# Autoethnography in Management Research: Possibilities and Pitfalls in a Research Case on Public Management Decision-Making

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Abstract

*Autoethnography is usually associated with cultural, identity-related or postcolonial studies, not with managerial decision-making and communications. This research project used self-reported diaries on decision-process and communication from public managers in the initial 10 weeks of COVID-19 lock-down in 2020. At one point, the researcher and the informants decided to turn towards autoethnographic analysis, as the managers continued to reinterpret both their experiences and their meaning. We decided that this analytic turn meant that informants and data sources were to be included as co-authors, as they in effect framed the analysis. This case study describes the process and discusses obvious pitfalls of including potential stakeholder-informants in powerful positions as sources of analysis and possible remedies for bias, misrepresentations, and general research ethics concerns. It also discusses possible benefits from the approach, as it allowed for observation of fine-tuned changes in management context that would likely not emerge in a more data-centric analysis format.*

# Learning Outcomes

- Identify autoethnographic elements in business research.

- Discover grey zones between authorship and qualitative data in autoethnographic elements.

- Assess bias and ethical considerations in autoethnographic management research, and propose remedies.

# Case Study

# Project Overview and Context

The idea for this research project was to use the initial COVID-19 lock-down to observe in real time how crisis affects innovation and digital transformation in public administration. The context was that I, the first author, had been teaching a continuous learning university class in digital transformation and leadership at USN School of Business in Norway. This is a course that mostly attracts medium- to high-level managers with medium to extensive experience, and one class was underway in Spring 2020. Before lock-down was a reality, it was quite predictable that it would come, it would be a crisis, and it would last long enough to have real impact. One group of 'students', all members of top-level management in four different state-level public administrations, decided to use the soon-to-be crisis for their term assignment, to log their management group activity to see whether innovation and digital transformation could be traced to the coming crisis context. I supervised them as my students, and after they finalised their student project, I asked if they would be interested in publishing their material, giving them four options based on a rule-of-thumb approach to Vancouver protocol:

1. They give me access to the data they collected, and I solo-author an article but credit them for the service.

2. I take lead in writing up the material, they join me in in the process, and those who actively participate in the writing will potentially be listed as co-authors.

3. They take responsibility for writing up the material, I contribute substantially and serve as co-author, or

4. They write up the material themselves, with my providing feedback and comments, and receiving credit in a footnote.

They decided for Choice 2, with an option to revisit their decision later on. Accordingly, my co-authors will interchangeably be termed 'the managers' and 'the participants', as they were both managers, participants in the project, and authors.

# Section Summary

- Accessing data sometimes involves seizing the moment, planning ahead, and being patient
- Following the Vancouver protocol on publishing implies having an open and fair discussion about authorship and ownership at all points in the process.

# **Research Design**

# Phenomenological Analysis and Content Coding

The initial research design was to use content coding and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Eatough and Smith (2017) described IPA as concerned with the lived experience and examining in-depth experiences and phenomena in their own right, whereby evidence and validity is derived from the first-person report, and knowledge is arrived at through descriptions that are recognizable and applicable (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). Coding is not essentially linked to phenomenology; it is a form of processing of data. Bulmer (2006) defined coding as a process whereby raw data are transformed into meaningful categories. In other words, content coding is an

analytic process that relates to text or context of little structure, unlike analyzing structured data where categories are given and can be explored directly. Often, software tools can be useful with qualitative inquiry, although software not a prerequisite. Qualitative inquiry can also be done manually as long as one allows for multiple categories or codes for each element of content. We choose to use software, specifically QSR NVivo.

It can be useful to distinguish between codes as singular elements of meaning, categories as groups of codes, and themes as broader, overarching ideas. There are several coding practice methods, and some fundamental decisions to make before starting the coding process include how to relate codes and categories, and whether to use open, inductive coding, closed deductive coding, or combined coding—in other words, you must choose whether to select your categories up front (closed), identify them as they emerge (open), or use a step-wise process, changing between up front (closed) and emergent (open) categories.

