**Collaborative Autoethnography: Its Use and Revelations in Management and Leadership Research and Publishing**

## **Abstract**

This article presents an ongoing reflexive account of us as three collaborating academics undertaking research and writing a journal article in the field of management and leadership. Influenced by collaborative autoethnography, it draws on narratives written at the time, recorded conversations and letter exchanges between us as we prepare our work for submission to a journal. Through the process we show how the quality of research improves. We do this by paying attention to the contradictions between the rational expectation of how research should occur and the messiness of what actually happens; and how difficult this was for us to pay attention to. This was achieved during a reflexive process of coming to know and learn about each other in a way that shone a new light on ourselves. We share the benefits of engaging in challenging dialogue and reflection that maintains a level of unsettlement within our collaboration. The contribution of our article is to demonstrate our use of collaborative autoethnography as a reflexive heuristic to enhance research practice in a multiple perspective context. This has enabled validity *in action* by making explicit learning and knowledge of the peripheral goings on of the collaborative process that might normally go unnoticed.

## **Key Words**

## Collaborative autoethnography, Research practice, Reflexivity, Validity *in action*

**Overview**

The objective of this article is to explore the process of three management and leadership researchers coming together to embark on a research project and achieve academic publication. The topic of our research project was action learning, where we worked as action learning facilitators with hospital doctors in the UK over two years. This article charts how we got to know each other as researchers, how we learn from each other, how this learning affects the nature of our research practice and our understanding of the academic community. These are the peripheral goings on that might otherwise go unnoticed. This article presents examples and analysis of our research conversations showing how research and researcher development benefits from engaging in challenging dialogue and reflection that maintains a level of unsettlement within a collaboration. We make explicit the need to be conscious of self-censorship and conformity within research teams and how we became more aware of how the expectations of the academic community affects our practice and what we say. Through this we illustrate how issues of power within the group and the wider academic community impact on our behaviour as researchers and influence the presentation of our work.

Those who are experienced management and leadership academics might recognise the dilemmas we surface in this article, but will perhaps find it novel to see how some colleagues have decided to record and document their collaboration with an accompanying analysis. The account that follows suggests a way of improving the quality of research through a variety of interactive processes and reflections that we call validity *in action*. It also offers an insight into the context in which management academics work.

**Background, Context and Contribution**

We are Rob, Janet and Adam. Rob and Janet are from the same university, Adam is from a different one. We are lecturers and researchers who have joined academic life after careers in other fields. We had previously presented the findings of our research project at conferences and in journal articles. However, a change was to occur. At one of our meetings to discuss our research, we were reflecting on our outcomes so far and our work in progress. In a relaxed moment while discussing the constraints of journal protocols and conventions, Janet expressed eagerness to achieve publication, suggesting that we create a hypothesis and that we apply a more formal structure to the paper to “get it moving” to comply with journal requirements. Adam’s response to Janet’s comment created a striking moment[[1]](#endnote-1) and a difficult discussion, as Adam expressed concern that we were not being true to ourselves:

The methodology in the recent draft of our paper just did not give voice to the challenging conversations we have had, given the emergent nature of both the methodology and how we had come to understand our research material.

We decided to write this article to show how we use collaborative autoethnography to improve our research practice, sharing our learning and developing knowledge that influenced subsequent actions and where these actions have taken our research. In other words, to explore the implications of what Adam had drawn our attention to. Rob’s long held interest in reflexivity in the field of management quickly drew him to Corlett’s work[[2]](#endnote-2) on being “struck” and “striking moments.” We recognised in Corlett’s work the collaborative nature (in this case of the researcher and interviewee) of being sensitive to how we act, respond and talk in that moment of being struck. Corlett cites Cunliffe,[[3]](#endnote-3) pointing to an emotional, psychological or cognitive sense of “something we cannot quite grasp in the moment.” Instead of Corlett drawing attention to a fleeting moment between researcher and interviewer, here we make it the focus of us as researchers developing our practice over a longer term. As part of the review process we were encouraged to consider “critical moments” and the work of Byrne-Armstrong and colleagues[[4]](#endnote-4) and what they describe as “messy, unspoken, complex and disturbing moments” that are not usually discussed in research. In this article we too use narratives, but do so in a different way. Firstly, we have written them close to the point of happening. Secondly, we use these narratives and other material to act as further reflexive prompts to encourage deeper noticing of our research collaboration. In this sense this article has merit in both what it reveals about our research process and as an invitation for others to enquire into their practice. The literature on autoethnography focuses mainly on its contribution to knowledge, but remains largely silent on how it might contribute to reflexive practice, particularly in the management and leadership community.

