Autoethnographies: experiencing management

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Autoethnography is often presented as a research method that aims to analyse and describe (*graphy*) one's personal experience (*auto*) in a way that resonates with wider cultural settings (*ethno*) (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Originally found in anthropology and sociology, the term was coined by Karl Heider and Hayano who formalized the method in 1979, and it quickly developed across fields after Ellis & Bochner (1996, 2000; Ellis, 2004) and Reed-Danahay (1997) pinned it as a manifestation of a reflexive turn in ethnography (2009). It has since conquered the field of Management and Organization Studies (MOS). In 2020, the *Journal of Autoethnography* was created and the first edition of the *Routledge International Handbook of Organizational Autoethnography* was published, and edited by Andrew Herrmann, one of the co-editors of the former. And in the meantime, autoethnographies of organizations have flourished to portray critical investigations of varied phenomena, ranging from HR practices (Grenier & Collins, 2016; Sally, 2017), to university ethics (Armstrong- Gibbs, 2019), the impacts of the neoliberal context on scientific production (Ortega, 2020) or the role of bad press in the rise of an organizational paranoia crisis (Frandsen, 2015). As a methodology, autoethnography is much less commonly used in the French-speaking world (see among exceptions Cova & Cova, 2002; Flamme, 2020, 2022; Letiche et al., 2017; Mercier, 2017; Rondeau, 2011; Zidani & Moriceau, 2019) and, too often those authors who wish to reflect on the ethical and practical issues they encountered and narrate their personal experience are discouraged from doing so (Moriceau, 2019).

In their subjectivist experiential form, by far the most common, autoethnographic accounts often begin with a dense, embodied and situated description of lived experience, seeking to retrace and reflect on this experience, revealing multiple facets and ethical, political, and cultural trials of a condition (Maréchal, 2009; Moriceau, 2019). The narrative often traces epiphanies, significant moments in a trajectory (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Denzin, 1989) and times of crisis calling for an analysis of lived experience (Zaner, 2004). What makes one's own experience so interesting is the fact that it offers incomparable access and understanding of a whole set of political, cultural and social issues (Ellis, 2004) and on the very making of social reality (Rondeau, 2011). It can also reveal some aspects of management that are often observed with difficulty and only tacitly expressed and observed. Yet those who experience such aspects know and recognize them and feel that they involve essential issues at stake for themselves, for organizations and for society. Autoethnographic narratives can indeed make visible with a whole range of unacknowledged or unpublished realities, mixed, subtle elements, that are present in organizations but often absent from manuals and more distanced approaches. Decentered from dominant rationalist and all-cognitive managerial accounts, autoethnographic texts are well suited to reflexively inscribe more holistic perspectives that embrace embodied experience, affects, feelings, desires, in their messiness. , as well as the dilemmas, uneasiness or doubts that often characterise management as experience.

In fact, what autoethnography does is engage not with management's abstract hunger for models and artefacts, nor even management in practice, but with the very experience of management: how it is inscribed in bodies, in life forms, how it generates affects and impressions, how it makes a culture, how it shapes identities, creates gaps and precariousness, arouses desires and delusions, promotes and disavows, connects and releases. As first-person accounts, autoethnographies give life to what it is to be a manager and to be managed, in situated and embodied experiences, where life is not separated from activity, where one's whole being is engaged, exposed and at play. In those texts, management then appears in a different light, in the chiaroscuro of its paradoxes and contradictions, in its possibilities and effects, sometimes in all aspects of its performativity when in-depth explorations of often repressed experiences that may be considered taboo or abject in managerial and organisational contexts, where processes revolving around identity issues, trauma, discrimination or sexuality are evoked. Autoethnographies thus allow us to perceive, think and resist what management brings to life, what life does to management. Moreover, narrating oneself, describing what is you, what only a subjective approach can know (Paring, 2019) has a potential individual and collective therapeutic effects and for new theorizations and awareness.

And when they are evocative, showing flesh and blood (Bochner, 2000) autoethnographic narratives can act as testimony but also as representation and raw platform for new theorizing, because it rests on other styles and plots. The writing is meant to be, using literary techniques to share experience (Denzin, 1997): dense and fine descriptions carried by a committed 'I' (Hanique, 2013), in search of a certain narrative truth (Bochner, 1994; Denzin, 1989), scenes of epiphanies and ordinary affects, "showings" (Adams, 2006), all of which invite the reader to take place in the scene. Of course, this entails a process made of doubts, trials and becoming and finding a satisfying writing style becomes part of the inquiry (Richardson & Saint-Pierre, 2000). The reader must find authenticity in description (Ellis, 2004).

When undertaken from a position of vulnerability, autoethnography as a method also has the critical potential to emancipate, resignify, and empower (Rago, 2013). Admitting vulnerability in research through self-reflexivity is often associated with an ethical encounter (Cunliffe, 2009) and the willingness to abandon hegemonic and normative forms of storytelling to make vulnerability visible in organizations. In such cases, rather than being a symptom of victimization, telling personal stories of caring for oneself and others that authentically picture disparities in the ways different groups get exposed to injury, aggression, rejection and death can be an important step towards emancipation. Exposing oneself and reflecting on the interference between self, others and the organization, and making differences visible as they emerge and play out can also trigger empowerment (Haraway, 1992; Cunliffe, 2009).

