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Wafa Said Mosleh

**Autoethnographic narratives as a process of inquiry**

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) asserted that by combining characteristics from autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography embraces researchers’ subjectivity and emotionality aiming to provide evocative, self-reflective and thick descriptions that connect the personal to the social, cultural and political. But while autoethnography as a qualitative research approach means to give voice to personal experiences in the field and using those to provide ethnographic insights and understandings, the writing itself may come about in a diversity of forms. Autoethnographic writing may serve as a form of inquiry as well as form of representation, which enables researchers and practitioners to engage with it as both a process and product of ethnographic research. Autoethnographic writing has been particularly relevant and influential in addressing issues where personal and embodied experiences may seem particularly relevant for accessing and understanding a specific field of inquiry (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2014; Chang, 2013; Solomon, 2010).

Within organisational studies, autoethnography and personal narratives are increasingly used and accepted as a legitimate approach to the study of organisational practices and issues that may be physically and emotionally experienced by an insider but are harder to access and address through a more traditional ethnographic approach where the fieldworker is less personally involved and has less at stake. Even if autoethnographic writing methods have not been as
widely involved in making sense of organisational life, there are several advantages in doing so (Gottlieb & Mosleh, 2016).

As I will argue in this chapter, autoethnographic narration helps social researchers understand everyday events in organisations through experiencing them first hand. This can enable the emergence of themes, that are often not articulated in organisational research conducted through traditional ethnographic methods. As I will demonstrate, this includes conversations that are usually experienced as difficult to bring up in public/formal conversation.

One method for writing organisational autoethnography is to build personal narratives around the experiences one makes within the organisations engaged with. As a researcher attending to this sort of writing, one enables an immediate, unfiltered articulation of the experienced happenings, and the reactions to them. Narrative writing can take many different shapes and invite for different types of actions; either to feed back the insights emerging or to analyse and reflect on one’s own learning on the organisational structures and processes (Mosleh & Larsen, forthcoming). Thus, writing in narrative form becomes a way of grounding research in human experience. By writing narratives throughout the process of carrying out organisational research, one constructs and interprets social processes, both at different points in times but also across multiple contexts/sites (Cunliffe, Luhman, & Boje, 2006). For the researcher, it can become a process of meaning-making in the world, involving both our own but also many other voices. Such understanding is built upon the assumption that we, as humans, make sense of the happenings around us through improvised acts where we understand who we are and what we do as we listen, talk and interact with others. The narrative writing style thus becomes a way to invite ourselves and others into our sensemaking process of organisational research and to keep a
responsive dialogic readership, as we are not telling a narrative in isolation from others (Simon, 2013).

In order to argue for the advantages of writing autoethnographic narratives within organisational settings, we first need to reflect on what it means to be part of an organisation and how we understand the link between wider organisational circumstances and the individual experience of them. Most organisational research splits the individual and the organisation level and articulates research as being done either on a micro-level or on a macro-level. Autoethnographic research works on a micro-level that considers and depicts detailed personal experiences that capture the everydayness of organisational life and connects those to the wider political agendas, strategic ambitions and practices of the organisation. Autoethnographic writing tends to focus on the particular, specific and contextual organisational experience, but it does not simply remain at the individual stories. Rather, the narratives reflect the social situatedness and enables a process of meaning making about the wider organisational structures. The strength of autoethnographic writing thereby refers to the capacity to understand central organisational phenomena by making sense of individual, situated and lived experiences. Thus, through this form of writing, we are able to expose and develop understandings of experiences that may otherwise be disregarded, inaccurately described or silenced due to the anxiety they can cause.

As a writer of autoethnographic narratives, I find it important to reflect on my understanding of organisations and the nature of organising, to conceptually justify how my work may contribute to understanding organisational life. I here move beyond the dichotomy of individual and organisational levels. Stacey, Griffin, and Shaw (2000), amongst others, present such argument. They describe organisations and human life as complex responsive processes of relating: understanding our interactions with each other as processes of relating, in which we from
moment to moment respond to each other’s gestures and create organisational patterns that emerge as a result of the interplay of many people’s intentions, interests and agendas. Thus, the overall pattern, e.g. ‘the organisation’ emerges through local human interaction. This thinking is influenced by the pragmatist George Herbert Mead (1934), who articulated the act of human communication as transformative, i.e. as changing the individual self, the actual situation and the society through the act of communication – a perspective that is in opposition to the now almost taken-for-granted idea of communication as a process of sending and receiving messages between individual minds.

If we accept that, we can argue that reflecting the transformative nature (Elias, 1998) of what one is taking part of, can contribute to knowledge. From such perspective, no single individual can be understood as responsible for the overall emerging outcome in organisations. Everyone is contributing to what emerges. In this complex web of interactions, we are interdependent of each other, and we participate in processes of inclusion and exclusion (Elias & Scotson, 1994). In other words, we all take part in the politics of everyday life (Stacey, 2003), and even if some stakeholders are more powerful than others, the outcome emerges in a web of interdependencies (Elias, 1998). I therefore find it central to invite researchers to reflect auto-ethnographically, as a way to make sense of what emerges in organisations, and to reflect one’s own participation in the web of interactions and the local politics. Here, the ‘unit of analysis’ changes from the individual and the organisation to the processes of relating. I argue that the process of autoethnographic writing can support researchers in understanding those connections between the individual organisational stakeholders and the overall organisational patterns.

In the broad array of topics, one may discuss in relation to autoethnographic writing, this chapter will particularly focus on the notion of ‘data’. I specifically ask questions that centre around;
how data emerges through abductive experiences, what ‘relevant’ data this type of autoethnographic writing may invite, which formats of data can emerge in such writings and how the representation of data from autoethnographic writings can help elicit unarticulated themes emerging within organisations. I will elaborate on how we, as autoethnographic researchers dealing with organisational issues, may generate, share and understand ‘data’ in different formats through writing personal narratives. I will present the notion of abductive experiences and explore how these may create new lines of inquiry that lead to new understandings of organisational research.