Our article adds to this literature in making explicit the process of how we come to understand our position in the academic community, and how we understand our differences. By explicit we mean having challenging conversations prompted by our various artefacts from our research project. These challenging conversations enabled us to pay attention to vulnerabilities, trust, identity, power relations and the differences between ourselves, as well as our interactions with the research community, and then how we responded.

The issue of self-censorship in relation to the mores and expectations of the academic community became evident; this article shows how easy it can be to settle into unnoticed routines that inhibit important conversations when it comes to journal choice, research practice and how far to challenge conventions. Grant and Elizabeth[[5]](#endnote-5) have observed how little resistance there is amongst academics in a performance driven university culture. By paying attention to these under noticed routines, or the hidden peripheral goings on, and tacit knowing, we reveal our coping and research practice as a form of social validity *in action,* by which we mean it is a constant process as part of our conversation. Encouraged by others[[6]](#endnote-6) who have used autoethnography in the academy and university setting our reflexive venture began.

**Process of Collaboration**

We voice here our experience of writing and researching together in action. We are therefore working towards a future unknown with its multiple possibilities, rather than of success achieved with its *post hoc* rationalization. This is a point explored by Boje with his interest in antenarratives.[[7]](#endnote-7) Here the prefix “ante” refers to the focus on a narrative that has not settled into *post hoc* certainty where there are many possible options for the way forward. To explore these options and the choices we made we decided on a collaborative autoethnographic approach. Collaborative autoethnography is a process of recalling and critically reflecting on one’s lived experiences[[8]](#endnote-8) with others.[[9]](#endnote-9) Like the warp and weft of fabric we have woven this in two connected ways: firstly, reflexively to engage with our research practice as a heuristic process; and secondly, to critically and reflexively investigate our research practice and represent the collaborative process to others in this article.

Our starting point was to develop our understanding of collaborative autoethnography as a conceptual framework for locating our lived experiences of how we engaged and negotiated with each other. This included our multiple and sometimes conflicting perceptions of how this shaped and developed our research practice.

**Our Practice and Working Understanding of Collaborative Autoethnography**

Collaborative autoethnography facilitates the exploration of the textures of how people relate to each other, and includes aesthetics, emotions and embodied experiences[[10]](#endnote-10) as well as logic and rationality.

Chang and others[[11]](#endnote-11) who have done much of the earlier work on collaborative autoethnography stress the importance of dialogical analysis and interpretation that the participants engage in as part of the research process, holding up mirrors of communal self-interrogation. They emphasise the simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical and ethnographic nature as being an oxymoron. They explain that “it is a process and a product of ensemble performance” and although you see the *product* here we draw on a *process* over the two years. It is difficult to keep a sense of contingent process alive, hence our use of narrative close to the point of happening. Lapadat[[12]](#endnote-12) explains that co-constructed narratives, analysed from a number of points of view, are more likely to highlight “themes of enduring pragmatic social value.” This, it is suggested, minimises tendencies of the individual to paint overly positive linear accounts rather than the often confusing open-ended nature of experience. Whilst we agree with this, our interest is also drawn to the steps before using collaborative autoethnography, paying attention to how awareness and the research approach developed.

In the field of management and leadership, co-constructed autoethnography in the form of guided dialogic processes[[13]](#endnote-13) has been used in executive coaching, enabling power relationships to be explored, particularly between the researcher/coach and the coachee. Cann and DeMeulenaere point out that it is an approach that can be used by researchers themselves in relation to the complexity of research relationships.[[14]](#endnote-14) Here a common feature is attention given to the temporal and the unfolding of uncertain events.