Thus, far from being a narcissistic self-obsessed method, as it is sometimes accused of, the personal texture of autoethnography makes it particularly well suited to do justice to self-others relationship complexities. While intersubjectivity is most often approached from the perspective of a self with concentrated powers and privileges in more analytical approaches, autoethnography gives presence to an uncertain I in a strange dialogue with others that it cannot appropriate, a self already penetrated by and struggling with others, power, language and body (Spry, 2009, 2016) and that can expose the visceral experience of everyday discrimination, oppression, exclusion and dehumanization (Diversi & Moreira, 2018

In poststructuralist or postmodern autoethnographies, a blurred genre involving a variety of creative practices (Marechal, 2009), writing becomes performance (Linstead, 2018) or is expressed through performances (Spry, 2009; Dinesh, 2017), it can become feminine (Höpfl, 2000; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015)

and require a certain poetic creativity to do experience justice (Moriceau, 2018a). The first-person singular is found to be plural: a constellation of being, acting, affects and thoughts, and a site where self, social, cultural and political are negotiated (Marechal, 2009). Mirrored others are no longer just reflections of "research data". In the chains of cause and effect, flesh, faces, matter and complexity intervene, for more credible, thrilling stories and new fabulations (Rancière, 2016; Marques & de Carvalho Oliveira, 2018). The sensitive invites itself to share other sensitivities (Rancière, 2000).

Where such partitions of sensibility tend to accentuate distinctions and borders, normalising how to feel about what we know, autoethnography can relate to the spaces of doubt and ambiguity, the in-between, liminal and plural places, where the lines are dotted in a way that is potentially able to challenge normative depoliticised distributions in order to justly render the reality of experience by in setting a collective twist of social justice (Diversi & Moreira, 2009). Rather than a self in search of the other, the autoethnographic voice is that of a self already caught up in political and ethical relationships, in power arrangements and contexts that structure its experience and trajectory, inside and outside organizations, academic communities, in the writing process itself. To conclude, autoethnography has the potential to bring other stories, voices, perspectives, starting points, writings, incarnations, conceptualizations, arrangements and memories but it can also show the toxic or restorative effects of secrecy and silence (van de Berg, 2021), the unmentionable (Tillman-Healy, 1996). It can penetrate margins (Hernandez et al., 2015), interstices (Diversi & Moreira, 2009), embodiment (Spry, 2001), location (Pink, 2009) and stigmata (Noali, 2016) to describe international management in its effects, traces, interferences and realities, in unprecedented manner.

Autoethnography however is not without challenges. These challenges are related to the difficulty of encapsulating one's experience autoethnographically, of revealing a vulnerable and intimate self, in a publication or communication process that exposes us (Doloriert et al. 2009) and to the limited space for other voices in research (Alvesson et al., 2008). They relate to narcissism and navel-gazing (Madison, 2006), the difficulty of accessing and expressing experience, scientific journals standards, a lack of understanding of certain research traditions, co-writing difficulties (Diversi & Moreira, 2009), questions of generalization based on singular experiences and the imposition of criteria against oneself (Elis and Bochner, 2000).

This Special Issue of *Management International* aims to bring together contributions that look at autoethnographic ways to illuminate, rethink, even challenge the impacts of management practices and organizational discourse. We welcome a variety of ethnographic narratives, written in different styles and from multiple subjects' positions or discourses, including repressed or minoritarian ones. We are particularly interested in approaches to autoethnography that take the following lines of exploration:

1 / Autoethnographic stories and reflections that portray marginalized voices and, underprivileged positions. These can take the form of:

- descriptions and thoughts that dare to narrate oneself (Rago, 2013) in and in face or organizations as concentration of power, domination, and normalization, narrate oneself from one's own flaws and vulnerabilities, marginalized positions, silenced or devoid of epistemic privilege.
- Various experiences that may depict or analyze., for example, white supremacy construction, gender dysphoria, academic bullying, or pandemic impacts in precarious situations (Liu & Pechenkina, 2016; O'Shea, 2017; O'Shea, 2018; Fernando et al. 2020; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020),

or neocolonial practices in management and international relations (Prasad, 2019; DIversi & Moreira, 2018).

2 / Autoethnographies that challenge logocentric theoretical approaches and the rational figures of the agentic manager or entrepreneur. These can describe management situations told from an unsettled and uncertain I : dialogic, fragmented and partial (Spry, 2016), built in and against the organization (Flamme, 2018), emphasizing the role of imagination and life forms (Zidani, 2019) or showing a shared or community acting capacity (Guidi, 2019), or the I of the researcher acculturating and struggling with academic norms.

3 / Reflections on autoethnography's potential for emancipation and social justice as well as its difficulties and pitfalls. These can include: reflections on psychodynamic mechanisms, narcissistic biases and traps, the effects of speaking out, paths of individuation (Flamme, 2018) and also efforts to raise consciousness (Diversi & Moreira, 2018). These could also emphasize the importance of questioning the autoethnographer's challenges, choices and responsibility (Winkler, 2017), conditions for writing in the aftermath, the pact with oneself and the reader (Custer, 2014), ethical and political revelations (Adams, 2011), and again on the place and role of the body in these processes.

4 / Reflections on autoethnography as a method to critically consider issues of vulnerability in a managerial contexts and the   ethical, political and epistemological questions that it potentially raises. These can include reconsiderations of issues relating to vulnerability, in a way that differentiates it from victimisation and discussions of the ethical relationship that it may generate as well as the difficulties of embarking on a transformation and recognition journey, in the midst of rules, norms and a singular destiny (Butler, 2004). The specific difficulties pertaining to making anxiety, desire, fantasies, shame visible when capturing one's personal experience authentically through writing, and the difficult question of what autoethnographic accounts reveal or affirm, and how they can be received both in business and academia, after publication. More generally, the time might have come to think again about the validity and merit criteria of autoethnographic methods, their possibilities and challenges, as well as emerging new forms.

Submissions should be sent no later than **19 September 2022** by email to miautoethnographies@mailo.com. Proposals should follow Management International's publication standards. Anticipated publication date: early 2024.

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