I am particularly concerned with autoethnographic writing as a process of inquiry rather than an end-product. This means that I present the writing of autoethnographic narratives as a way of approaching and making sense of organisational issues and practices, rather than a finalised representation of data. The autoethnographic narratives I present share a sensitivity to the way personal experiences may address themes that are not articulated in formal settings, including issues of power, by providing new insights and challenging conventional discourses and official organisational accounts.

Below, I present different types of narratives, that are used for different purposes at different points of time in the organisational research process. Their purposes range from ways of capturing informal data to ways of articulating conflicting situations as means of sensemaking. As we will see later in this chapter, the narratives take different shapes; some were at the time of writing not written with a purpose of sharing with others but simply used as means to empty one’s own thoughts and reflect on challenging experiences in the field. But even when writing on our own, we do so in dialogue with social situations and imagined others, and regardless of the
form or meaning that my narratives writing eventually took, it was the process of writing that was important.

As we, as social researchers, carry out ethnographic or autoethnographic research, we inevitably find ourselves entangled in different processual social situations, during which unexpected happenings can occur. As we are in the midst of those, we are forced to make all sorts of small decisions along the way, and the writing of narratives can be a way of bringing meaning unto those unpredictable events, opening new lines of inquiry as well help us to make choices that inform our studies.

**Data as abductive experiences**

Writing context-sensitive autoethnographic narratives in organisational research enables immediate, unfiltered articulations of particularly interesting events. I frame these as abductive experiences. Abductive experiences, which Brinkmann (2014) coined ‘stumble data’, are particularly driven by wonder and surprise and are not necessarily presented for us as obvious ‘data’ in our research endeavours. Rather, they are experiences that we stumble upon, which cause breakdowns and unbalance in our understandings of the world and thereby require us to lead a process of inquiry in order to regain balance and learn something new. Inspired by Brinkmann, I move beyond discussing data as something we construct to confirm/reject a theoretical hypothesis or collect to generalise into theoretical understandings. With the autoethnographic writings, I seek to highlight and make sense of surprising events that we, as autoethnographic researchers, stumble upon, and which have the potential to become data. I argue that the understanding of real-life situations, which social researchers are faced by in organisational settings can, with time, change as a result of the abductive experiences we encounter. Actively involving oneself in fieldwork, and remaining reflexive to the insights
developed from it, can lead to an open process of inquiry. In practice, that means immersing oneself into the empirical context and allowing the research questions to be guided by that, rather than grasping for detached and objective translations following pre-planned means of data collection.

By writing about the abductive experiences we are faced by in our organisational research endeavours, we are able to detach ourselves from the actual experiences in a way that enables us to examine our own and others’ entanglements in the organisation. In doing so, we enable a process of sensemaking that shifts between involved and detached engagement. In doing that, the writing of our abductive experiences becomes a way to nuance and reflect on our experiences with others, and still provide legitimacy to subjective encounters in organisational research.

**Abductive experiences in the light of pragmatism**

Carrying out fieldwork in organisational settings requires researchers to reflect on own fundamental assumptions about the nature of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’, because such perceptions have implications for how organisations are studied and understood. John Dewey (1910, 1920), a leading pragmatist philosopher, explains that the particular focus on ‘truth’ distracts us from paying attention to nature of inquiry; instead of asking what ‘truth’ is, we should be asking ourselves what difference it makes in adopting one or the other method for inquiry and what kind of knowledge those different methods allow us to produce (Morgan, 2014). Taking this into account, it is easy to imagine that pragmatist philosophy is sensitised through human experience in a social world, where individuals interact and collaboratively create social phenomena that inform human thinking and action. Such an understanding has been developed by Charles Peirce, John Dewey, George H. Mead and William James (Simpson, 2009).
Martela (2015) states that pragmatism has only had little direct influence on social sciences, but that in recent years more organisational scholars have started to draw inspiration from the pragmatic approach. He argues that pragmatism has the potential to become a distinct methodological lever in organisational research, citing Wicks and Freeman (1998), who propose that in comparison to other epistemological stands, it can better address practical relevance to organisational research.

Essentially, pragmatists see theoretical concepts as tools to cope with reality, rather than representing abstract truths. This supports the argument for ‘multiple truths’, which recognises that individual perspectives can provide different understandings of the same phenomenon, none of which can claim to fully represent absolute ‘truth’ (Bacon, 2012). Pragmatist philosophers see human life as being in constant movement: reality is not a fixed entity, but a process of ongoing co-construction in which people act and relate to others, developing and negotiating interdependencies (Mead, 1967).

By taking this positioning in a research process aimed at understanding organisations, I accept – while some insights and learnings can be usefully extrapolated to other social processes – no absolute objective truth about organisations and their innovation processes can be made. Dewey (1925) stresses that a phenomenon is dependent on the context and events emerging at a given time: ‘reality’ is dynamic, uncertain and unstable and should be understood as part of the bigger picture of the environment studied.

Taking a stand that accepts the idea of ‘multiple truths’ leads to the perception of ‘reality’ as conditional to specific situations, people, experiences and the sense that researchers or practitioners make of it. Such an understanding, as explicated by Stacey and Griffin (2008) in the complexity sciences, especially draws lines back to Mead and Dewey. Understanding ‘reality’ as
ongoing fluctuations of change and instability is illustrated by Dewey’s way of describing it as ‘warranted assertibility’, to avoid articulating ‘reality’ as a static entity waiting to be captured (Bacon, 2012). This is a way of expressing that one’s assumptions/hypotheses becomes valuable as they are confirmed in the process of research.

According to Dewey (1938), warranted assertions are insights emerging from our processes of inquiry that are so settled that we can begin to act upon them. However, he also emphasises that we should embrace the feeling of not knowing, because that will drive new processes of inquiry. Building on this, Martela (2015) explains that taking a pragmatic approach to organisational research means embracing our pre-understandings, warranted assertions and theories to make sense of a research topic, but that we simultaneously need to unblock our path of inquiry by avoiding being blinkered to surprising events and insights.