In our case, we applied phenomenological research design to provide in-depth knowledge of the relationship between crisis and innovation in the public sector. Innovation in the public sector and public services is a specific research field; albeit a tradition of two decades, its academic ancestry is young compared to general business innovation and entrepreneurship scholarship. Through the student assignment, the managers (who were my students) had concluded that there was no observed effect of crisis. Some existing digitalization projects had been speeded up to meet demands, but they did not identify any new initiative that could reasonably be termed innovative. In the follow-up research process, we wanted to look further into why there was no innovation, which lead me to suggest phenomenological analysis and content coding. We initially decided closed categories that related to certain topics we aimed to investigate, such work practices, productivity, management practices, management roles, flow of information, forms of interaction, central government signals, and ambitions. Building on codes that appeared through these predefined

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categories, we established inductive or emerging categories. Guiding principles for what should be considered a relevant category was:

- whether topics covered appeared important in the recorded diaries;

- whether topics in relating coding were recurring;

- whether categories seemed important, surprising, or fertile in retrospect; and

- whether issues relating to the categories appeared relevant for understanding organisational mechanisms.

After establishing emerging categories and corresponding codes, the material was reanalysed to address potential inconsistencies. The aim was to conceptualize phenomena within the context of current literature on public sector innovation to develop knowledge of innovation in a crisis context, with an emphasis on why it did not happen. In doing this, we coded in parallel and compared coding to assess if we agreed—simply put, to see if we saw the same issues and labelled them similarly—to strengthen intercoder reliability (Yan, 2020).

This was the research design we implemented. The managers first had one approach in their student assignment that was related to a straightforward study of innovation-crisis output, where my input was mainly supervision to ensure data quality. When I involved in the project as author, after the student assignment was completed, we collaboratively introduced a different design aimed at producing knowledge on a 'how' level (how did the crisis affect), rather than a simple yes or no (did it spark innovation). As we shall see in the Method in Action section, the design turned from phenomenology to autoethnography, which, although epistemologically related, involves a fundamental change in analytic point of view. It started with the following reflection from one participant (from recollection):

> *This analysis appears valid to me when we look at what we actually recorded, it was true for spring 20. But if you ask me now, one year on, what was important, how it impacted us long term and what we gained, it is not quite spot on.*

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Moustakas (1994) explained in their historic and epistemological conceptualization of phenomenology, the participants' analysis of their situation may be an essential element of analysis also in phenomenological analysis. It is therefore relevant to ask whether it adds value to label the analysis autoethnographic, when phenomenology could encompass participants' analysis of own situation. However, following up on the participant's observation, we did not only include analytic elements, we transformed the relation between object of study and analysis: participants transformed from data sources to analysts and researchers, bringing along the issues of management autoethnography.

# Autoethnography

According to Reed-Danahay (2006), autoethnography is a "form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. … The term has a dual sense and can refer either to the ethnographic study of one's own group(s) or to autobiographical reflections that include ethnographic observations and analysis." Ellis, an influential proponent of the approach, claims this line of reasoning to approach research and writing is a means to systematically analyze and describe personal experience in order to understand cultural experiences (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Historically, this method is linked to both scholarly liberation from positivist social science research and postcolonial research and identity research, though it is also applied in other areas. A significant factor is the recognition that an impersonal and objective research position is impossible, and that the significance and impact of research rather is related to bringing alternative perspectives to light for a clearer analysis and reading. General assessments of methodological quality must therefore follow somewhat different criteria than traditional criteria such as reliability and transferability. In autoethnography, the credibility rests on the source's coherence, trustworthiness and the possibility of the source's sense of experience. Generalizability can accordingly not be achieved by individual considerations, but by layered compilation of considerations (Ellis et al., 2011; Plummer, 2001).