The data that we collected over the last two years were: recordings of our conversations, narratives written soon after events, descriptions of ourselves at formative stages and letters to each other. These letters show: how conversation transcripts and narratives were understood; what literature and knowledge we were drawn to in making sense of our collaboration; and, in turn, how this understanding impacted our research in a field new to us.

**Homeward Bound from the Conference**

We attended a conference where we presented initial thoughts on our collaborative autoethnographic research. This is an extract from Rob’s narrative, written homeward bound on the train the day after:

I open the door, it has a squeaky hinge and it closes with a bang. We are presenting our paper and are hoping for lots of lively conversation. I see white tables arranged in dishevelled rows with chairs facing the front. I feel awkward, my heart sinks …. Adam has a conversation with the chairwoman of the session “shall we move chairs round into a circle?” “No, we will just ask people to move their chairs a bit” comes the response. The result: a hotchpotch of chairs and scattered people.

Notice the attention given to the unpredictable situation and surprise felt by Rob in the social bind of wanting to change the room layout and yet follow conventions to say nothing and fit in. This focused on the interaction between human experience and the environment in the form of the rows of chairs facing the front and how this might affect the flow of conversation that Rob was hoping for. Rob continues:

We begin; I introduce Janet and Adam and we go through the genesis of the paper. Adam describes a striking moment of us working together, a challenge that he made to Janet and me that the paper we were working on just wasn’t consistent with our practice. Janet describes … how she is noticing her research practice developing and changing and accepting vulnerability. Over to me. I talk about the opportunities that we are keen to explore: the implications for research validity in the reflexive process; how difference between us enables us to notice. I stop for questions, pause and the audience responds: “have you thought about *Organizational Ethics*?” “What about *Management Learning*?” “The *International Journal of Qualitative Research* and their special issue on dirty work?” “Or *Journal of Management Inquiry*?”

The conversation moved safely towards journal titles rather than the nature of our practice itself, diverting attention away from the theme of trust.

As Rob continues:

I ask myself “Why didn’t I say something about noticing the shift to the safety of journal titles?” The other two presentations take place and a crane trundles past the open window, I can’t hear what is said. The sessions finish 10 minutes early and Janet, Adam and I are talking. K, an audience member, comes over: “can I join you?” We have a conversation. K says “I wanted to say something but it seemed too mundane.” I question K as to what she means by mundane, I find this intriguing. What is it about the mundane that is difficult to talk about? Is the apparent obvious and out of bounds … what are the implications of this inhibiting reflexive conversation?

On the face of it, what we were pointing to in our presentation seemed important to us yet was viewed as mundane by the audience, all of whom seemed to hold the view that research validity as a reflexive practice did not warrant closer consideration. For Janet as a researcher, already recognising her own vulnerability, and being accepting of this, the need to create this openness in others for a discussion of validity was noted. As the conversation gravitated towards advice, for example which journal to publish in, there was no exploration of ideas or relating our experience and questions to their practice. This experience continues to impact on our movement of thought and reflexivity and how to respond to it. Notice Rob’s distraction with the crane. During a conversation much later with Janet, Rob explained how vivid this memory was, particularly a juxtaposition between what seemed a mechanical flow of time that the slow trundling represented, when set against how he was feeling of events panning out in the room. For Rob it was the idea of being involved and detached at the same time, a form of jarring meta noticing that made the experience more vivid. Posthuman researchers such as Benozzo and others[[15]](#endnote-15) describe the academic business conference in relation to how presenters and participants are controlled, regulated and dominated in relation to expected behaviors and identities. Posthumanism research suggests that focusing on human relationships in the analysis of experience is preventing fuller understanding of subjectivities. Take the chairs and their arrangement in the conference room (non-human matter), for example. Gale and Wyatt[[16]](#endnote-16) write that autoethnography cannot be understood without recognising the power of both the non-human (matter) and human objects of the setting. Posthumanist autoethnographers point out that subjectivity may need to be revisited. As Warfield writes: “voice, data, and classic processes of analysis must also be rethought as being more complex, more layered, unbounded, and always shifting.”[[17]](#endnote-17) We continue to explore our collaboration in the form of three vignettes written as letters to each other. The idea of letters came from a “collaboratory” workshop we all attended, looking at leadership evaluation in the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK. One of us was asked to be part of a letter writing circle to understand our experiences of the NHS,[[18]](#endnote-18) an approach that has been employed to explore management pedagogy.[[19]](#endnote-19) Connelly and Clandinin explain that “letter writing is a way of offering and responding to tentative narrative interpretation.”[[20]](#endnote-20) We were drawn to the process, particularly how letter writing might provide reflexive prompts for the writer and reader(s), enabling more confident interpretations of experience. In writing a letter there is someone explicitly in mind; it turns into an imagined conversation in which one anticipates a response. It is a process from which additional meaning can be gleaned from the “richness of being together, an invisible dynamic, that has lurked secretly throughout” of three people who enjoy being with each other.[[21]](#endnote-21)