With that said, Dewey (1938) stresses that we should not doubt our conclusions just for the sake of it; rather, to make strategic use of doubt, so that it may serve the inquiry in arriving at reasonable warranted assertions to address the challenge at hand. Thus, inquiry should begin from and be rooted in our everyday abductive experiences in the field. I emphasise that in this chapter through narrative examples that emerged from my daily experiencing in the organisation I later describe.

For auto-ethnographic research, taking a humble stance towards what ‘reality’ is has implications for how organisations are to be studied and how they are to be understood. It requires an understanding that the stakeholders’ actions, as well as our own as researchers, are highly dependent on the conditions of the context in which the research is conducted. These conditions relate both to the stakeholders’ own experiences and to the organisational events continuously unfolding. Thus, by accepting that organisational processes emerge under complex and dynamic
conditions, it may be possible to identify significant events; but objectively attempting to
determine how and why they are significant poses some difficulty.

Like the outcomes they can lead to, from a pragmatic perspective, organisational processes are
novel and unique to the particular organisation in which they are emerging. This challenges the
conception that overarching generalisations can be made. Within qualitative research, scholars
often apply theoretical concepts to obtain general insights from the analysis of specific
qualitative patterns (Halkier, 2011). Such analytical generalisation is done in many different
ways, but Halkier argues that it is often described on an abstract level and that qualitative
scholars debate whether generalisation is a desirable or a central concern for drawing
conclusions from data.

This has also been discussed from a complex responsive process perspective (Stacey et al.,
2000), in which first-hand experiences written in a narrative format provide insights on the
conversational ‘reality’ of organisations. According to Homan (2016), the outcomes of complex
responsive process research should be evaluated not only from a theoretical perspective but also
from a practical one in order to stay consistent with the nature of the understandings from which
the processual concept was developed. Homan emphasises that the insights gained, and detailed
accounts are inevitably tied to the local interactions, and for that reason cannot be ascribed
generic representation detached from time and space; nor can they provide rules and guideless
for problem solving. Rather, they should be categorised as practical wisdom that evokes, for the
reader, the feeling of having been in contact with local experiences such that they have a
‘window’ to the experience and, if it resonates with them, can choose to transfer insights to their
own context.
This is quite different from attempting to provide an objective and generic presentation of organisational life. Homan refers to Brinkmann (2012) when stating that the process of ‘theorising’ in this type of organisational research is not separated from the concrete experience of doing research. The research process parallels the daily abductive experiences in the organisation, where we are inspired by theoretical concepts, writing narratives about our encounters, discussing them with others and reflecting on them.

**Recognising and responding to abductive experiences**

In the following, I will present two sides of one story based on a research study I carried out in a European product development company within the consumer market. I present it from two different perspectives to highlight the difference between the insights that researchers can generate through either sticking to formally planned field work or recognising and responding to abductive experiences. The first story is the official one, which I was presented with on commencing ethnographic field work at the organisation by following the formally planned interviews and conducting participant observation in the agreed upon settings. The other (‘ unofficial’) story is what I personally became aware of through my ongoing auto-ethnographic immersion during which I remained responsive to my abductive experiences and followed openings for informal conversations, which made themselves available. I present the stories to highlight how the stumbling upon abductive experiences through informal engagement within organisations can elicit ‘data’ that otherwise is not articulated in formal settings and therefore is difficult to generate through traditional ethnographic endeavours.
The official story

As my PhD journey began, I was involved in an academia-industry project of which the aim was to explore and develop more engaging ways for practitioners to learn about the practice of innovation. It was suggested that I work with a product development company in the consumer market. The particular department that would be involved is one that functions as a cross-organisational service unit. It delivers technology solutions to the rest of the organisation upon specific request and funding. Thus, if any department working on a new project needs a technical component for the products, the department I collaborated with will be contacted and asked to develop and deliver that component.

On visiting the organisational department to lay the stepping-stones for our collaboration, I conducted an interview with the Head of Department and one of his three middle managers. As I sought to understand the department’s structure, purpose and strategic aims, the department head explained some significant developments that had affected the department’s need for and interest in innovation processes:

We have a strong organisation built around strong processes. We had a big shift about 10 years ago. We built an outside-in approach, involving our customers in the development. We listen to them, validate our designs and test. We want to create value together with our customers. But with that shift, the complexity increased. We need designers and engineers in our department to develop these technical solutions, and with the diversity of professional backgrounds they hold, we have been facing the challenge of facilitating the innovation process involving all those competencies.

He mentioned that although he had been with the company for several years, he had only recently been appointed to manage this department. He hoped to enhance its ability to represent a
strong and value-adding internal business partner for the rest of the organisation. To help develop a team that could collaborate across many disciplines, he had begun physically locating people in the office space around project teams, rather than in competence centres:

Some of our employees have been in their own glass cage for years on end. Only working with people holding the same kind of expertise as themselves. And now, suddenly, they are taken out to work on different projects and bring their knowledge into play in unfamiliar ways. We don’t want our engineers to kill some of the designers’ really innovative ideas, but neither do we want the concepts we develop to be completely detached from reality. We need the right balance of different knowledge fields in our innovation process, and we need to teach our employees to feel comfortable in working like that.

The middle manager, with responsibility for design and innovation (Section Chief 1) in the department, presented me with same type of arguments, yet with a particular emphasis on facilitation:

Nothing is going to happen if we don’t facilitate the process. We need to facilitate the process of collaboration, so that everyone feels valued and respected. We need methods to facilitate, but the methods need to come alive. It’s one thing to build a framework, and another what everyone ends up doing on a Monday morning.

And so, a couple of months passed, and my PhD research formally began. The first session I was invited to observe was a meeting where two of the middle managers, responsible for design/innovation (Section Chief 1) and mechanical engineering (Section Chief 2), were to inform their senior designers/engineers that new work procedures would soon be implemented. At the centre of this change was the concept of design briefs. Previously, individual department employees could spend some of their working time developing new ideas that could potentially
turn into projects. This was no longer allowed; instead, they were to develop detailed design briefs for any potentially promising new idea. These briefs needed to describe the idea/technology, the resources needed, stakeholders to be involved, the process/timeframe for development and so on. Based on this, the idea’s potential would be evaluated by the department head and management team (Section Chiefs 1 and 2, together with their third managerial colleague – who so far had not played a conspicuous role in department).