Accordingly, the use of autoethnographic analysis is therefore slightly different in our study than in classical autoethnography. First, identity politics or cultural experiences are not the object of study, but rather public sector business management in a crisis situation. The objects of analysis are not emotionally or empathetically driven; the presentation in the analysis is not about deep empathy, but rather about observations of organization and management, supplemented by retrospective analysis. Finally, the participants are not part of the narrative as individuals in a culture, but are participants as leaders in organizations. Thus, there is reason to be aware of possible misrepresentations of their own business, through either a loyalty to their business or a desire to appear favorably through specific representations.

# Section Summary

- Interpretive phenomenological analysis aims for in-depth, conceptualized knowledge built on lived experience.
- Coding can be a tool to structure concepts in knowledge building, ranging from open to closed coding and any combinations between.
- Phenomenological research can be of direct business impact even when nothing seemingly happened, as an in-depth understanding of how and why still is applicable knowledge.
- Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the research author within a social context that is rarely used in business and management research.

# Research Practicalities

Even without participants being co-authors, questions of both anonymity and protection, and potential biases, were standard issues to address at project initiation. We had to discuss the protection and integrity of the organizations involved and of the participants involved in relation to their organizations, and the possible effects of bias on data collection by participants, as they were

mangers in their organizations. With an autoethnographic turn, we would additionally have to consider and remedy for bias in the analysis itself.

## Business Consent

The businesses involved had to consent to the data collection, and a number of issues needed to be spelled out, such as protection sensitive government data and business integrity, protection of employees, and under what circumstances the business could be entitled to intervene in dissemination of findings. The logging of activities could involve actions of other, identifiable people, which raised privacy concerns regarding employees. Furthermore, the organizations involved were specific—the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-Dir), The Norwegian directorate for development cooperation (Norad), a state-owned university (University of Stavanger), and the Norwegian Public Service Pension Fund (SPK)— so it did not make sense to anonymize. Not only would it be difficult to anonymize these organizations, but also doing so would obscure analysis.

In our case, the object of study was management decision processes, and the business processes were quite specific to the participating organizations. Therefore, general and qualitative findings on organizational processes should describe the context for the reader to be able to appreciate the decisions made, and in our view to an extent that anonymizing is not relevant. As an additional element, the research project had to ensure academic integrity and that the organizations involved could not make any demands on the findings and conclusions. This required formal consent from top management of each organization. We decided to include an opt-out clause, whereby the businesses would not have a say in the analysis, but could object to (and thus prevent) the piece of work being published, provided that their decision was grounded in legitimate concerns for business integrity and information.

# Data Reliability

The clarification of business protection and research integrity may look good on paper, but in our case the project participants were part of top management. So even though the organizations were not entitled to intervene in analysis, they would have every means to do so. As we will see, this formal distinction between roles was important for the process. Bias, here understood specifically as the systematically skewed misrepresentation in data, should therefore not only be questioned in terms of data reliability, but in this case also directly in terms of conflict of interest, as the data sources, the managers, could have conflicting interest.

Hammersley (2020) cites bias as "the tendency to produce systematic error," which can relate to the researcher, the sampling, or reaction to being observed, for example. Importantly, the concept of bias was often related to thinking of correspondence to facts, and Hammersley explains a number of reasons why this way of thinking is philosophically contested. Still, as researchers, we aim for trustworthy and robust observations that relate to an external experience and accumulated knowledge, so philosophy and absolute conclusions aside, bias needs to be taken seriously. In our case, assuming the participants tried their best to distinguish assumptions and observations, an essential starting point was to identify and question systematic blind spots, in order to distinguish position and tautological bias. Position bias, as I approached it, is when managers observe realities from a different perspective than other parts of the organization, potentially missing out on processes in which management is less involved and interested. Tautologic bias, I defined as a management group's proneness to observe what is on agenda strategically or informally, and hence 'find' that these are recurring and important topics. As researchers, we need to know our own researcher bias to deal with it, and in this project this would apply to participants too, so we spent time discussing these forms of bias, both for general learning and as tools to question observations and claims on the go. Still, these forms of potential bias could affect what we saw as potential in data: We could not ask what was important for innovation and digital transformation in the

organization, as this would be a question very vulnerable to position bias and tautologic bias, but rather inquire about the relation among management decision-making, deliberation and communication, and to discuss innovation and digital transformation in the organizations in this context.