In using letter writing, we explicate our mores, assumptions and ethics.[[22]](#endnote-22) When reading the letters, it is relevant to notice how fragments of previous experience present themselves and are, in turn, responded in the subsequent exchanges. Not only are we getting to know each other, but as Douglas and Carless point out, in doing so we make explicit our obscured cultural norms thus “paving the way for imaginary leaps that are necessary for change,”[[23]](#endnote-23) which for us was change in our research practice. We make explicit the application of theory in our situation (see Janet’s letter), emerging insights that we find helpful (Adam’s letter) and our embodiment of the physical world (see Rob’s letter).

Within the vignettes we refer to artefacts that had previously been created to enable further reflexive prompts and engagement. Humphreys made the explicit connection between the use of vignettes and reflexivity in qualitative research, pointing out that “the use of autoethnographic vignettes in any qualitative research account would enrich the story, ethnography, or case study and enhance the reflexivity of the methodology.”[[24]](#endnote-24) We occasionally interrupt our vignettes to offer interpretive thoughts. For clarity additional context and/or detail have been added in to the original letters.

## **Vignette 1: First Letter from Rob to Janet and Adam**

Contextual note: In this letter Rob refers to the research project on action learning that we have been working on with hospital doctors for two years.

Dear Janet and Adam,

In looking through all the [collaborative autoethnographic] material we have collected over the last year or so, there are some memorable excerpts that have jarred my thinking …. We wrote those narratives to describe ourselves to each other, and reading mine again I can feel a blended sense of intimacy and vulnerability. There was nothing there that I wouldn’t have shared in conversation quite easily but it was the act of writing that made it vivid and edgy [which in my case involved my childhood and the impact of the War on my parents], even a sense of permanence [that you do not have in conversation]. But in reading the two of yours I sensed that feeling was shared. … For example, Adam it was clear to me how good you are at spotting the flaws in our argument and reigning in my imagination particularly when I was making those shaky connections [for example the associations I was making between Michael Polanyi’s work and the Aristotelian idea of Phronesis – a point picked up again in Adam’s letter]. … Janet, I was struck by shared experiences with our parents and younger years and that shift of identities. Over the years I have moved career a number of times; each time it has felt like shedding a skin, but only partially, with itchy scar tissue becoming more noticeable – particularly being an academic deeply interested in our practice. Sometimes this gets in the way as I become frustrated with the academic conventions ….

I’m looking through our conversation transcripts [of the research into hospital doctors and action learning] and was really struck by this short clip on 6 October in the Staff Club:

R: “I would like to include mention of the surgeon and an anaesthetist as they see the world very differently.”

A: “Hmmm”.

R: “Their worldviews are very different; we saw that brought to life by the discussion on [a particular incident that happened].”

A: “I had some of this in my group [of doctors I was working with] too.”

J: “So did I …”

What strikes me in [the full] conversation is how [our understanding of the research participants] started and then shifted. We talked about how far we should anonymise our findings. I was keen to include small details and colour such as the layout of the room and even the fact that the bacon rolls had tinfoil around them. But then we shifted to minimising the vividness of our writing, something that I understand but struggle with. What is interesting when I read this short conversation again is how we came to realise a common thread through all of our experiences of [working with the doctors] … namely the issue of power and resource, but how this cropped up from nowhere [between us], I remember … being quite excited at the connections we were making.