This change of approach was explained as being necessitated by budget cuts, resulting in the need to allocate budgets to the ideas with more potential, rather than ‘waste’ resources on undocumented skunkworks. The new procedures would increase departmental transparency and facilitate the establishment of cross-disciplinary project teams, who would be required to work together on the development of the briefs.

Section Chief 2 seemed to be in charge of the meeting, stressing:

“We have a limited budget, so you must keep us informed of what you’re working on and why. Things have been loose until now, but that’s not how things will be from now on. We need to know what’s cooking, and as managers we have to justify what we are spending our money on. The briefs must help us prioritise where to cut down. I’m going to have to ask you to do that. This is not to limit your creative process, but to support you.”

Some resistance was apparent among the employees, who argued against the new procedure. Despite this, the management team was keen for the employees to immediately get started on the process of creating design briefs in cross-disciplinary teams, which they could then use to evaluate the potential of proposed projects and choose which to invest in.

Now, let me tell the story one more time through an emphasis on my abductive experiences. This story is equally true, yet differs in many ways. The narrative begins one day in October 2016 – a
day that, while at the time not striking me as particularly exceptional, has gradually emerged as a significant point for my research endeavour.

The unofficial story

‘Wafa, quickly, put those notes away!’

I was in a meeting with Section Chief 2, who initially was not meant to be involved in the project but had somehow found his way in. Keen to understand his perspective on their new innovation procedures, I grabbed the chance to ask him. He sat making critical comments about the leadership style of Section Chief 1, who by coincidence walked past the meeting room and saw us. Instantly, Section Chief 2 urged me to hide the paper on which had sketched the organisational structure when explaining their challenges. From the confidentiality I was being invited into on these person-sensitive issues, I knew I was becoming entangled in the managerial dynamics of their interplay. For that reason, I continuously chased ways to engage in more informal conversations with Section Chief 2.

To the question of how he would characterise his role in the organisation, he responded with the metaphor of a ‘change agent’, elaborating that he perceived his role as one of ‘empowering’ and ‘challenging’ people. His story was one of being newly hired to save the Mechanics subsection, which at the time appeared to be in serious trouble. The section was plagued by firefighting in a broad array of the project portfolio, lagging behind and neglecting long-term development.

Referring to the theme of ‘creating transparency’ in the decision-making by introducing the procedure of working with elaborate ‘design briefs,’ the following are my notes from a conversation with Section Chief 2 responding to the theme of trust between department managers:
Section Chief 2 mentions a project a while ago. Apparently, Section Chief 1 and the Design Section had been working on a project for a prolonged period of time without communicating to colleagues and section chiefs of other sections the potentially big impact the project would hold for the rest of the product line – including work conducted in Mechanics run by Section Chief 2. While engineers in Mechanics anticipated minor technical changes following the launch of the Design Section, it turned out that comprehensible and fundamental changes were required and thus elicited a rethinking of the next 15 years of product development in the whole department. According to Section Chief 2, these possible implications were only superficially communicated by Section Chief 1 to the rest of the department; and having been taken by surprise on these ‘important matters,’ Section Chief 2 was now criticising Chief 1 for running his section as an isolated ‘silo.’ Sharpening his message to me in the conversation, he claims that Chief 1 has ‘done this many times, on purpose’. I ask why he thinks Section Chief 1 would do such a thing intentionally, and he replies:

Because he didn’t want to tell the world what changes they were making, in order not to have to deal with the political issues this would elicit had it been otherwise openly discussed. Had they announced this earlier, the world would have looked differently. If you announce you want to change the world, the world will respond in resistance, arguing it is not ready. So instead you smoothly integrate the large changes you are aiming for. You manipulate, so that the world starts to adapt.

He finally explained that the new design brief procedure had thus emerged as a necessity to ensure transparency across the entire department, and that he had been the one to suggest it at a meeting with the whole management team. This explanation was thereby vastly different than the ‘cutting budgets’ explanation, which was officially articulated to me in the formal interviews and at the meetings involving the department employees.
Wanting to know more about the organisation’s political dilemmas, which seemed to be going on in the shadow, I once more interviewed Section Chief 1. Inviting him to respond to the issues I had informally heard of, left me with the impression of a manager concerned with safeguarding the relatively scarce resources allocated to the front-end innovation projects in his section. According to him, given the political climate in the company at the time, the overall department resources were currently at risk of being reallocated to ‘downstream development’ (located primarily with the Mechanics section, led by Section Chief 2). He worried it would be too easy for the department management to de-prioritise the part of the product development process that could not evidence exact directions and known outcomes.

Section Chief 1 articulated that in his attempt to protect this work (located with his Design section), from the outside it looked as if he was building a silo that did not seek to integrate itself with the rest of the department. From his own perspective, the proposed ‘breaking down of silos’ and opening up by ‘transparency across fields of expertise’ – supposed virtues of the new ‘design brief procedure’ – made him feel that his expertise and responsibilities were being called into question by Section Chief 2.

My perception of Section Chief 2’s complaint – about being ‘left out’ of the information loop in an upcoming front-end project that would have a significant impact on work conducted in Mechanics – was subtly changing as I absorbed Section Chief 1’s story of finding his section’s work squeezed by the involvement of Section Chief 2 and the agenda of transparency, with its new ‘design brief procedure’.

