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Autoethnography: A methodology to elucidate our own coaching practice

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Abstract

When researching our own coaching practice there are a number of methodological choices we might make, action research being a common choice. This paper argues for an alternative methodology, the application of autoethnography to elucidate our practice and make explicit the deliberations, choices and motives that drive our actions and 'theories in use'. This paper is based on personal experience of the first year of a three-year doctoral journey so focuses on decisions around research design rather than findings and may be of value to fellow coach researchers considering how they might effectively explore their own practice.

Key Words: Action Research, autoethnography, practice-based research, coaching practice, methodology

Introduction

The transition from coach practitioner to researcher can be a challenging process personally, professionally and developmentally. As described by Williams (2014), exploration of research decisions opens up our own work to the scrutiny of others and provides a window into our deliberations that may prove informative for others. This paper demonstrates my autoethnographic approach as I explain my own methodological journey via action research before arriving at an alternative destination of autoethnography as the primary approach to explore my practice as a team coach. The paper begins with a brief personal background of my coaching practice, outlines my motives for researching team coaching and describes two operational teams with whom I contracted to carry out the research. This is followed by a discussion of the philosophical commitments that underpin my practice-based epistemology. I consider appropriate literature and my research context to demonstrate the considerations and choices that have led me to autoethnography as my primary approach. As I am currently engaged in data analysis, the findings of the research itself are not included in the scope of this paper. However, I conclude with initial reflections on the past twelve months and the autoethnographic approach adopted.

My coaching practice

My professional identity was forged over 20 years as line manager, project manager, human resources and organisational development (OD) specialist within a large American multi-national corporation. What Polyani (1965) describes as tacit knowledge was built over this time such that when I now perform my professional role I am drawing on this collected library of theory, experience and know-how that combines to enable me to perform with competence in my role, without necessarily being able to explain how I know what to do.

Teams have played a central role in this 20 year experience, from my initial role as a team manager on a production floor in a washing powder factory, to leading the creation of a structure of

highly effective autonomous teams in a pan European Customer Services and Logistics function and finally, as the OD manager for a European Service Centre, enabling the creation of cross-functional customer focused teams within a high performance organisation.

Through my career, I also developed as a coach, first working with direct reports in my role as line manager, then coaching and mentoring other managers in my organisation, and finally as an external coach working with leaders across a number of sectors as they took on the challenges of more strategic senior roles. In my current role I provide a range of development interventions to professional managers seeking to develop themselves, their teams and the overall performance of their organisations. As an academic I bring theory and practice together to help my clients solve real-world problems. In particular I am actively involved in the development of coaches and have confidence, skills and underpinning theory to explain my approach: however, when I am asked about team coaching a feeling of vulnerability creeps in. Somehow, knowing about teams and about 1:1 coaching is not enough. Is team coaching a modern description for team building or team facilitation? In practice I rely on well-worn tools and techniques collected on what is now a 27 year professional journey, I apply instinct and experience but I lack a clear process, conceptual clarity or confidence.

My motivation for this project is to develop mastery as a team coach underpinned by a robust theoretical framework. I aim to achieve greater clarity about what I am doing when I am coaching a team in order to: develop my own practice, contribute knowledge to the extant literature on team coaching and develop teaching methods that will support the development of other team coaches.

Specific questions that inform my research design are:

1. What is the purpose of team coaching; what outcomes are we seeking?
2. What is going on in a team coaching intervention?
3. Is team coaching distinctive from other team-based interventions?
4. How does the experience of 1:1 coaching inform my team-coaching practice?

My Client Teams

At the start of this research project, I agreed to work with two operational teams over the forthcoming 12 months. My aim was to find a research approach that could exploit the rich experiences of working with these client teams whilst fulfilling my professional obligations. Team one was a university programme team working together to develop new learning strategies for their students with a heavy emphasis on team coaching. This team were meeting weekly to discuss programme issues and resolve operational challenges relating to the learning, teaching, assessment and administration of the new programme. The team decided to assign one in four of these meetings to working with me, in order to focus on their own development as coaches. The team comprised five team members at the start of the study (four men and one woman), but later reorganised, with two members leaving and two new members joining so that the team comprised two men and three women.

Team two was a group of managers in a local authority organisation responsible for providing adult learning. The team were interested in using coaching as a developmental approach with their adult learning tutors. Similar to the university case above, the objective of coming together as a team was to work on their own development and identify ways to further the understanding and usage of coaching within their department. After a number of months of discussions with all of the departmental managers involved, it was agreed that six volunteers would form this developmental team. The team comprised five women and one man.

