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Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice

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Abstract

Exploration of our organisational life has much to gain from fiction so as to reflexively engage with provisional processes of uncertainty, doubt and paradox. These are often neglected qualities of how we go on together in our organizational lives. Taking an autoethnographic approach I present one narrative of a fraught meeting that I was part of to explore my leadership development. I do this in relation to Homer, Shakespeare and Allen-Poe to explore leadership issues of: paradox and how we become enmeshed in unfolding events; the interaction between a leader's future intent and how this plays out in action. In doing this I offer an invitation to explore literature that speaks to and develops our practice of leadership and how we might develop and communicate useful insights.

Introduction

In this paper I address the question: 'why study organizational ethnography?', a question posed in this journal by Jørgensen et al (Jørgensen, Henriksen, & Dembek, 2015). Here I take autoethnography as a way of exploring a fuller range of 'being a person' in an organisation, including issues of doubt, uncertainty, hope etc. in addition to other factors that are more adequately covered in organisational literature. For Boje and Tyler (2009) it is an approach that allows for an exploration of the 'multiple layers, multiple selves (...) [in the] interplay of narrative and story' (p. 177). This being in contrast with an autobiographical approach which down plays these multiple possibilities, instead stressing a more linear personal account. Jørgensen et al explain that 'giving corporate subjects the possibility of speaking' (Ibid, p. 1) is one of a number of reasons why this is important. This is difficult. Here I explain why and explore possibilities for autoethnographers to engage with their experience and I do so autoethnographically.

Background, events and commentary

I will introduce a little of my background including some of the twists and turns that have led me to write this paper. This includes the challenges I faced as a leader working on a complex and highly political project and the nature of how I felt let down by management literature. I include one detailed narrative of a meeting that I was part of when my confidence

Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice was tested leading to surprise and doubt in me and some of the people I worked with. I do not offer this as an extraordinary incident; on the contrary it is rather ordinary (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). I will then use this as a basis of how I came to use friction as a reflexive prompt to explore my own practice in ways that might be helpful to the autoethnographer.

I came to academia after twenty years in various managerial roles. After my first degree in microbiology in my early twenties it was not until my forties that I completed an MBA and doctorate. Later in my career I worked in large scale change for a health organisation in the UK, the experience of which I will draw on here. During my MBA and doctorate that I noticed how literature (fiction, stories and plays) could establish a rich connection between what was written down and that of my lived experiences in organisational life (Avital, 2008). I shall now refer to this as 'literature' as distinct from management literature which I will term as 'writing'. By lived experience I mean richer meaningful interpretations of doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety as one moves into an unknown with others in the temporal process of organising. This was in contrast with much that I had read on my MBA which had frustrated me with explanations of implied certainty (Kotter, 1996; Porter, 2008; Senge, 1990). To illustrate this, here is a narrative of a meeting I attended in which I presented a draft report. It was a meeting of a UK Government taskforce that brought people from different disciplines together to work on long standing problems in providing sufficient organs for transplantation.

The (...) meeting (...) was held in the basement of a government building where a group of disparate individuals had come together as a Taskforce. We had been working together on this for several months. It was a big room, with tables arranged in a large square. (...) At previous meetings there had been a tendency for those with differing views to sit as far apart from each other as possible, and so it was this time.

Together with the chairman, I was one of the first to arrive. She confided that she was worried that one of the members might 'walk out' and put the success of the initiative in jeopardy. I noticed that she had a couple of large boxes she had brought with her. It turned out later that she had made some cakes for people to share during morning coffee. This created a lot of interest and affected the conversation. The previously difficult and tense exchanges stopped as people became directed towards the cakes. I heard people recounting their favourite recipes and giving a small insight into their home life. It occurred to me that there would not be many opportunities for such a diverse range of people to be in the same room together, not only because of their different professional and social circles, but because there was an active professional dislike and mistrust between some. This point had been made clear before the meeting when one member of the group had publicly and in writing described another professional group as being 'slippery'. At the heart of this difference were very real professional, ethical and legal difficulties and ambiguities.