In response to the conflictual transition of work procedures, I allowed myself to become increasingly involved in the strategic changes and the department’s collaborative process of developing design briefs. Wanting to know more about the conflicts that were emerging due to
the enforcement of the new procedures, I spoke with some of the employees who had been involved in the creation of design briefs. My notes capture some interesting comments:

Section Chief 1 would like us to have the illusion that there is front-end work going on right now, but there really is not, and he doesn’t have the resources to let us do front-end work. Section Chief 2 has a team three times as big as ours, and he has the resources to allocate people, so some people in his team are doing more front-end work than I am, although I was the one hired to do it. I don’t know why it’s like this. It is hard to figure out, really. Section Chief 1 made us do design briefs for a few days, and we made 53; but it doesn’t make sense—they’re not leading anywhere. He knows that we won’t be doing any of these projects in real life; he just wants to give us the illusion that we are. Basically, Section Chief 2 can give us resources from his team, but he has no designers hired.

I look at him and ask: ‘So, what’s the effect of that?’

He thinks for a second and hesitates before saying: ‘Maybe Section Chief 2 has been more successful than Section Chief 1, and now has the capability to involve his employees in front-end, while we, who are hired to do front-end, cannot because we have to take care of the early design phase of the launch projects and we are too small a group of employees. We never have the time to do anything other than that. Downstream always wins; it has a deadline that needs to be met, whereas front-end is unfocused and without a project that needs to be delivered within a given timeframe.’

So, why have I told these stories? I did that to provide a more practical example of how stumbling upon experiences that may not look like obvious ‘data’ may lead to new questions and topics of wonder. I highlight that these can change our research directions into that which provides more in-depth insights into the organisational happenings.
In order to conduct ethnographic research within the organisation, I, as a researcher, was invited into the organisation and provided ‘access’ in a formal sense (being officially invited in as a researcher and given a physical space). Conducting interviews and participant observation for some months allowed me to develop a particular understanding of the organisation. As written in the narratives, my personal relation to the stakeholders developed, and I was invited into a more personal space where informal narratives shadow themes began emerging. In that, my point of ‘access’ changed, and I started recognising that studying organisational innovation processes through formal means of data collection (interviews and observations) could be one access point, but that personal relations and shadow conversations were providing me with a very much contradicting understanding. One that was less focused on formal structures and processes, and more on informal power struggles, conflicting political agendas and interests.

I aim to clarify how my deliberate choice to remain attentive and responsive to my abductive experiences in the organisation influenced my thinking, as well as the outcome of my work. By reacting to the informal experiences and conversations I was stumbling upon, and which made me wonder and ask new questions, I allowed new lines of inquiry to emerge, and through them continuously became aware of underlying conflicts and tensions, which were not articulated or related to in an open way in the department. Thus, allowing myself to become more involved in those conflicts further into the research process, by actively engaging in formal and informal conversations about them, led me to learn that the department’s innovation practices were influenced not just by formal decisions made by management, but involved many deeper layers of political, emotional and personal issues.

I came to realise that I could not fully comprehend the organisation and its innovation challenges only from the formal means of data collection in the official story, and that the abductive
experiences were central to sensitising the social dynamics in the organisation, as well as my entanglement in them. Thus, by writing the narratives about my informal abductive experiences I began taking a reflexive approach in my research endeavours and continuously stayed responsive and sensitive to the informal happenings I was becoming entangled in.

**Depicting abductive experiences through autoethnographic narratives**

In the following, I draw on three autoethnographic narratives from the doctoral project previously described. In the first narrative, the reader is invited into the experience of the kick-off meeting of the project, whereas the subsequent two narratives particularly focus on the organisation I collaborated with.

By involving these short snippets of the original narratives, I emphasise that writing about my abductive experiences I develop ‘access’ to the unconscious understandings I have developed of the project and the organisation, as well as the political issues I was becoming part of. The narratives I present thereby do not emerge as outcomes of my research but as a process of inquiry. By writing, sharing and reflecting on the abductive experiences with other researchers I move beyond personal perspectives and come to speak to bigger organisational issues. Thus, enabling shared sensemaking of the abductive experiences became a way to understand my role in the organisation, the political game I was becoming part of and the shadow themes dominating the innovation discourse.

**Narrative 1: personal emotions and experiences as data**

Following is an auto-ethnographic narrative written immediately after the kick-off meeting of a knowledge alliance project, involving a diversity of industrial and academic partners. The partner organisations have each sent one representative, who will speak to the larger agenda of the
project and present the organisation’s motivation and interest in taking part in the project. In writing that at such an early stage of the project, I try to make sense of the different partners’ perspectives and fundamental understandings of innovation, as well as my own frustration in that concern.

* * *

The whole conversation revolved around innovation. It seemed that I was not the only one with a long list of unanswered questions. Most of the partners seemed to be confused, but the project coordinator kept pushing us back to the purpose of the project; to remind us why we were all there. He kept repeating:

practitioners want to be innovative, but they do not know how to. We need to help them figure that out. These methods are solely concepts. We need to find new ways of utilizing these methods to develop new meaningful ways of practicing innovation in companies.

Everybody agrees, nods and somehow gets back on the same page for a short while. We are asked to focus on tasks and deliverables; the application says we will be doing online surveys with 400 students and 40 interviews with company practitioners. Two of the company employees look sceptical. One of them continuously repeats that time is money, and that we cannot require that much time from practitioners. He suggests cutting the interview down to the bone; ‘why do we need to have initial questions about the interviewees’ backgrounds, positions within the company etc.? I can send you that information via email. We need to be quick and effective’. In my mind, I have a combined feeling of frustration, confusion and annoyance. His vision goes against what I have been trained in. I have a list of questions on my mind: What about continuously building a trust relationship to the informants? How do I make sure the interviewee feels comfortable enough to give me all the interesting stories, their real experiences from within
the organisations? How do I keep the questions open, allowing the conversation to bring me surprises, rather than feeling restricted to eight questions I need to rush through?

I am not sure if I should be challenging them at this point. I am not sure what my role will be yet, and they might not listen to my thoughts. It might be better to wait. Before I get to wrap up my thoughts another industrial partner jumps in: ‘You need to understand that German companies are like the military. You start with a plan and end with executing it’. I easily recognise the engineering vocabulary in his articulation. He continues:

I have a system and a process – if I need to sell this to my management, I need a sexy title. It needs to clearly show where this method fits into our process and distinctly state how we will benefit from it. What the outcome will be.

