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Researching Workplace Spiritualization Through Auto/ethnography

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Abstract

Studying the spiritual in workplace settings presents a significant challenge to the organizational ethnographer. Spirituality is such a fluid and deeply subjective concept that is often understood and practiced in ways that are implicit to individuals and attempts to study it in the workplace risk producing accounts that are reductive and inaccurate. In an effort to craft a rigorous and representative account of the deployment of a Spiritual Management Development (SMD) initiative in a large services organization, I experimented with a form of autoethnography, referred to as 'auto/ethnography' in this paper, which attempted to produce a rounded and holistic account of reactions to the initiative. The generic elements of this method are presented with a view to demonstrating the possibilities and difficulties associated with adopting this research approach to the study of workplace spirituality.

Introduction

The study reported in this article aimed to undertake a long-term engagement with an Spiritual Management Development program in a single organizational site, and investigating its effects on participants and on their understanding of the organizational culture in which they work. As such, the study set out to ask not only what the Spiritual Management Development programme attempted *to do to managers*, but also what participating managers *did to* the programme. The empirical findings of the research included in the main article are not discussed in this document, but the rationale for the method and a description of it are.

Spiritual Management Development (SMD) is a relatively new field of study which promises managers that, by connecting with their innermost selves (or souls), they can in turn influence and improve their organization's effectiveness (Bell & Taylor, 2004).

I did not study the culture of the organization *per se*, but the effects of an SMD program which an organization had decided to deploy amongst its managers.

From an early stage, I was concerned about the potential crisis of representation that this would involve. On one hand I was fearful that I would produce a report that would support and reinforce the managerialist agenda that is too often part of what Catherine Casey referred to as 'the hidden

curriculum' (1995) of organizational change initiatives: on the other I did not want to misrepresent the real personal value that participating managers might take from the programme by producing an entirely critical report that saw such workplace spiritualization as an oppressive attempt to colonize employee subjectivity (Carrette and King 2005) by disregarding the reflexive capabilities of participants.

Early in the research process, I realized that I would have to develop an ethnography that would be rigorous in how it collected and analyzed data, whilst accurately representing DSB's managers and their experiences with *Spirit1* in a way which reflected the cultural milieu in which I found myself on it's own local, internally contested terms (Parker 2000). I was faced with a *choice* of ethnographic genre.

Genre 'is more than the packaging of a message: it is integral to both the story told and the reader's response' (Monin and Monin, 2005 p.511). Similar to the social practices and cultural processes ethnography seeks to uncover, genre is subject to, and a product of, ideology and discourse. Van Maanen (1988) pointed out that the genre and style of ethnography varies according to its intended readership (academic, social scientific or general), the tradition within the social sciences to which it belongs (sociology or anthropology), and the stage of development of the method itself.

The means by which ethnographic researchers in organizations represent their data continues to be of interest to management researchers. Ford and Harding (2003), for example, retold the experiences of managers whose organizations underwent a merger in the style of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* because: 'Portraying pain in the coolness and remoteness of academic language is difficult, for the academic format is not well suited to such and evocation' (p.1132). I was conscious that adopting a generic ethnographic perspective would delimit the possibilities of producing an accurate and convincing account of how the SMD initiative was received in the organization. Applying an ethnographic generic template to the research would risk doing violence to how I reported these experiences, and instead I chose to 'craft' a piece of research that was more suited to developing a vivid picture of the phenomenon under study. In trying to represent the phenomenon, I had to represent it on its own terms and not slavishly follow evaluative templates inherited from other ethnographic genres. As one's selection of ethnography style is an ideological choice (Van Maanen, 1988) I first had to come to terms with the generic components of the main forms of ethnography.

Genre & Ethnography

In adopting the conventions of genre and style, certain aspects of ethnography are often deemed appropriate and other observations are discarded as invalid and immeasurable. Some much used representational genres are outlined here in order to elucidate the amount of choice available to researchers.