Philosophical commitments

My first degree was in science, using the “scientific method” where laws are established through “observation, experiment and comparison” (Crotty, 1998, p.22). However, the ontological assumption of a world of realities and the posture of the knower as objectively detached has been challenged by my professional experiences where collaborative participation has been a fundamental approach, enabling space for encouraging alternative narratives and more relational ways of knowing. This fits with an emerging research epistemology of social constructionism where “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world” (Crotty, 2006, p. 43).

Whilst my work contract calls me ‘academic’, my heart says ‘practitioner’. As such, I am interested in how the process of doing research can integrate with my practice with clients, to improve my practice and to have an impact in my clients’ organisations. I relate to scholars who argue for an epistemology of practice (Raelin 2007; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Rennstam & Ashcraft, 2013) bridging the gap between theory and practice and creating knowledge in specific contexts that, when shared, can have relevance for others. This approach embraces social constructionism and recognises that as practitioners we are ‘entwined with others and things’ (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, p343) and that knowledge is created and understood in this context. Practitioners use both tacit and explicit forms of knowledge and continue to develop and refine their understandings of knowledge over time through social interaction (Nonaka, 1994).

Participation with others to generate meanings, implies an inter-subjectivism (Cunliffe, 2011), a postmodernist theoretical perspective that recognises multiple realities and enables a deconstructive discourse (Cassell & Johnson, 2006) which creates space for practitioners to recognise patterns of thought, challenge hegemony and encourage alternative narratives. This approach may generate different forms of knowledge such as experiential and presentational knowledge (Park, 2006), or “communicative knowledge”, (Rennstam & Ashcroft 2013 p. 2) which may have particular relevance for my coaching practice.

Entwinement implies the “embodied nature of practice” and “the temporality of practice” (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011, p344) which for me means, as a coach, enacting my practice over time with the history of what has gone before, the anticipation of what is to come and the here and now experiences all contributing to my sense of what it means to coach a team. I will return to this idea as I consider autoethnography in more detail, but first I consider my initial interest in action research approaches.

Action research for the scholarly practitioner

Action Research (AR) appears to be the obvious choice for a practitioner-researcher interested in “research aimed at changing practitioners’ practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions in which they practice” Kemmis (2009, p 463). AR resonates with my aims in three fundamental ways. First, it concerns the “integration and interdependence of theory and practice” which allows the practitioner to construct their own praxis (Zuber-Skeritt, 2001, p15) and allows my identity as an academic to emerge as I explore practice with a scholarly approach. Secondly, it seeks to integrate action and reflection, a practice that is developmental both for myself and for the clients I work with because we are engaged in exploring our “theories in use” (Argyris & Schön, 1974) through critical reflection on action. Thirdly, it is about participation and collaboration with others (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, Reason & Bradbury, 2006), which aligns with my commitment to the participative and relational nature of engaging others at work and my commitment to social construction as an epistemology.

For this research project I aimed to study the practice of team coaching through my own experiences in relationship with my client teams and the experiences of my team coaching peers by asking questions such as ‘what are we doing when we are team coaching, how do we come to know what to do and what kinds of knowledge are we drawing from?’ (Rennstam & Ashcroft 2013). However, embarking on action research as a new researcher is not an easy task. What Reason and Bradbury (2008, p.1) describe as “a family of practices” with common characteristics concerning practical knowledge, action and participation can feel overwhelming and appear contradictory as each author describes his or her own particular brand. For example: Action Learning (Revans, 2011 and Pedlar & Burgoyne, 2008); Action Science (Argyris & Schön, 1974); Co-operative Inquiry (Heron, 1996 & Reason, 1999); Developmental Action Inquiry (Torbert, 1999); Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987); Participative Action Research (Fals Borda, 2008); and Living Theories (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) all describe their own particular approach.

Action research in participation with others

In AR terms, the desire for participation and empowerment initially lead me to read about participatory forms of action research (PAR). Whilst this approach meets my needs as a democratic form of participation, in practice PAR has its roots in the black liberation movement (Fals Borda, 2008) and social transformation work in the developing world (Friere, 1970, Swantz, 2008) and has connotations of emancipation, democratisation and the emphasis on giving voice to the oppressed (Cassell & Johnson, 2006, Raelin, 1999). In these types of projects, the issues come from the community, the case examples often dealing with social issues well outside the scope of an organisational project. This is not where my research is located.