Prior to the meeting I had sent around the latest draft of my report, a 'work in progress' that sought to capture the developing thoughts of the group at the time. Just before we sat down a couple of people came up to me and said how well the report was coming along and how amusing some of the minor typographical errors were. My Chief Executive came over to me to ask if there was anything he needed to do to support me during the meeting.

I stood up to present the paper. There was quiet, attentive listening, but little in the way of active engagement. But then a point came where I felt that I was at the centre of the meeting's anxiety and tension. There were comments that the report was unbalanced, with too much attention paid to supply chain issues at the expense of clinical concerns; the terminology I had used was wrong, and so it went on. It is difficult, or impossible, to untangle my feelings of anxiety. I felt myself wishing that I was somewhere else. I felt confused, as if I had missed something; a part of the jigsaw. After the meeting a couple of people came up to me to express surprise at what had happened and speculated about other private meetings that must have happened behind the scenes.

Later the events of the day repeatedly went through my mind. It was at this point it started to occur to me that there was more to the discussion of the report, and my reaction to it, than appeared at first. The report was one example of where

Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice
conflict had surfaced, just as the cakes were a focus for connection. Conflict and collaboration were constantly emerging in unstable, surprising and interdependent ways. As the narrative illustrates, it was not only me that had feelings of doubt, uncertainty and anxiety, it was others too leading to a complex dynamic affecting us all.

Writing this narrative was difficult for two reasons. Firstly, the very nature of the material was painful; it is far easier to write about success. Writing about failure in a detailed way brings back intellectual and bodily (e.g. flushing, change of heart rate) memories. Secondly, writing about practice, that we have honed and have become expert in over many years, does not allow us to notice the full range of possibilities. Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist and anthropologist, discussed this in his concept of the logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990). Here he draws our attention to the generative process of habit and repetition one develops and in doing so we develop a range of short cuts from the numerous options that might be available to the newcomer. In other words, our bodily and mental processes only have access to a narrow range of reasonable contextual possibilities (Ibid, p. 55-56). This he termed *habitus*, our inner world with all its hard to notice assumptions, in contrast to 'field' the external social context in which we find ourselves. What I became aware of in my own autoethnographic work and illustrated by Bourdieu's logic of practice, is that noticing and engaging with one's experience is difficult, we are only partially sighted to our patterns of assumptions and biases that are so deeply ingrained in our practice. And it is painful.

It was the use of literature that was a factor enabling me to explore my experience. In the three very different forms of literature I will draw attention to the following: the interaction between advice and how events play out; paying attention to paradox and dilemmas in the living presence (Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000); and the interaction between a leader's intent and how events play out. The literature I will draw on will be Homer's *Iliad* (Homer, 2003), a story from Edgar Allen Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (Poe, 1993) and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Shakespeare, 1611) respectively. The question might be why these stories? I am aware that all three cases are written by men, now long dead, about men, and indeed I am a man. Over a ten-year period these stories have stuck to me like velcro; easy to attach but hard to remove. And there lies a problem; it was hard to notice why. A place to start would be my influences at the time. My MBA and the doctorate were personally challenging, it gradually made me notice my own assumptions and biases, the most vivid being the issue of power (Warwick, 2010) particularly working in senior positions, a glimpse of which we see in the above narrative. Linked to this, in my role in strategy and policy, was the task of rolling up complex relational processes into policy that implied simplicity (Warwick & Board, 2013). Although this would gain commitment I knew full well the weakness of words when it came to implementation. Put another way, it was a trust in others, but trust not properly articulated. A further factor were the projects I had been working on over the years and I noticed a common feature was an ending, a closure. Being in charge of a project comes with its own power, but it is temporary, and the benefits can only be reaped once the business has taken it over. In reflecting on these now, and in my previous analysis (Warwick & Board, 2013), I was curious of the impact of power on me and those I interacted with, issues of anxiety and doubt and of confusing paradox and of what it takes to make the next sensible step, again that we glimpse in the above narrative. These were issues that I could relate to in my velcro fiction that was lacking in much of the organisational literature I was reading.