Although the dominance of *realist ethnography* appears to be gradually eroding, it remains the most prevalent, and identifiable form of representation. Van Maanen (1988) states the most striking characteristic of realist ethnographic description is the absence of a personalized authorial voice from the text. Stylistically the text creates a narrative which utilizes metaphor, tropes and synecdoche that document the minutiae of mundanity in a highly organized fashion. The subjects of the ethnography present accounts of events in their lives, but ultimately 'the ethnographer has the final word on how the culture is to be interpreted and presented' (Van Maanen, 1988 p.51).

For Geertz (1973) ethnography is essentially a philosophical undertaking to interpret a culture, 'and a good deal of the rest is confession' (p.346). Van Maanen (1988) writes that if the ethnographer is identified in realist ethnography at all, that s/he soon disappears after a brief mention as a methodological footnote. To paraphrase Foucault (1988), the ethnographer dies so that the realist text might live. *Confessional ethnography* challenges the assumption of realist ethnography that social or cultural groupings are scientifically and externally observable by emphasizing the authorial voice in the document produced. This is done by the ethnographer writing autobiographically about their experience in the field, their methods and how they came to their conclusions. The confessional ethnographer emphasizes learning from living in the field and casts themselves as an interpreter of available texts in as 'honest' a voice as possible. Common practices in

confessional ethnography involve the ethnographer normalizing their presence on the site, representing fieldworkers displaying the acceptance and competence of the ethnographer, displaying empathy and involvement and writing about how informants are handled.

Unlike realist ethnography, *impressionist* approaches express an interest in the non-mundane elements of fieldwork. Such approaches seek to write vivid pictures of specific events which startle the reader and act 'as a way to getting to matters more dear to the writer's heart' (Van Maanen, 1998 p.102). They are rich in metaphors and imagery, highly descriptive, dramatic and expository. Still something of an ethnographic sub-genre, the intention of impressionistic writing is to communicate cultural knowledge in a non-conventional way.

Critical ethnography, as with critical management theory (and critical theory in generally) 'questions the wisdom of taking the neutrality or virtue of management as self-evident or unproblematical' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, p.1). Much critical ethnography is conducted from the radical humanist perspective (Van Maanen, 1988) and critical ethnographers seek to 'make it clear just who they think owns and operates the tools of reality production' (p.128).

All of these approaches represent opportunities to the ethnographer interested in workplace spirituality. Ethnographic realism has provided most of the

technical approaches traditionally associated with the method, yet if applied to my study might result in a set of personal interpretations of individual behavior. Confessional ethnography assists in placing the person of the researcher in the research, but tends to be used in describing difficulties with the research. Although critical theory has been massively influential in studies of how organizations socially construct their own realities (Gergen and Thatchenkery 2004) I shared Cunliffe's (2002) concern 'that both conventional and critical approaches focus on realities and systems existing independently from or own personal involvement, and use external or third party frames of analysis and critique' (p. 39).

Context and Genre

I was studying a spiritualization initiative in an organizational culture. I had to then understand the programme, the organizational culture, and the participants. Although I had attended briefing sessions on the programme and participated in a workshop alongside some managers, I need to understand *Spirit 1* and *DSB* in the deepest possible way. Sanders (1997) demonstrates how difficult it is for professional qualitative and social researchers 'to maintain a relatively impermeable boundary between ... occupational life and ... everyday experience' (p.457). I decided to engage with the teachings of *Spirit1* and apply it to my own work and personal life in the same way that DSB's managers were encouraged to. Rabinow (2000) writes that 'in order to establish the right relationship to the present – to things, to others, to oneself – one must stay

close to events, experience them, be willing to be effected and affected by them' (p.xviii). Writing reflexively on ones own experiences with spirituality and processes of spiritualization (such as seriously engaging in the spiritual management development or personal development programs we are studying) enables researchers to configure questions on interventions which otherwise would not have suggested themselves if we merely observed them. The position of the researcher in such scenarios becomes that of what Tedlock (2000) refers to as a *bicultural insider / outsider*. In studying the impact of *Spirit1*, I found myself 'semi-detached' from the phenomenon I was investigating: I shared the language and national cultural setting of the vast majority of managers in the programme, yet was divorced from the day-to-day organizational realities faced by them. Through genuinely engaging with *Spirit1*, I hoped to develop a deeper insight into their experiences of the initiative: to understand how the SMD programme might effect the self-hood of participants, I needed to understand how it would impact on my own.