Interpretive note: Note the ways in which we challenged each other and adapt to the mores of the management and leadership research community. This included ensuring anonymity of research participants by removing details of the physical environment; here Rob draws on the metaphor of “scar tissue” to indicate a dissonance between the choices made at the time and his life before becoming an academic. The letter also shows how Rob noticed the qualities in Adam and Janet and sensed the impact these might have in the research collaboration. The final sentence refers to power and resources; these themes became important in the research,[[25]](#endnote-25) even the impact of our own power as both group facilitators and researchers.

## **Vignette 2: Second Letter from Janet to Rob and Adam**

Continuing in vignette 2, Janet responds to Rob and offers an invitation to Adam:

Dear Rob and Adam,

Rob, thank you for your letter about our research. In reflecting on our work together, I have found the experience enriching in terms of learning about myself and others. I would describe it as a freeing experience with tensions. Rob, I picked up in your letter your point regarding power, and for me it also links to trust. The collaboration we are engaged in enables a mutual understanding[[26]](#endnote-26) of social research, where no one expert view is prioritised and we are moving away (via critical thinking) from the application of natural science measures to craft our research understandings and practice.

This raised questions for me, one is the place of the research participants in our project—how much are they engaged with us in this creation? Second, how likely is it that we will truly participate as ourselves and with our participants?

Interpretive note: Notice how Janet is now exploring her/our relationship with the research participants that featured in our research papers and draws on wider literature and theory. The collaborative autoethnographic themes of similarity and difference are present, both in relation to our collaborative autoethnography and to the research project participants.

Janet continues: Have we assumed a level of trust from our participants? I was caught by this conversation about mutual understanding, power and Foucault in a book review.[[27]](#endnote-27) Caterino cites Foucault: “As exemplified in confession, the subject’s own reflexivity is seen as necessary to find the truth about the self, but as these confessional discourses are basically administered by the new social sciences they are forms of objectifying and normalizing subjectivity. This leads to the same problem on a different level. If subjectivity and self-reflection are just forms of self-surveillance or self-policing and domination, then how can subjects get a hold of this domination?”

On one level we are writing about shared experiences with participants in our study—on another we may have different understandings as they are not a part of our interpretation of the data. I may be making an assumption that I am taking a phronetic position, in that to undertake research I am using insight, skill and wisdom in an Aristotelian sense. However, I am not, as Flyvbjerg and others[[28]](#endnote-28) suggest, independent of theoretical knowledge as I am interested in building a theory around [action learning].

Interpretive note: For Janet the problem of scientific detachment is now becoming apparent in two respects. Firstly, in relation to our relationship as researchers with the participants. Secondly, in the nature of detachment from our own experience.

Janet continues: Further, Caterino argues that if we do take a phronetic position we need to incorporate mutual accountability, and to do so a form of evaluation is required. How are we (I) justifying our aims and goals? Have I moved position or am I crafting in a sense of “naturalness” about our work? Is my rejection of scientific forms of evaluation, but acceptance of our evaluation of participants’ experience, based more on not being able to meet the criteria of natural sciences i.e. size of samples etc. rather than any moral or theoretical position about the research and participants? I was very happy to grasp Scrivens’ hand of generalization offered by a presenter at [the] “collaboratory”; it certainly eased some of the tensions I felt and offers patterns or symptoms for interpretation. Caterino[[29]](#endnote-29) suggests that the positions of Flyvbjerg et al[[30]](#endnote-30) around mutual understanding and Foucault’s with regard to constitutive power make an uneasy mix, which I can see.

Interpretive note: As Janet continues she is starting to challenge our practice, namely the assumptions of how we work together (our identified themes of similarity and difference) and the data and the ease by which we get bound in a cycle of objectification. Using the analogy of the “corner of one’s eye,” Janet is catching the wider perspective of knowledge that is influencing her practice.