I am trying to hold back for a bit. Is he serious? We are here to talk about innovation, and he wants to know what the exact results and benefits are going to be? And here I, naively believed that innovation was about bringing something new to the table. To not know how the process would develop or what it would lead to. I stay silent and wait for more of his interesting perspectives to be articulated. Maybe his company is a military base, but even soldiers need to adapt to new challenges in the battlefield and to remain responsive to the ongoing happenings around them. I decide to remain silent, while he continues to share his valuable insights. ‘If I tell my manager we want to try story-telling, he will say: story-telling? Okay fine, but we have tried that before. We tried all methods previously. They do not work’. At this point I am a bit blown away by the arrogance, but eventually, after a conversation with my colleague realise that maybe he did not have much of a say, and that his managers back home played a significant role in this.
Nevertheless, here we were – four academic partners with well-established research experience, and yet from his words it seemed that he disagreed with the fact that our methods might be able to bring any value to their practice. I am trying my best to stay neutral; convincing myself that I eventually will get to a point, where my engagement in the project allows me to challenge their perspectives. This is my first real encounter of experiencing that much reluctance in my work, and for some strange reason I believe this was the perfect way to get me excited about this 3-year project journey.

* * *

What characterises this narrative is the type of experience we get access to by reading it. Firstly, the reader develops awareness of the contradicting perspectives and various agendas that run implicitly and explicitly in the project. Secondly, there are emerging conflicts of interest, intentions and power. Through reading the narrative, we are invited into taking on the feeling of standing in such situation. It also shows that roles are not pre-defined (although it might look like that in the project description), but are taken, given and negotiated through interactions between the partners. This narrative is written as a personal reflection on the very first meeting between ten different project partners, and it embraces the thoughts, emotions and subjectivity of the researcher’s experience. With those personal reflections included in the narrative, the reader comes to understand what is at stake in the project, which contradicting positions that are emerging and how they are being negotiated. It emphasises the difference between the official and unofficial considerations that emerge in cross-organisational collaborations. I consider this an abductive experience because it surprised and made me wonder about my own and the other partners’ roles and potential challenges of the project. The experiences led me to ask new questions in order to understand how my research responsibilities would be defined and how I
would have to deal with the project initiation. The personal narrative has not been shared with anyone prior to writing this chapter, but rather been used as a point of reflection; about the project, the partners and the contradicting expectations towards the research.

**Narrative 2: data in the shadow**

The following narrative is from within the product development organisation I presented earlier. This narrative is based on a meeting with Section Chief 2, which was intended for the planning of upcoming project workshops, but instead I was invited into a sensitive conversation, which highlights the conflicts and shadow themes emerging within the organisation.

* * *

He looks at me for a second, leaves the room and comes back with a sketchbook. ‘Okay, Wafa, I will tell you something. And I will exaggerate a bit, for you to get a better understanding of it. But you will have to forget about the names as soon as I say them’. I am getting a little excited. I know this manager has different insights about their innovation practice, but also the challenges they are experiencing on management level. He usually emphasises that they have challenges they try to overlook.

He starts by sketching out the organisational structure. [...]

He then explains to me, that they need a chief specialist; someone who knows a lot about platforms and who can involve their cross-organisational team in making decisions. Rather than having a manager on the side, who has an employee who knows how to shout the loudest, and who will bring forth his own agenda. I am getting the feeling that he wants to be that chief specialist. He continues by explaining that the cross-organisational team already has put each other in boxes and that it is hard for them to see beyond that. He goes on by saying:
they are living in the past, and they do have a lot of experience, but they are not dinosaurs. They have to be experts who can work collaboratively and who are looking towards the future in a joint manner, rather than just being focused on their own, while showing no interest in the other fields.

As he calls in his colleague, who is also a manager in the department, he looks at me and says: ‘Wafa, quickly, put those notes away.’

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In this narrative we find that it is not the insights/data about the organisation, which is interesting, but the way that they are ‘handed over’ (the medium is the message). What characterises the narrative is that, at the point it was written, the ‘data’ itself was the interesting part, because it provided hidden information about the structure of the organisation and the ongoing power struggles. However, sharing it with other researchers involved in the project and reflecting on our different understandings of the narrative makes it clear that the story is delivered to me in confidence and that I become part of a political organisational game without being aware of it at the moment.

Thus, with such personal narrative I am able to capture the sensitivity of the situation, rather than limit it to hard facts about the organisational challenges through traditional field notes or more formal data collection methods. Also, sharing it with other researchers becomes a way to get responses, reflect on those and challenge each other’s assumptions in order to develop our understanding of the organisation and its innovation challenges. The writing technique here highlights the relation between the managers and the ethnographer. It is written in a more observational and less emotionally engaged way than the previous narrative. Even though it draws on direct quotes to provide a feeling of the conversation, it becomes a capturing of raw
data in a narrative form. But the data is not present in a formal sense; hence, one way to capture and articulate these insights is through such personal narrative.

In the abductive experience described, I become personally involved in confidential themes. As a researcher in that situation, it comes easy to me to take an unreflective stand, led by a feeling of excitement about being confided with such insightful and sensitive data. However, writing about the happening and through the writing reflecting on it, I come to distance myself from the event and understand my own entanglement in the political game that the research and the organisation is part of. Thus, it becomes a question of seeing new perspectives of my experiences. I come to realise, that the manager has an interest in influencing the innovation agenda within the organisation as well as the project, through me.

The auto-ethnographic writing thereby enables transparency towards one’s own experiences in organisational research and challenges the possible biases one holds. This, together with the full narrative, is described in a paper, which discusses the complexity of organisations and the ways in which ethnographic research approaches can help capture that (Mosleh & Larsen, forthcoming).

**Narrative 3: data in conflictual events**

After the previous abductive experience involving confidential conversations between me and Section Chief 2, my research team and I organised a workshop to address some of the challenges that one of the cross-organisational teams was experiencing. The workshop mainly involved improvisational theatre enactments that would invite the organisational stakeholders to take part in. The aim was thereby to enact a scene that both practitioners and managers would be able to recognise and respond to during the workshop as well as in subsequent joint reflections.