Autoethnography and Auto/Ethnography

I wrote two separate ethnographic accounts of the SMD programme: one was an ethnography of the DSB managers, and in the other I had become my own research site. Like Watson (2001) I attempted to 'weave the ideas and findings of other writers along with my own research, experiences, thoughts and observations into the tapestry recording my journey' (p. 223). Watson's use of the word *weave* is important: the Latin root of the word *texere* or *text* is *weave*, and in creating my textual account of *Spirit1* I sought to create what

Bakhtin referred to as a 'heteroglot' narrative where 'the position from which a story is told, a portrayal built, or information provided must be oriented in a new way to this world – a world of autonomous subjects, not objects' (1994). My personal account, alongside the variety of ethnographic accounts produced as part of the project were knitted closely with theory and different layers of interpretation which 'cannot be treated separately by must be continuously integrated' (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000) in order to produce a rigorous, reflexive analysis.

Although there are some instances where autoethnography is presented as auto/ethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997), the former nomenclature has become the convention. In autoethnographies the researcher conducts ethnographic study on a social or cultural grouping of which they have some claim to membership. Recent autoethnographies in the context of organizations have turned to the explanation of particular experiences in organizational contexts in a way which 'crystallizes the key conceptual and theoretical contributions to understanding the relationship between culture and organization' (Boyle and Parry 2007). Autoethnographies attempt to report experience and develop theory from an emic perspective and directly address 'the inescapable, recurrent problem of the human presence in data collection' (Hayano, 1979, p.103). A relatively new development, autoethnography has grown in popularity over the last 30 years. Increasingly it has come to describe studies which bridge the personal and the cultural. It varies its emphasis on research / writing (graphé), culture (ethno) and self (auto) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). There are

many different style of auto-ethnography, but they all attempt to emphasize 'individual experience as an important part of social relations' (Vidal-Ortiz, 2004 p.184). Alvesson (2003) outlines how auto-ethnography ranges from 'self ethnography' where the researcher focuses on studying the culture of a milieu to which they already have access as a legitimate participant (Lave & Wenger, 2001) to approaches such as 'memory work' where social phenomena and experience are rigorously interpreted through the lens of personal experience.

I used the term auto/ethnography to refer to the fact that my account of a workplace spiritualization initiative is based on an ethnographic account of the initiative, and my own autoethnographic account. As the project moved into its data analysis phase, the 'slash/stroke' between these two areas became of utmost importance as my own experience of the programme both informed and challenged the interpretations and experiences of DSB's managers. This is demonstrated by reporting on some key findings from the research process below.

The 'reflexive turn' in the social sciences is increasingly emphasized as a way of producing rigorous data collection and analysis. Ellis & Brochner (2000) describe 'complete-member' research in reference to 'researchers who are fully committed to immersion in the groups they study. During the research process, the "convert" researcher identifies with the group and "becomes the phenomenon" (Mehan and Wood, 1975) being studied' (p.74). The

'slash/stroke/ dividing 'auto' and 'ethnography' gradually dissolved; field notes and personal journal entries at times became indistinguishable.

The categorization of responses to the SMD programme would not have been possible without understanding how it might affect selfhood, which was only 'accessible' to me as a researcher by genuinely engaging with the programme. My autoethnographic account informed my hypothesis that the success of an organizational spiritual learning initiative is influenced by pre-existing, socially-informed constructs of ontological identity. Conversely, the ethnographic accounts suggest a polyphony of reactions to the programme which contributed to my understanding of why my experience of *Spirit1* changed over the three years I attempted to practice its principles.

The process of auto/ethnography, when applied to workplace spiritualization programs such as SMD, gets researchers closer to the experiences of managers undergoing such initiatives and opens up greater opportunities for data collection which may not necessarily become available using more traditional approaches. My experience with DSB's program created a deeper understanding of why participants struggled with implementing its teachings in their own working lives. It is, however, not without risks, and the following potential dangers must be considered by researchers considering utilizing this approach

Researchers are always at risk of converting to the belief-systems they are exposed to. Researchers examining corporate spiritual learning initiatives are placed in a position where they must identify the processes used to ostensibly convert managers, but yet must remain respectful of their field and provide new findings in often overpopulated theoretical milieus. The tension between these two concerns is not sustainable for long periods of time, and attempts to energetically engage with data may expose researchers to an unanticipated risk of conversion.