The confusing experience in the narrative is not uncommon but is rarely addressed in mainstream management writing. If discussed there is a tendency towards the overly theoretical and 'clever' as with the tendency in the critical management literature (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, 2003). Having said this, I am conscious that I might be accused of similar; it is akin to trying to look at ourselves sideways in a mirror. I have sought to address this with a combination of personal accounts of practice and theory. And it is for this reason that I have taken an autoethnographic approach (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) in which the context of narratives provides connection between theory and practice (Empson, 2012; Kempster & Stewart, 2010; Mischenko, 2005). Although criticised for 'navel gazing' (Essen & Varlander, 2012) it can offer voice to the gamut of feelings, confusion, logic and tentative decision making that most of us glimpse in how we go about being and doing with others. The use and engagement of literature has implications for: personal and management development, and to establish firmer connections between practitioner/management experience and management research.

The uses of literature – an orientation beyond the case study and the provisional nature of context

The use of literature in organisational studies and management education is not new (Czarniawska & De Monthoux, 1994). To cite but a few examples, Knights and Willmott draw on the contemporary fiction of Lodge's *Nice Work*, Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Wolf's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*

Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice (Knights & Willmott, 1999), Sims reflects on the childhood story of the *Velveteen Rabbit* (Sims, 2004) to explore love for an organisation.

My approach is to describe three 'striking moments' (Corlett, 2012) in which engagement with literature shifted my thinking, particularly in the reconciliation between my experience and my reflection on practice. In reading this, other literature may come to mind in ways that enable other connections to be made. And in doing so, over a period of time we might come up with some shared literatures that can offer insights into wider management writing and practice, either in writing or conversation in seminars.

A feature in all three examples is the issue of context, but not as a means to neatly distinguish one study from another (Flyvbjerg, 2001) but what I would call 'provisional context'. By this I mean the shifting nature of the characters and contexts in the literature and how they come to understand and react to their situations; and how we as readers shift our understanding with them. In management education it is this case study that has often been used to explore complex events that people face in organisations and to draw some conclusions in ways that are defensible against the scientific criticism (Eisenhardt, 1989; Hartley, 2004; Yin, 2011). Czarniawska (1997, p. 64) cites Yin's definition of a case study as

being an empirical inquiry that: investigates contemporary phenomena in real-life context; where there are boundaries between the phenomenon and context; and uses multiple sources of information (Yin, 2011).

She then goes on to explore the problems that arise in such approaches, particularly how these definitions become further focused, and the implication this has for fixing both the context and what is noticeable; in other words to lose the provisional nature of experience.

Examples from my MBA some ten years ago that I read and discussed, many of which are still available, or have been revised (The Case Centre, 2014), covered topics such as leadership, including the BBC (Keys, 2003) and GE (Bartlett & Wozny, 1999) and corporate wrongdoing drawing on Enron (Nanda, 2002) and Worldcom (Ebberts, 2005).

A characteristic that I noticed was a lack of attention given to how the characters developed, how they live and make sense of what they are facing as well as an over emphasis of rationality over confusion and 'muddling through'. And from these heroic endeavours were distilled attributes to be applied by the reader. This aping of the scientific approach is problematic (Dreyfus, 1986; Mason, 2006); it seeks to predict and explain everyday activities, draws the reader to un-reflexively react in ways such as: 'how could they have been so stupid to have done that ...', 'how did they think they would get away with ...', 'isn't that obvious ...', or similar. In all three cases that I will describe we develop an understanding of the characters' back story. Leading up to those critical incidents we have started to appreciate in some way their hopes and expectations; we sense an interconnected melee of which they are a part; we share their vulnerability; and, we sense the provisional context in which they act, and connect with their hopes.

Process over spatial separation

Several ways of researching organisations, such as action research and grounded theory, emphasise a dualism between the individual and the social (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, pp. 26-27). These approaches can downplay the temporal whilst favouring the spatial as illustrated by phrases such as 'stepping back from the data' and 'what's the big picture?' and 'let's see this through another lens'. This spatial way of thinking, often accompanied by post hoc rationalisation, obscures emergent feelings of ambiguity, sensemaking and conflict (Warwick & Board, 2013).

Without implying that a simplistic choice between the spatial and temporal is possible, there is merit in a redressing of the balance towards the temporal, paying attention to the detailed patterns of anticipation, action, recognition, exclusion, etc. And it is here that literature along with our own narratives offers promising possibilities.

