially seriously weakened the use-value of the research. To what extent this is more a feature of self ethnography research as opposed to other forms of research, is open to debate.

In conclusion, our paper highlights the need for us, supervisors and students, to be open and reflexive about our own values and practice. We have discussed above some of the implications for business education and argue that overall the potential of self-ethnography can outweigh the pitfalls. However this approach is not for the faint hearted or for those who do not subscribe to critically reflective practice. We suggest that additional empirical examples of self-ethnography work is needed both to wider the debate and to make this type of work more accessible. We welcome feedback and comments on our work and would particularly welcome comments from others who have utilised self-ethnography to inform their research and teaching.

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