Janet concludes: To an extent I am partially comforted by the idea that we are researchers participating in a larger social project (research into action learning) and whether our research can help improve how individuals, groups and organizations work better. Caterino cites Corey Shdaimiah and Roland Stahl who advocate this form of collaborative research which they describe as inherently phronetic. I will stop here to ask you both – what do you think?

All Good Wishes, Janet.

**Vignette 3: Third Letter from Adam to Janet and Rob**

In the final vignette letter 3, Adam responds to both Janet and Rob in melancholic tones.

Dear Rob and Janet,

Thank you for your letters. I intended to write on Friday with reference to Rob’s transcripts of our experiences and conversations …. If I were to take a pessimistic view I began to feel an overwhelming sense, yet again, of joining a discourse “too late” and also wondering if this game of academia, in trying to make an original contribution to get published, forces us into the process of fixing our data. …

Interpretive note: Adam takes a more existential perspective, questioning the worth of our research, both here and in relation to bending to academic norms, our integrity and issues of who we are.

Adam continues: Hence having enjoyed Janet’s philosophical discourse (which I can relate to) I was relieved to see that final paragraph about being part of a larger social project. Action research (AR) has always been the poor relation in academic research and this is still reflected in the rankings of journals dedicated to AR. Much of our work is loosely aligned to the AR framework in its various forms and I am reminded yet again of Lewin’s[[31]](#endnote-31) original conception of AR as a way of engineering change for social good. I was also persuaded by McNiff and Whitehead’s[[32]](#endnote-32) action research as living theory, that is to say “theory” does not have to be grand or generalized; it can have utility at the individual level. This applies to a lot of educational research (again low status). So phronetic I would say, yes Janet.

Turning then to our experiences as a research team, they are of course a source of enjoyment and learning. … It is fascinating that after all I say above that I have colluded with you to stay in the closet about our silence on rejection [of a paper put into a journal for review]; this is the politics of research and protection of our reputation. Yet amongst ourselves, because there is so much trust, we have become increasingly transparent. Rob’s transcripts offer an account of these issues and how [us as] three practitioner researchers try to find a way of supporting others in their learning challenges and disseminating what may help others in tackling similar problems. Are we saying anything that has not been said before though? Maybe not, but it might be interesting/useful? If so, to whom and what would they do with it? …

Interpretive note: Adam as an aside also addresses the question: are we saying anything new and the problems of newness more generally? In previous conversations, Adam had cautioned that the field of autoethnography is not without its critics, even amongst its own advocates, citing Coffey who warned of the “dangers of gross self-indulgence.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

In his letter Adam alludes to the work of Holt[[34]](#endnote-34) and the risk of narcissism but also mourns a lack of conventional business journals in which to explore the worthiness of inquiries like that of our triad. Here the collaborative autoethnographic theme of difference surfaces. In addition, Adam has explored the problematizing of the notion of researcher as controller, stressing that there is little control between the researcher, the research process and how this will be taken up by the reader. The collaborative autoethnographic themes of similarity, relating to an appreciation of Janet’s position, difference in relation to our collaborative autoethnographic triad and developing trust and our shared identity are interwoven in Adam’s letter.

Adam continues: The paper Rob distributed by McDonald[[35]](#endnote-35) prompts some useful descriptors to apply to our interactions in our team, for instance, the way we “reveal” aspects of ourselves. Janet and Rob on soft reviews looking for supportive views, whereas Adam is thinking about getting challenged, revealing his anxiety about the need to be relevant. Janet’s openness to “changes to herself through interaction” regarding how our research is affected by learning about other worlds (Rob). The one-page stories are similar to “confessionals” and “coming out” in what we pay attention to. Rob notices what is going on, Janet emphasizes the importance of trust/security that enables “transparency.” We all want an “identity” with a work ethic but also reveal our anxieties, Rob re completion and Adam re writer’s block through self-criticism of every sentence he writes as if there is a danger that he will be found out as an imposter in this academic world. It comes through for me that Janet loves the learning experience of research. Rob enjoys coming up with ways to express what is going on using his wide knowledge of literature and Adam seeks assurance of impact on others.