* * *
I began feeling that I was becoming involved in organisational politics that I should not be involved in. Regardless of that, it increasingly became interesting for me to learn about the underlying issues and reflections of Section Chief 2, because he already had revealed critical tales to me about the department. He clearly sat in a powerful position in the organisation. Due to my developing involvement, I was beginning to realise that the politics and the internal challenges they experienced were impossible to detach from my innovation research. While I came into the project with an idealised notion of innovation being a self-contained, fluffy, beautiful, pink cloud, I began realising it was not. It had strings connecting to all sorts of politics, assumptions and demands by different people and I had to give in; allowing myself to go with the flow and learn through different sorts of informal experiences on the field site. It was simply becoming impossible for me to ignore the fact that I was entangled in themes and tensions that seemed secretive, but at the same time extremely essential for me to fully grasp the bigger picture of the organisation and its development. Whereas I previously was randomly engaged in these incidents I actively began seeking them to nuance my understanding of the organisation and the management team.

We are at the theatre workshop and present the participants with the challenge of the cross-organisational team, which we want to actively engage with. The actors we invited to the workshop start by addressing the challenge of collaboration and invite people on stage. Some of the employees proposed inviting their manager, Section Chief 2, to play the hardcore, highly experienced engineer, who usually says ‘no’ to any new proposal. He happily took the role, and it was clear that he was exaggerating it to make a point. I was observing him while he was playing this stereotype to the fullest; clearly trying to trigger some discussion and involvement from the audience. I could not stop thinking that he had his own agenda and that he was trying to
nurture it through the enactment. A little later, the conversation took a new turn. One of the actors asked the two managers, Section Chief 1 and Section Chief 2, to take their own daily roles and discuss the responsibilities of the cross-organisational team. In doing that, it became apparent that they had never clearly stated what the roles and responsibilities of the team were, or who the decision-making power was to be left with in the end. Maybe without predicting that this could happen, both managers were now placed in the hot seat. I felt my stomach double up, but Section Chief 2 took it quite well, admitting that they had not been clear about things, and that they might have to invite the team to a meeting, during which they could discuss these issues.

Finally, it was time for lunch. The others started leaving but I waited for Section Chief 2 to finish up packing. I wanted to hear his thoughts on the theatre, so I delicately asked the question. ‘So, what did you think of this? Does it make sense to use theatre as a method?’ His reply somehow surprised me. He said that he found the theatre method very useful for triggering discussions, but that the team members were presenting themselves as the victims. He argued that they just had to get going, doing what they were supposed to do, rather than complaining about resources and so on. He then added that he felt that everyone kept cutting corners, talking around things. He wanted to be able to poke the right things, and allow everyone to tell an idiot, when he is being an idiot. He ended his argument, by stating that presenting oneself as the victim will not solve anything, and that they really need to address the underlying issues.

I am still not sure if he felt that his agenda backfired, and that he had to rescue it by stating those things on the way to lunch, or if he was satisfied by the fact that the underlying issues were brought to the surface. Either way, the theatre play did stir up some of their shadow themes to the surface.
This narrative took a different role than the previous ones. It is written in a less involved and more observant way; capturing a particular event from the eyes of a slightly outside standing researcher. In addition, it brings on a second layer, by documenting my own progressive understanding of the research through informal analysis. It becomes a way of making sense of happenings through writing about them and providing new insights, e.g. that innovation is inevitably linked to organisational politics.

In this, the notion of data cannot be detached from the analysis. Rather, the writing itself becomes an open process of inquiry, where I involve myself as an instrument in the development of new knowledge and constantly adapt to new understandings of the field. By writing the autoethnographic narratives in a way that captures and remains responsive to abductive experiences at the same time as drawing intermediate conclusions, enables the researcher to stay attentive to emerging themes and thereby better grasp the complexity of the organisation.

In this type of narrative, emotional aspects are not the drivers of the writing, rather involved as a way of indicating when something is at stake. Like in the other two cases, the narrative is used as means of personal notetaking and reflection but comes closer to that of writing field notes while attempting to make sense of what the researcher is understanding by the autoethnographic encounters.

**Data and autoethnographic validity**

So, now we have seen different examples of auto-ethnographic narratives that draw on abductive experiences. Despite their differences in style, the question which often emerges in discussions on autoethnographic writing is whether personal narratives can be characterised as legitimate data in the broader social sciences research community. In publishing autoethnographic work,
there may be questions of the transparency of data collection, as well as on the objectification and analysis of the data. Due to this challenge of legitimising my subjective research encounters I was, in the beginning of my research process, hesitant to write about my abductive experiences in an auto-ethnographic way. I was not confident in categorising my personal experiences as rightful research findings, which made me arrive at the question: what makes organisational autoethnographic writing a contribution to knowledge?

As Brinkmann (2014) points out: ‘What we call data are always produced, constructed, mediated by human activities, or “taken” as John Dewey wanted us to understand through his pragmatism’ (p. 721). Brinkmann argues that instead of data, one should talk about createa, that is, about the taken, constructed, and selected – rather than the given. Instead of understanding data as objective ‘things’ already out there in the world ready to be picked up, we can try to understand data, i.e. our abductive experiences, as something created through our bumpy engagements with the world through our research. I argue that autoethnographic writing allows for engagement with the acts, thoughts and emotions of interaction with organisational practices and stakeholders. The writing enables researchers to reflect on how the interdependencies between researchers and organisational actors as well as between organisational actors themselves enable and constrain particular engagements within the organisation. I find this to be a strong argument for autoethnographic research – in particular addressing themes that are underexplored or inaccessible through traditional methods of research.