# Conflict of Interest

Bias due to conflict of interest is similar to the bias discussed in the previous subsection in consequence, but different in practical approach, and it can relate both to individual and collective interest. The interests of the organization may overlap with the interest of participants in the management group both as managers and employees; such interests could be, for instance, to appear favorably, to promote careers and position, or to avoid negative public attention and scrutiny. So even though the organizations formalized their acceptance of not intruding in analysis, they were already there. In addition, there is the potential of individual self-interest. There is literally no limit to what kinds of psychological and instrumental reasons people may have to willingly or unwittingly being imprecise. The following are some examples: to appear positive with colleagues; to promote policy choices made; to strengthen one's career by showcasing one's own experience; to advance specific situational descriptions, open re-negotiation or question past organizational decisions; to damage one's own business because of negative experiences, internal competitiveness among the research participants; or to make one's own experiences more interesting in the research setting.

These concerns are not unique to autoethnography and were already present in the data collection, but they are amplified in the autoethnographic turn. With a phenomenological analysis resting on content coding, both the content and the analysis can be challenged due to bias. Transparency and openness is one important remedy. It does not eliminate bias, but the possibility of scrutiny and

review does become a framing factor for honest and careful analysis. When the analysis narrative contains both analysis and presentation, full transparency is harder to achieve and scrutiny even more so. Accordingly, the potential of bias is strong. Thus, ensuring rigor is more than documenting practice; it is an ethical responsibility of the researchers throughout the research process.

We do not claim that we hindered bias and self-interest; however, we did develop a number of practices to address the issue, which we will discuss in the Method in Action section as well as sum up the kinds of findings for which this paved the way.

## Section Summary

- Business cases can't always be anonymized; lack of anonymity has to be predictable and transparent for collaborating businesses.
- Businesses involved should be expected to have interests that may be in conflict with research integrity. Researchers should clarify on what circumstances the business can legitimately intervene. Legitimate interventions could include protection of employees, protection of sensitive data and even protecting the business from misleading representation.
- Participants on the management level may carry bias in the form of reliability due to position or self-confirmatory processes, in the form of carrying business interests, or in the form of professional or emotional self-interest.

# Method in Action

In this section, we discuss how the change in analytic strategy resulted in an adjustment to the research question and its object of study. We also discuss the distinction between autoethnographic narrative and analysis. We then discuss how we worked with bias and self-interest, and finally what kinds of findings this opened up, and whether or not this is a suitable analytic strategy in management research.

## Object of Study

With the autoethnographic turn towards what was important in retrospect, our initial object of study—the digitalization and innovation processes—also changed, as we could not say that "what was important" necessarily had a relation to these. It is tempting to claim this was a process we observed and decided on a new and relevant object of study, but that is not quite true. We observed that we had lost sight of our object of study, but we took time to identify what was actually our new object of study. In the end, it was the input from one reviewer summing up the first manuscript that observed that we were basically studying "what happens to governmental, administrative control when an incident like Covid-19 occurs". We found that this was more precise that we had been, as it moved away from a thematic interest of specifics within the organization and pointed to a general "what happens".