Even accounts of longitudinal studies, capturing an element of the dilemma and ambiguity that people face (Flyvbjerg, 1998; MacIntosh, Beech, Antonacopoulou, & Sims, 2012; Samra-Fredericks, 2004), lose dramatic quality by down-playing visceral reactions to events and long term implications of power relations. Pierre Bourdieu discusses these themes in Outline of a Theory of Practice (Bourdieu, 1977). He too argues that the abstraction of temporal flow of events is problematic illustrating this with the practice of gift exchange. A spatial or objective approach would imply that gift exchange is a reversible operation where gifts are to be matched by return gifts of equal value, whereby one cancels out the other. Looking at this from the temporal, of the character's own experience, allows consideration of hesitation, possibilities, excitement and how this fits in with the meshed course of past events; events that point to the irreversibility of experience. Bourdieu also links this with 'style' of the return of a different gift, choice of occasion and so on that comes to affect the experience of the gift and how this might elicit further response as an ongoing process.

Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice

I will explore three examples in literature addressing the temporal in different ways, but ways that draw on a common thread, namely that we as readers/audience become enmeshed in the story. We are a part of dramatic tension and relations and we share their risk, hopes and fears and how contingent these are on the actions of others and events over which we have variable control. I include several short extracts of literature, not as an alternative to the full text, but to offer a bridge between my argument and the authors' work.

Interaction between advice and how events play out

In the following section of Homer's *Iliad* we encounter the interaction between the father, Nestor, and his son Antilochus. It relates to a chariot race, one of a series of contests laid on by Achilles to mark the funeral of his friend Patroclus. We see the clear confident articulation of a paternal plan yet we sense how fraught with danger this is as the son takes on his principal adversary Menelaus. We therefore see a confident articulation in a different light. We live with them as the consequences unfold and we sense that lived cunning of wisdom as Antilochus uses his wit to relate his father's advice to events.

The Iliad

An extract of the advice Nestor gives to his son, Antilochus.

Now let me tell you something to look out for. It is obvious enough; you cannot miss it. There is a dead tree stump, an oak or pine, standing nearly two metres high. It has not rotted in the rain and is flanked by two white stones. The track narrows at this point, but the going is good on either side of this monument, which either marks an ancient burial or must have been put up as a turning-post by people of an earlier age. In any case, it is the mark that the swift footed godlike Achilles has chosen as his turning post for this race. As you drive round it keep your team close to it and lean in your chariot just a little to the left yourself. Call in your outside horse, touch him with the whip and give him rein; but make the inside horse hug the post close enough, almost to scrape it with the hub of your wheel. But avoid touching the stone, or you may injure the horses and wreck the chariot ... (Homer, 2003, p. 404).

Later, how events unfold for Antilochus

Very soon, warlike Antilochus saw a place where the sunken track grew narrow. It ran through a gully: water piled up by the winter rains and carried part of it away and deepened the whole pass. Menelaus was picking a course through it, making it difficult for anyone to come alongside. But Antilochus steered off the track altogether and gave chase along a slight diversion. Menelaus was alarmed and shouted at him: 'Antilochus, this is stupid driving! Slow down! The tracks narrow here. There will soon be more room to pass. Watch out you don't hit my chariot and wreck us both'. So he spoke, but Antilochus, pretending he had not heard him, laid it on with the whip and drove faster than ever. They both ran in for about the distance a discus will carry when a young man releases it with a swing of the arm to test his strength. Then Menelaus's pair gave way and fell back ... (Homer, 2003, p. 407).

Here Antilochus has to interpret advice received from Nestor in the moment of the unfolding of events, making the most of opportunities whilst reacting to dangers. In considering the interaction between Nestor and Antilochus we see the importance of wisdom, knack and practice in interpretation of Nestor's advice. This is a process that has been referred to as *Metis* (Baumard, 1999; DeCerteau, 1984; Detienne & Vernant, 1991; Scott, 1998), named after the Greek god of cunning and wisdom and described as:

a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years. It is applied to situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous logic (Detienne & Vernant, 1991, p. 3).