Co-operative inquiry, however, elucidated by Heron, (1996) and Reason (1999) captures more of my intention to work with practitioners on their practice, in particular the idea to enable learning through dialogue has resonance with the approach. Reason (1999, p.208) describes Co-operative Inquiry as a way of working with other people who have similar concerns in order to:

- *Understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things;*
- *Learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better*

Initially, I considered creating co-operative inquiry groups with my client teams as, coincidentally, both operational teams had coaching as core areas of interest. One group asking: “how do we learn as a team to build coaching in to our practice?” and the second group exploring “how do we work as a team of coaches to support student learning?” Although initially researcher led, I recognised that ideally a cooperative inquiry group would transform the role of the researcher over time to one of peer co-researcher. However, creating ‘authentic collaborative inquiry’ (Reason, 1999 p.212) where the group find ways to collaborate in a spirit of reflective dialogue and cooperation such that there is no dominant voice is challenging, particularly as the researcher continues to make key interventions or prompts around the inquiry process. (Heron, 1996).

Ultimately I decided to reject the idea of creating cooperative inquiry groups with the operational teams for two key reasons. Firstly, I realised that the operational teams were less interested in the why and how of team coaching and more interested in their operational outcomes facilitated by my practice of team coaching. In other words they did not sufficiently share my interest in the research questions. Secondly, the teams did not demonstrate a capacity for critical reflection that would allow them to step outside their operational concerns and observe our team process in action. Whilst I saw this capability as important for optimal functioning of their team

work effectiveness, I was aware it could be a slow process and a longer term development objective and was concerned not to privilege this objective early because of my own research aims. However, I was still very interested in the ideas of cooperative inquiry as both a mechanism for learning, and to bring third person realities in to my research design (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). I felt from the beginning that involving my peer group was important for the project to have credibility, by ensuring my work had resonance and relevance to others, in particular practicing coaches (Greenwood and Levin, 2000). As I learned more about cooperative inquiry I recognised that it could be a mechanism for involving like-minded peers to explore their own practice in order to co-construct ideas about what it means to coach a team. In the section on research design and data collection methods I outline in more detail how I have applied these ideas in practice.

First person action research - finding autoethnography

In line with my epistemology I sought an approach that enabled me to place my own practice at the centre of my research. I was attracted to the work of Whitehead and McNiff (2006) who describe a first person action research approach where practitioners ask questions relating to their own practice and how to improve it. By clarifying the meanings of my values as explanatory principles or 'living theories' that underpin practice I could gain a greater understanding of my practice and how to improve it (Whitehead, 2009, p.86). However, as I began to articulate my research design in line with the experimental cycles of action strategy, evaluation and reflection fundamental to all action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Reason and Bradbury, 2008), I found the structure did not entirely match my context. I was initially inspired by McNiff's (2013) assertion that I could achieve my aims through "a spontaneous, self-re-creating system of inquiry" (p.67), however, the case studies offered follow a more planned approach (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; McNiff, 2013, McNiff, 2014). In my team context I felt a sense of venturing in to the unknown, I was not starting with a clearly defined model and not testing a new approach, rather, I was attempting to unlock my understanding of what I do in practice whilst responding to my clients' needs spontaneously, as I saw them, in the moment.

Perhaps the nuance is in the question. In this research I am not asking directly '*how do I improve what I am doing?*' (Whitehead, 2009, p.86) although of course that is the ultimate aim, but for now I am asking, simply, "*what am I doing?*" or "*what is going on?*" In this sense I am in more exploratory mode, and hence I found my way to autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography is writing about (graphy) my story (auto) and making sense of a cultural (ethno) experience, that of being an organisational team coach (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). By exposing my vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices and values (Ellis & Bochner, 2006), I draw readers into the conversation inviting them to consider how my experience may resonate with their own (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, Sparkes 2000).

I was conscious there are different examples of how to conduct autoethnography (Wall, 2006) but had particular affinity with Duncan (2004) who recognises the benefit in a method that allowed me to "externalise my inner dialogue" (p. 29) through reflective journaling in order to elucidate tacit knowledge and to understand the principles and values that underpin my practice with a view to surfacing "theories of action" (Schön, 1987, p.25). Duncan's (2004) research related to new technology and how she created it and, whilst feedback from users was informative, it did not go to the heart of her research questions as the users were not familiar enough with the nuances; this resonates with my own experience. Whilst team members could give feedback on how they experienced my interactions, they were looking at their experience, not the mechanics of team coaching. They did not see my intention, the choices I was making or the deliberations. Whilst working on a computer I may notice user-friendly interfaces and a fast Internet speed but I can make no comment on the operating system driving them. If my coaching is the equivalent of the operating system I needed to understand the programming, and that, in my case, came from within.