## Analysis and Narrative

To fully describe the research output, it could be useful to make a distinction between analysis and narrative. We see the analysis as the process of arriving at conclusions, and narrative as the presentation in text and figures. In autoethnography, narrative and analysis are closely linked, but in our case they were separated. The more traditional autoethnographic question would have been something like, "how do public managers experience a crisis like…", in which the narrative would have a prominent position as a part of analysis. Although this is what we explored in analysis sessions, we did not aim for an individualistic and experienced object of study. One reason is that we weren't as intrigued by this question, but by its consequence. Also, a research question centering on experience would imply a different form of data: a much more traditional or subject-oriented diary, fewer instrumental summaries of decision processes, and more focus on emotional and psychological reactions and reflections.

In other words, we used the autoethnographic approach for analysis, but the object of study and the narrative were more traditionally business oriented. It was an autoethnographic analysis, but not an autoethnographic narrative. There would have been many reasons to stay with a phenomenological analysis, which still leaves room for analysis within data but theoretically safeguards against participant bias in the analysis process. Partly, we felt that a return to phenomenology would remove the most relevant findings of our study, or not be transparent about how findings came about. One could argue this is never possible, that research always is biased and partial in some way (see, for example, the works of Mads Alvesson (2000) for discussions of these issues in relation to management research). So rather than seeing this as a limitation, we wanted to be explicit about an autoethnographic analytic approach, which also pushed us to be alert to the relation between the self and the analysis throughout the process.

## Practices and Remedies

The bilateral importance of trust was immanent—both the lead researcher's trust in co-authors, and the participant authors' trust in the lead researcher. For me, as the lead researcher, the reliability of accounts was important; for the participants, it was important to have a safe zone where they could explore reflections and experiences, reducing concern about being exposed as ignorant or incapable in the moment or that their developing thoughts would be recorded as data and used in analysis without their involvement.

In our case, we had a head start in situational definition, as the four managers met through an academic course that each had opted to take for professional development, so we did not have to negotiate their role as being out of day-to-day management practice. Also, as a teacher in this course, I had time to build their confidence in my academic qualifications and show my familiarity and affinity with the field of practice through discussions. In the continuing collaboration, we

maintained this out-of-daily-work context of the collaboration and emphasized making it a space for reflection, unlike the daily meeting carousel of decision-making. In short, it was essential that they trusted me as an academic, as someone they could confide in on a professional level, and as someone who took them seriously and engaged them in debate that was both deliberative and context-sensitive.

In processes where concepts were developed, we made sure emergent concepts were questioned: How would the experience or observation be seen in a different organization? How would you react on observation in a different organization than your own? How would your colleagues comment on this concept, and how would you feel about that? If this not a specific but a general observation, what would it be part of?

Although the student-teacher relationship was a tool for creating a research context, it also had potential for imbalance. Although the participants were all high-ranking managers, there was the risk that this teacher-student relationship could induce a tendency to agree with me, to overweight my assumptions, and to generally accept my analysis less critically. The remedies for this followed the same pattern as for their management role bias: a dialogue that continuously reopened observations and concepts, and using the student-role to inquire rather than to register.

## The Autoethnographic Potential

The core of our findings was a subtle shift in sensemaking in administrative management. Discussions in the management group in the initial lock-down period centered on ensuring that procedures were followed and that essential processes kept going. After about five weeks, a general perception was, "we landed this, what do we do now?" followed by a period focusing on public value of production, resources at hand, and the organization's role in the service delivery ecosystem. We describe this as a shift from an ethos of administrative practice (AP) aiming at control and safeguarding against

mistakes towards an ethos of bureaucratic craftsmanship (BC), in which strategic discussions related to value creation, ecosystem effects and resources. (This dualism is related to neo-institutionalism, whereby AP is linked to appropriateness logic as described by March [2004], whilst BC is different from the corresponding "consequence logic"). It is an open question whether this shift had a practical impact, but we argue that a resource-, ecosystem- and output perspective is more progressive than an appropriateness logic, in is likely to have impact.