We cannot hope to acquire the ability of driving a chariot in such circumstances, but at least we can develop an understanding of the relationship between rhetoric, practice, risk and a stake in the outcome. In doing so there is the

Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice opportunity to examine our own practice and to notice the rhetoric that we listen to and speak and how we interact with each other.

As someone involved in policy and strategy development this gave me a valuable insight that affected my practice. For example the objective of policy and strategy was not only to provide clarity, but also to be mindful of how this will be interpreted by those charged with implementation. The latter point with the inherent tension between allowing enough flexibility to adapt to changing context but also to remain true to the policy aims. In other words, to acknowledge the anxiety of strategy and policy formation that manifests itself in overly rigid controls and simplification in communication, yet to recognise the practical skill and wisdom of those on the frontline. This is not a case of either/or, but awareness of the importance of both to each other.

Situations in which we find ourselves are rarely clear-cut; there are tensions and competing priorities that require an holistic understanding so as to make the next plausible choice and it is within this context that I will discuss paradox.

In my strategy practice I found that issues were rarely clear cut (but were often spoken of as if they were) and there were competing tensions and priorities that needed consideration. There is a sense of this in the earlier narrative where competing views needed to be discussed and reconciled in a way that would enable us to take the next step. It is within this context that I found the issue of paradox to be helpful as explored with a tale from Edgar Allen Poe.

Paradox and dilemma in the living presence

With Poe's *Descent into the Maelstrom* we hear the account of the narrator's conversations with a sailor on the summit of a cliff overlooking the scene of his tragedy. The sailor describes the dilemma he faces when his boat gets caught in a whirlpool. We can only do this having established in our mind what is at stake for him including his relationship with his brothers whom he now mourns. Poe delivers us to a point where we can directly live the visceral sense of paradox as he momentarily weighs up life-and-death choices drawing on fragments of memory in relation to how events are unfolding.

With one of the three brothers having drowned the other two are caught, paralysed with fear. Our sailor emotionally detaches himself enough to notice how certain items are escaping the vortex. With this insight he tells his brother, but he is too caught up in the moment and drowns. The observant brother manages to escape, but later on he reflects:

Descent into the Maelstrom

I called to mind the great variety of buoyant matter that strewed the coast of Lofoden, having been absorbed and then thrown forth from the [maelstrom]. By far the greater number of articles were shattered in the most extraordinary way – so chafed and roughened as to have the appearance of being struck full of splinters – but then I distinctly recollected that there were *some* of them which were not quite disfigured at all. Now I could not account for this difference except by supposing that the roughened fragments were the ones which had been *completely absorbed* – that the others had entered the whirl at so late a period of the tide, or, for some reason, had descended so slowly after entering, that they did not reach the bottom before the turn of the flood came, or of the ebb as the case might be. I conceived it possible, in either instance, that they might thus be whirled up again to the level of the ocean, without undergoing the fate of which had been drawn more early or absorbed more rapidly (Poe, 1993, pp. 59-60).

At this point of noticing, of what was around him and how this related to previous experience, he realises that his only chance of avoiding the whirlpool would be to lash himself to a barrel. He does so, and survives.

In the story we can participate in the sailor's plight and dilemma and notice with him the paradoxical process he finds himself in; in what the figurational sociologist Norbert Elias calls 'involvement and detachment' (Elias, 1987). We can understand this in an accessible way, accessible to the full range of logic and emotion. In this sense paradox is not a rationalist position of 'either ... or', or even 'both ... and', but is a process of 'at the same time', explored as a temporal process. It is a process that I can relate to when I re-read the narrative of the workshop above; the sense of emotion, edginess, conversations of understanding and rationality. In the recounting of this excerpt we sense the temporal quality as events unfold, a subject explored by the US pragmatist philosopher G. H. Mead (1932) in his essay *The Philosophy of the Present* that each new experience enables us to reconsider our previous experiences as we continually form our consciousness and identity as we move into the future. It is only in the distant future that we can look back with some certainty and draw a coherent thread through our experience. It is this certainty that is prevalent in many case studies, particularly those I have cited. What I am drawing attention to in these examples of literature and my narrative is the lived presence as people try to

Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice understand their situation in relation to their past, both being mouldable, as events unfold. In relating to Poe's paradoxical dilemma of being caught up in events, but at the same time detaching himself, in order to make the next step we no longer say 'how could they have been so stupid to have done that ...', because we share a sense of confusion, pain, sadness, achievement and consequence. Stacey, in commenting on complexity and organisational dynamics, defines paradox as:

a state in which two diametrically opposing forces/ideas are simultaneously present, neither of which can ever be resolved or eliminated. There is, therefore, no possibility of a choice between the opposing poles or of locating them in different spheres. Instead, what is required is a different kind of logic, such as the dialectical logic (Stacey, 2006).