While my field notes, which usually emerge through traditional ethnographic approaches, are analysed and developed into a tangible outcome only interpreted by me, the autoethnographic narratives become a way to share specific, unfiltered and mostly conflictual and political, ethnographic encounters and personal experiences that I can invite other researchers to make
sense of with me. In such exchange of understandings, new insights can emerge, which support me in understanding my abductive research experiences in a different and new light. For that reason, I argue that autoethnographic narratives written within the entanglement in organisational experiences enables researchers to reflect on experiences from within the fluctuating development of organisational life, and substitute representational views reached through a position that seems unaffected and observant.

**Purposes of writing about abductive experiences**

In the beginning of this chapter I asked the question of what relevant data this type of autoethnographic writing may invite for and what formats it may take. I argue that data is not as a final product of the research we conduct, but the experiences that continuously emerge in our research endeavours, which help us develop our understanding of organisations. By experiencing and communicating our abductive experiences we, as researchers, come to construct and reconstruct our understandings of the organisations, which makes it difficult to talk about a traditional practice of data ‘collection’ through autoethnographic narratives. Thus, the ‘data’ I emphasise in this chapter is the experiences that emerge in the daily interactions within an organisation, which create an unbalance in our understandings, thus leading us to open new lines of inquiry in our research process.

Through my experiences of writing autoethnographic narratives about my abductive experiences, I have come to learn that they may open up for various avenues of critical reflection. As such, they provide exposure to underlying themes that may be critical to the organisations we study, and thereby provide insights into complex social relations that we may not be exposed to through formally planned fieldwork. Through constructing and reconstructing our understandings of the field as we encounter situations that make us wonder and ask new questions, we can consider the
practice of writing autoethnographic narratives as a reflexive method of inquiry that enables us to create consciousness about our research endeavours and the relations we build in the field, at the same time as providing powerful insights from a deep level of immersion. In my work I have come to see different purposes for writing autoethnographic narratives about the abductive experiences I come to stumble upon. These are as follows:

**Narratives as a way of generating empirical material.** By writing personal narratives we are able to uncover themes which, for different reasons, may not be discussed openly through traditional formats of ethnographic inquiry or in formal organisational forums, but only experienced in informal settings where organisational stakeholders may invite researchers into confidential issues. Thus, the narratives give access to personal encounters and become part of the data that is presented in order to create understandings of organisational setups. By documenting abductive experiences that have not been formally recorded social researchers are enabled to provide more in-depth understandings of organisational life and practices.

**Narratives for analysis, reflexivity and sensemaking.** Writing autoethnographic narratives may serve as a way to provide analytical detachment to your own experiences by turning them into texts – objects separate from you - that can be read, shared and analysed by different people, from different perspectives at different times. Personal narratives can be used to continuously make sense of the events taking place within an organisation. Through writing and rewriting, we come to develop new understandings of abductive experiences as well as our entanglement in the organisation we seek to research. The writing itself thereby becomes a space for reflexivity and sensemaking. By remaining reflexive to our experiences in the field one can create some distance to own actions and perspectives in order to continuously critically reflect on the one’s own involvement. We interpret and construct our lived realities in the organisation through narratives
enacted over longer periods of time and across contexts. Thus, constantly constructing reflexive narrative acts of consciousness in order to make sense of our research, which does not emerge in linear form, but is negotiated with ourselves and others through the writing and interpretation.

**Narratives as multivocal and co-created.** Writing about abductive experiences can be a way to share those with other researchers who might have different interpretations. Thus, we are able to create a space for co-analysis and enable the co-creation of meaning about the organisational happenings. In sharing autoethnographic writings, we enable others to become aware of social or organisational realities that they may not have been exposed to or thought of prior to that and invite them to interpret the material together with us. Through the writing one is able to create dialogues with one self, with literature, with other accounts and with formal discourses. In that matter, writing autoethnographic narratives becomes a means to explore perspectives.

**Process vs. product.** Lastly, in my work with autoethnographic narratives, I emphasise that the process of writing is highly crucial for the research one finally presents. I do not explicate the narratives as end products, but rather focus on the understandings researchers continuously can develop as they are writing and rewriting as well as reflecting on them with others. Thus, the process of writing can help us, as social researchers, better understand a phenomenon in the given organisational context. Through the writing process, we recreate the abductive experiences in a reflexive way so that we may think of the organisation in new ways. Rather that attempting to provide an objective and detached representation of an organisation, we find that the richness of autoethnographic writing lays in the detailed, context-sensitive experiences researchers themselves make in the field.
Concluding remarks

Cunliffe (2002) asserts that our academic training prepares us to be structured and objective in our intellectual inquiry, whereas real life in the field requires us to move between events of confusion, surprise, embarrassment and fear; we may often find that we need to shift position. Taking an abductive approach in an auto-ethnographic research process can help us, as researchers and practitioners alike, to move beyond the limitations we find ourselves constrained by, in initially trying to quickly impose a specific understanding onto the experiences we face. An autoethnographic approach that acknowledges the fluctuating everyday life of organisations can help better clarify the multiplicity of our abductive experiences and their unpredictability when interacting with stakeholders of the organisations we engage with during our fieldwork. In taking an autoethnographic perspective on my research and remaining responsive to abductive experiences, I have come to understand that instant explanations of my research endeavours are impossible; instead, my reasoning can continuously grow out of a collection of experiences, the actions I take in the moment, and the ongoing effects of those responses. Such an understanding follows Peirce’s (1877) argument about belief and doubt, which highlights that moving between the two can help us create new understandings of ‘truth’ – while acknowledging that these too can be superseded by new understandings and theories as we gain new experiences, and the process of inquiry develops accordingly.

Dewey’s (1938) understanding of practice has also paved the way for the abductive research approach I take in autoethnographic field work. He argues that inquiry is a continuous process that may not remain settled when exposed to further practical investigation. Thus, the results of social research are founded on a specific context addressing particular experiences and challenges, as well as involving a diversity of stakeholders. Hence, while the results can merely
appear as suggestions for coping with issues related to organisational processes, we can always develop new understandings and further amendments. I finally propose that abductive reasoning is a way of thinking about and carrying out field studies in a responsive manner, which acknowledges the emerging situations social researchers may find themselves influenced by and entangled in, within organisations.

References