Interpretive note: Here notice Adam’s soul-searching questions about the context in which we present and seek and interpret feedback and conversation about our collaborative autoethnographic research.

Adam concludes: It is interesting that we all pay attention to our surroundings when we meet or present, but it affects us in different ways. Janet can be knocked off her usual confident/positive course, Rob can unusually be annoyed or distracted whilst Adam, through some abandonment of anxiety/self-critique, attempts to find grim comedy in the situation. Hence Adam tries to detract from the “are we as interesting as we find ourselves” whereas Rob and Janet have more confidence but feel the disappointment more (Homeward Bound narrative).

All the very best, Adam.

**Discussion**

When we were carrying out research into the use of action learning in hospital doctors we became intrigued by the changing relationships between us as researchers, of what is around us and the power of our wider research community in what we have termed *peripheral goings on*. They are peripheral in the sense that whilst our conscious research activity focuses on issues of methodology, literature, interpretation and the like, issues of relationships are difficult to notice and talk about, yet impact on the quality of the research. It is this intrigue that has led to this article. We explore self-censorship and power in relation to the mores and expectations of the academic community and how easy it can be to settle into routines of conducting research and getting published in an efficient way. Here we draw attention to the cost of this efficiency in how it might distort our research, hence our focus on validity *in action* as a social process.

In terms of social validity in action, we mean paying close attention to the conversations throughout our research, voicing different experiences, our argument and our understanding of each other and ourselves. Prompted by a journal reviewer late in our research, we also revisited our earlier view of our physical surroundings, which we have previously paid little academic interest to. Having enjoyed capturing these environmental descriptions yet limiting their inclusion in this article, we are now experiencing a further “jarring” of our position. From a fear of being too unconventional in the business journal literature, we are now faced with moving toward the post human position to gain publication and to do so, considering further as Massumi[[36]](#endnote-36) writes, the previously unproblematic presence of matter.

We addressed two interconnected topics in undertaking our research. Firstly, how collaborative autoethnography and reflexivity as an enabling heuristic might improve research practice. Secondly, to share these insights in a way that might be useful to others in terms of knowledge and validity *in action*. By *in action* we are not describing a technique that is applied. Instead we are drawing attention to long term ways of thinking and behaving that might enable glimpses, to challenge, to understand our tacit knowing or, as Polanyi describes, “subsidiary particulars.”[[37]](#endnote-37) The process enabled a continual unsettlement of assumptions and practices between ourselves and the research community. Drawing on Bourdieu’s[[38]](#endnote-38) notion of the interaction between *habitus* and field, this is a *social action* facilitated by our interaction with people who see the world differently. We are pointing to ordinary working relationships and trying different ways to develop our noticing ability of how we relate to each other and more broadly. As we have said, this did not come naturally. Early on it was a striking moment when one of us pointed out that a recent draft of a paper did not give voice to the challenging conversations and emergent understanding that we experienced. In the present it has been the sudden revelation of a possible further ontological turn to include that of the posthuman voice. When looked at carefully, through the span of our research, this lack of voice extended from how we came to interpret research participant interviews, our engagement and assumptions of the management and leadership research community and, between the three of us, as we worked together.

In creating artefacts and engaging with them, we developed a heuristic process of reflexivity, explication and narrative (in their various forms and styles that we all adopted) through which we increasingly got to know: each other; ourselves; the research material and the mores and expectations of the research community. It forced us to question who we were and who we were working with, not as a single event, but ongoing as we each created gestures that were responded to by others. Here we are drawing on George Herbert Mead’s notion of gesture as a form of action which creates a response in which further meaning is created as an ongoing social process.[[39]](#endnote-39) We began to notice how we related with each other changed over time. In particular, this highlighted what we revealed of ourselves to each other and the impact this had on our own professional identity and practice in moving into a new field.