This description, although meaningful, lacks a connection with lived events that Mead describes, or any sense of emotion as people face such circumstances. One is caught in a bind; the more it is described with clear words and argument, the more it eludes us. And it is here that literature can make a contribution along the lines that Edgar Allan Poe has done with a short story of a sailor's plight.

I will continue with this theme to explore how literature can illustrate a woven connection between the reader and the characters of the plot in order to develop a sense that we as readers share a developing stake in the dilemma and opportunity of those involved.

Interaction between the text and reader/audience

In management literature on leadership and learning much is spoken of systems thinking (Jackson, 2003; Seddon, 2008; Senge, 1990) to draw attention to the complexities of the wider stage. However, there are some pervasive assumptions associated with systems thinking namely that the agent sits isolated beyond the boundaries of the system in some privileged position. This is in contrast to being immersed in the melee of the on-going endeavour, with the individual both affecting and being affected by the actions of others (Stacey et al., 2000). In the next example I pay attention to these dynamics in ways that directly affect us, the reader, in this process.

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero has gathered all those that are important to him on an island, and having demonstrated his power and magic they have changed; the only person yet to do so is Prospero himself and it is this we come to in the epilogue. And to do this he engages with us, the audience. It is only in understanding this that we can now come to appreciate the importance of his plea to us, the audience, that he should now be relieved of his magic powers and return to his dukedom in Milan. But we also see his power is not absolute but is intertwined in the activities and thoughts of others, for example Miranda's hold over him as his beloved daughter. In other words, power is a connected network of influence through the activities and interests of others in a way which becomes apparent during the progress and 'resolution' of the play. Just as we saw that gift exchange is not a zero sum game, here power is expressed as an ongoing figuration with histories, anticipations and choices to be made. But here the uncertainty is shared with the audience; notice the following:

Tempest

Epilogue, spoken by Prospero

Now my charms are all overthrown,
And what strength I have's mine own,
Which is most faint: now, 'tis true,
I must be here confined by you,
Or sent to Naples. Let me not, (5)
Since I have my dukedom got
And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell;
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands. (10)
Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please. Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
And my ending is despair, (15)
Unless I be relieved by prayer,

Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free. (Exit, 20) (Shakespeare, 1611).

In appealing directly to the audience and asking us to make a decision we all have a stake in the process and we are now involved in the decision as to what Prospero does with his powers. We do so at a point whereby we understand the characters and how they relate to each other. In the dialogue we experience a shift in power and we can envisage a different future in which we have an explicit role to play.

Each time I have watched the play I remember feeling a sense of immediacy at this point and slight discomfort; I was no longer a viewer but a player and part of the power relations, albeit in imagination. My sense of immediacy has been arrived at from a developing relationship with the characters; I care for some, dislike others, and am puzzled by several. And I am now imagining a possible future with Prospero in his Dukedom, Ariel free, Caliban free, Miranda's future with Ferdinand and my role in the demise of Prospero's power and magic. What responsibility do I have? Contrast this with the case study approach there is little appeal to me (us) in the game, the invitation of 'what would you do ...?' seems distant, logical and unemotional.

The epilogue invites us to consider our own movement and participation within the unfolding of events in ways that we find unexpected and unsettling. It also draws attention to the shifting nature of power relations and how we become moved by others. We are not indulging in abstract, unconnected clarity of thought. There are important invitations in considering our own involvement that have parallels with leadership and the power relations of which we are all part, but enmeshed as both actor and audience member. Here leadership is not a one-way street between the leader and the led; instead we notice how the leader is influenced as well as influencing the interactions which have led to the crucial and transformative part of the play. In doing so it adds to the debate of authentic leadership and followership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Crippen, 2012) by exploring relationships as inter-dependent processes in which we all have a stake.