In my own case I shared the national culture of my interviewees (in most cases) and worked in the same city during the same time as they. However, although I spent significant amounts of time in the organization, I was employed elsewhere (as an researcher in a commercial organization and as an academic lecturer) and did not experience the deep experience of being part of a community of managers in a single organizational locale. Auto/ethnographic research, might possibly induce feelings of 'outsiderness' in shared scenarios.

Another concern is connected with the potential risk to the researchers own sense of ontological identity. Researchers who engage with faith systems in an effort to 'get closer' to their research subjects risk damaging their own sense of ontological security. Giddens (1991) writes: "To be ontologically secure is to possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, "answers" to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses' (p.47). Our ontological security is our sense of place in the world;

our connectedness to an ordered continuity of events. Conversions and epiphanies are responses to dissatisfaction with this order. What risks exist then, when an individual does not actively seek out a change in their ontological security, as might happen with using an auto/ethnographic approach?

Laing (1990) refers to the schizoid state which stems from an individual's developing ontological *insecurity*. Although it is not posited here that the spiritual management development programs might cause mental health problems when applied in a cultural context outside the one in which it has been developed, it was my experience that attempting to 'live by' prescriptions for self-hood that do not refer to one's immediate cultural 'reality' can be productive of isolating and painful experiences. These are similar in ways to Anthony's (1994) description of 'managerial schizophrenia' which arises when an espoused cultural ideology does not align with experience at a local level. Lasch (1985) wrote that narcissism results from reactions to crises in self-hood which arise from individuals living through troubled and uncertain times when the threat of annihilation results in mass-hysteria. The desire for self-enhancement and development can result in the development of a dissonant state of self-hood which places excessive and contradictory demands on the self.

'The desire for complete self-sufficiency is just as much a legacy of primary narcissism as the desire for mutuality and relatedness. Because narcissism knows no distinction between the self and others; it expresses itself in later life both in the desire for ecstatic union with others, as in

romantic love, and in the desire for absolute independence from others by means of which we seek to revive the original illusion of omnipotence and to deny our dependence on external sources of nourishment and gratification' (Lasch, 1985 pp. 245 - 246).

Laing (1990) writes that lack of clarity about identity can lead to heightened levels of anxiety that are sometimes pathological. An ontologically insecure person lacks a sense of 'personal consistency or cohesiveness' (p.42) which is then manifested in three forms of anxiety: engulfment, implosion and petrification. The former and latter forms of anxiety were most notable prior to (and at times during) my engagement with the *Spiriti* program.

The key benefit of utilizing auto/ethnography is that it is respectful, in practical terms, of the participants and interviewees. Auto/ethnography can assist in the removal of barriers which so often present when researchers enter an organizational site to undertake cultural research. Although auto/ethnographic approaches run the risk of creating 'pain' for the researcher, they also produce salient and useful qualitative data which can boast unparalleled richness. A central ethical concern arising from this discussion of this method is the issue of the risk of emotional pain (Sampson et al. 2008). A question that remains to be answered is: How can we develop auto/ethnographic techniques in a way which is not harmful to the researchers who engage with it? Because auto/ethnography is conducted in concert with ethnographic approaches, it directly addresses concerns about the rigorousness of auto-biographical research, whilst utilizing the conventions of more traditional ethnographic approaches.

In the main article article, auto/ethnography is applied to the study of SMD, but it has applications beyond such overt attempts to introduce organizational spirituality. Indeed, Ackers and Preston (1997) noted that a spiritual tone had begun to be introduced to management development initiatives over the course of the early 1990s, and the study of workplace spirituality as it as applied to other areas such as performance appraisal systems, leadership, organizational change, etc., remain potential avenues for investigating the spiritual though auto/ethnography.

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