Whilst studies of reflexivity in the management and leadership field[[40]](#endnote-40) often pay attention to individuals, here we consider its social nature, a point that Leggatt-Cook and others[[41]](#endnote-41) also consider in looking at “researchers at play.” Hibbert and others[[42]](#endnote-42) point out that our identities reflexively respond to and in turn affect our research colleagues. Thought of in this way, we are paying attention to the micro-process of social sense-making[[43]](#endnote-43) that ordinarily is difficult to notice. This social sensemaking is linked to identity formation as one reveals and conceals[[44]](#endnote-44) in terms of impression management and how we get to know each other. To make sense of our experience and to facilitate further reflexive conversation we found a useful body of thought in “queer” theory (see Adam’s letter). Here attention is paid to the fluid and unstable identities that we reveal to each other using the metaphor of the closet[[45]](#endnote-45); this was the subject of conversation in reflecting on how we related to each other. In the course of everyday events we continually negotiate with ourselves what we reveal and what we hide.[[46]](#endnote-46) These issues of identity come to affect the entire span of research from initial ideas to contribution.[[47]](#endnote-47) As we see, it became useful to consider this interaction as phronesis, as organic and emergent through the social interaction between ourselves and others, but one that was tacit.[[48]](#endnote-48)

We noticed the effect that paying attention to the dynamics of ourselves had on the validity of claims that we made or, as the action researcher Peter Reason would describe, the quality of our research.[[49]](#endnote-49) There were a number of moments when connections were made from the mundane to those akin to jazz improvisation where ideas built on each other in ways that surprised us. These moments seemed fragile and would easily have been missed if we had not been paying attention to how we interacted with each other, rethinking our research identity and position to one that, as Katie Warfield notes, *“is more complex, more layered, unbounded, and always shifting*.”[[50]](#endnote-50) As we looked at our process and its evolving and unpredictable nature, we were prompted to notice posthuman elements and this further challenged how we related to each other, our research and our environment. Whilst we have noticed and re-noticed the chairs and a crane in our data and have brought them a little further in from the periphery, we have not fully examined them, though this is ongoing. Yet they are omnipresent and, as Summer Dickinson[[51]](#endnote-51) notes, they have become objects which we return to and may become “the thing that challenges us to explain the assemblages of life.”

In this section we address what might be useful to others in developing social reflexive abilities so as to improve validity *in action*. Drawing on collaborative autoethnography we found a number of techniques useful; these included writing narratives close to the time of events occurring, recording and transcribing conversations, writing about our formative experiences and writing letters to each other where we discussed these artefacts. Even writing this article has had an impact.

**Conclusion**

Our article explores the process of three academics coming together to embark on a research project and achieve academic publication in a subject that was familiar in pedagogical practice, but new as a subject for research. We reveal the way collaborative autoethnography may be used as a social reflexive learning method to enhance research practice. We show how being open about our developing knowledge and learning in our collaborative research practice has supported social validity in action. This knowledge relates not only directly to the research field *but also* peripherally in: our own assumptions and how we saw the world to ourselves and each other; our research practice; and, expectations of the research community.

In the process of developing our understanding of the periphery we have shown how we have improved the quality of research from coming to know and learn from each other, as we became increasingly aware of: 1) ourselves using narrative to illustrate our challenging conversations; 2) how we engage with each other using letters; 3) how we articulate our learning via our analysis and interpretation of our artefacts; and 4) our association with the academic community. It was in working together that a greater awareness and noticing of the nature of our insights came about. A recognition of the importance of conversation, wending its natural course, allowed connections to be made that were unexpected. By providing examples and analysis of our research conversations, this article shows how researcher development and research benefits from engaging in challenging dialogue and reflection that maintains a level of unsettlement within a collaboration. We have pointed out the importance of mutual challenge, and the tracing of this challenge, in both the development of argument and validity *in action*, as opposed to *a priori* or *post hoc*. Its contribution is that it surfaces the need to be conscious of self-censorship and conformity within research teams. Beyond ourselves we extended our noticing to the expectations of the academic community and how this affects our practice and what we say. In doing so the article has shown how issues of power within the group and the wider academic community impact on researcher behaviour and influence the presentation of their work. We hope this documented experience of how we have sensed, adjusted and made the next step into knowing each other and our new field, enables others to notice and give voice to their experience in useful ways which entail trust, reflexivity and collaboration.

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