It has enabled me to develop greater reflexivity and awareness of how power figurations change over time. The meeting I described finished and others subsequently took place. The experience of shame and embarrassment faded, new understandings were (tentatively) formed and others too had their 'rough patches' over the two years I was involved in the project.

Giving voice to undiscussables

When I think of my career I recall many times of profound doubt and uncertainty (a glimpse of which I have shared), ranging from decisions I was part of, others less so, sticking with a plan, taking another route, reacting to events and listening to advice; but talk of such feelings was marginalised and more often self-censored. Working with others on their management development I often see this with them too. These are not subjects often discussed in the management writing (Chia & Holt, 2008; Hawkins & Edwards, 2013; Jackson, 1996).

What I am pointing to is the experience of doubt and vulnerability and how literature offered a way to explore similar feelings in useful ways, not as atomised clips, but as temporally joined narratives from which meaning can be gained. In other words, literature offers a way of developing bridges between experiences and how we might think of it, discuss it and develop reflexivity. Consider the mariner in *Descent into the Maelstrom*. The sailor's story focuses on doubt at a point where he has nothing more to lose; his telling is the coming to terms and making sense of his doubt in making the choice that he does. With Prospero the way that he speaks to us, the audience, speaks of doubt as he is uncertain as to the decision we might come to and how events might unfold for him. This is a form of doubt that many of us share as we make an important presentation or seek to convince someone at a meeting. But it is Nestor's tone of voice that I find the most intriguing. On the one hand Nestor speaks with confidence and clarity, but this is fragile and masks deep concern over Antilochus's chances of success and the consequences of failure, shame and death. A more attentive discussion of the dynamics between conviction and doubt offers the opportunity to explore power, how decisions are taken and how we might communicate this. For example, how the confidence and clarity that appears on the surface of organisational strategy and the management discourse masks uncertainty and doubt as to how these objectives and insights might play out.

Moving beyond the traditional management writing towards an (auto)ethnographic approach to uncertainty and faith in contemporary society, Pelkmans (Pelkmans, 2013) makes the point that doubt is an essential feature that underlies and energizes much of human thought and action. However, to explore this one must 'pay attention to the temporal dimension, and to explore how hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment may over time feed into and give way to each other' (Ibid, pp. 4-5). But to talk of doubt is tricky with a tendency to 'vanish with articulation', a point I made earlier with the concept of

Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice paradox. Pelkmans also explains the importance of doubt, particularly within the practice of academia as without it one can't move beyond one's own habitual ideas, assumptions and truths. It is also essentially discomfiting; a view shared by Melvin Pollner (Pollner, 1991) of his reflections on the missed opportunity of reflexivity in ethnomethodology when he states '... an "unsettling" i.e. an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality. It is the antithesis of "settling down". Bloch also points to the social process of doubt, in that it is not solely a lonely internal process. It is a part of the dialogic process that stimulates movement of thought (Bloch, 2013), a process that can span years if not decades that can come to incite further thought and investigation (Driessen, 2013). Doubt is an essential prompt that enables critical reflexivity, and it is the separation between the observed and observer of many case studies that plays down doubt and those multiple avenues and possibilities that fleetingly emerge and close, both in our own mind and that of the characters, nudging us straightforwardly towards one side of the argument.

Conclusion

Autoethnography offers important insights into organisational life addressing visceral aspects such as hope, anxiety and doubt and often, aspects of human 'beingness' often ill served by other organisational research approaches. To the individual researcher, keen to take their experience seriously, it can offer a valuable opportunity for personal development. However, autoethnography is difficult and the expertise we have developed over the years comes at a cost: our assumptions, biases and choices are difficult to notice and engage with. Here I argue that reflexive prompts in the form of fiction can enable an engagement with one's experience. I hope the examples that I explore strike a chord, building a 'bridge' to readers' own experience. However, my primary aim is to offer new insights into how we might engage with autoethnography in a way that enables us to pay thorough attention to what it is to be 'human' in our organisational life.

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Doubt, uncertainty and vulnerability in leadership: using fiction to enable reflection and voice

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