This observation could possibly have been made through management team meeting observations, but not necessarily. The everyday practice of management decision-making both in formal and informal administrative meetings is centered on expedience and decision-making, and a change in perceived ethos or underlying logic is not necessarily available to observe from the outside, nor necessarily something the participants will observe or reflect upon, as it will be a matter of arriving at the best decision in the moment, not of the philosophy underlying it. Our method approach probably enabled us to address with greater precision the experience of being part of decision-making, how sense was made of the situation, and how this impacted top-level decision processes.

## Section Summary

- The researchers chose to not present an autoethnographic object of study, but still used autoethnographic analysis.
- The team approached bias in self-representations through trust-building, systematic inquiry, and symbolic role definition practices.
- The autoethnographic approach might have helped to shed light on subtle nuances in sense-making.

## **Practical Lessons Learned**

Our research design changed mid-way from a phenomenological content analysis to an autoethnographic analysis with elite participants. In this section, I reflect on how I would have approached this project if I had designed the study as such from the onset. In that case, the question would have been the pros and cons of autoethnography versus more in-depth qualitative data for phenomenological inquiry.

The experience and analysis over time could have been captured by asking participants to log activities and interviewing them multiple times over the research period. An important gain would be a less contested relation between data and analysis, and questions of authorship would be uncontroversial. This study as it was carried out involved an epistemologically complex and controversial approach to research, not least when allowing people in power to frame the analysis, and in a way, one could argue that the analysis lends unwarranted credit from autoethnography as a tradition that often is associated with cultural experiences and postcolonial research. So much so that issues of analytic perspective would perhaps be less visible, but nonetheless be relevant to debate.

In contrast, I'm doubtful I would have made the same observations. Bringing people's observations and analysis to light through interviews is a personal skill, one I consider myself quite good at, but still, it does take a well-developed intuition to identify a shift as subtle as this without defining it as an interviewer. Also, the analysis, as it came out, was a result of a long-time span of trust building, which if applied in a design in which interviews and observations were treated as external to analysis, consequently would bring the participants very close to the analysis.

Furthermore, although the method clearly is problematic in using an almost identity-politics methods with people in power, the question still remains whether it would have been different if they were not part of the analytic process. Is my bias as a researcher observing them any better than theirs?

After all, questions of research ethics and transparency will to some degree be a question of trustworthiness and researcher responsibility. I'm not sure I'll do it again, not because it didn't work (because I think it did), but rather because it is a little bit epistemologically 'messy' and implies a need to spell out the analytic process more nuanced and interrogative in publication than if applying a more developed methodology that is more familiar to peer reviewers.

## Section Summary

- Ethnographic analysis creates more complex relation between data and analysis, which is an argument against it.
- The lead author questions if it would be possible to observe the subtleness of findings with an outside perspective.

# Conclusion

Our experience with autoethnographic analysis in management research is that it is doable and can be valuable. It provides a framework for observing experiences of management that do not easily come to light in a more traditional observatory where data are collected and afterwards analysed in a separate process disconnected from the business context. Researchers aiming for this approach should still take caution:

- The approach may be problematic in allowing people in power to frame analysis.

- Participants have both organisational and personal biases that need to be addressed.

- Trust building may include academic confidence, practice-related confidence and personal trust.

- Autoethnography implies that questions of authorship (i.e. who owns the analysis) need to be addressed.

As we have argued, these issues can't be resolved, but to some degree can be remedied through systematic inquiry, trust-building, and framing of the analytic setting.

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# Discussion Questions

1. What do you see as the most imminent dangers of using autoethnographic methodology with privileged people in powerful positions?
2. What do you think are essential criteria for who should be data sources and who should be authors?
3. Suppose the participants were not high-ranking managers. How would this impact their role as co-authors?
4. The authors argue they found nuances in decision-making that would otherwise not be available, but at the cost of less analytic transparency. Is it worth the price? Why or why not?
5. Comparing this analysis to a standard scientific approach with a stronger emphasis on control of variables and measurable reliance, in what ways is this study more or less scientifically transparent and trustworthy?

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