There is debate as to whether autoethnography is sufficiently analytical (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006) or scholarly, and how we might evaluate self-narratives as effective research (Sparkes, 2000). Ellis and Bochner (2006) argue that evocative stories that resonate enable readers to create their own understandings, allowing vicarious learning from another's experience. With a close relative in autobiography we are encouraged to utilise the conventions of good practice in story telling such as character, plot and dramatic tension (Ellis, 2000) perhaps focussing on turning points or lives transformed (Bochner, 2000). A text that is real, credible, believable and informative about some aspect of social life is more likely to move the reader to action (Richardson, 2000). I was also inspired by Muncey (2005, 2010) who utilises a variety of artefacts, metaphor, diary entries and poetry interwoven with reference to multiple theoretical perspectives and her own reflexive narrative to create a compelling text.

Denzin (2014) challenges us to question how we construct our text in order to share experiences suggesting that we, as the author, do not present an all-knowing narrative of experience but rather, that we problematize our experience and allow uncertainties and multiple voices to be heard. This approach fitted with my desire to explore the messiness and realities of practice and is liberating and valid within a postmodernist tradition accepting the subjective, contextualised nature of what I came to understand as knowledge and the multiple, dynamic meanings embedded in language and the subjective nature of what I write (Linstead, 1994).

I recognised the need to be reflexive (Cunliffe, 2003) which means to be aware of my own insights or feelings and socially aware of the relational, inter-subjective dynamics between myself and others, particularly how issues of gender, race, class and hierarchy can create power imbalances and how professional ideologies blind or constrain me (Finlay, 2002; Holland, 1999).

An integrated methodology

The AR principles of action and reflection; integrating theory and practice and research in participation with others remained central to my research philosophy, and AR inspired my cooperative inquiry groups where I explored my research question with others. However, autoethnography created a freedom to place my emerging practice with my clients at the centre of my research allowing me to give voice to my entwined and embodied practice and afterwards to make sense of the experience through reference to data collected in the field. In the section that follows I outline my research design and data collection approach.

Research design and data collection methods

i. Research in collaboration with client teams

As described above, at the commencement of the research process I had agreed to work with two operational teams and had contracted with them that, during the coaching, they would agree to some forms of data collection that enabled me to investigate our experiences. I audio recorded each session, kept field notes and reflections of my experiences as the coach and requested reflective feedback from the team members after each session by sending them a follow up email asking questions such as, "What was significant for you in today's session?" The activities with the operational teams are summarised in Table 1 below.

ii. Research in collaboration with peer group of professional coaches

As an executive coach I network professionally with others who are involved in similar work. I invited a group of 34 coaches, who regularly attend a regional coaching network, to join me in creating a collaborative inquiry group with the criteria that a significant part of their role was

designated as coaching, they had experience of working with teams and were interested in developing a greater understanding of their own team coaching practice. I received 17 positive responses to the invitation and as a result created two groups with a smaller membership of eight and nine respectively in order to create trusting, collaborative environments.

Research approach	Participants	Activities	Data collection
Autoethnography during team coaching practice. Observing, questioning and writing about what is going on for me and the team members when coaching a team.	Operational team 1	8 meetings over 12 months Jan 2014 – Dec 2014	Audio recording of meetings, participant reflective diaries. Field notes and personal reflective log.
Autoethnography during team coaching practice. Observing, questioning and writing about what is going on for myself and the team members when coaching a team	Operational team 2	4 meetings over 6 months Feb 2014 – July 2014	Audio recording of meetings, participant reflective diaries. Field notes and personal reflective log.

Table 1: The research design of action, data collection and reflection with client teams

With each cooperative inquiry group I worked with participants to identify areas of curiosity relating to our team coaching, we reflected on practice, identified actions to take within our own teams and identified reading and reflection we might do outside to develop our understanding. We then return to the group to share reflections, insights and further areas of inquiry. Along the way I shared my research project approach, my tentative interpretations and findings encouraging the group to feedback and challenge me on my thinking, my approach or the focus of my work. The activities and data collection approaches with all four sets of participants are summarised in Table 2.

Research Approach	Participants	Activities	Data Collection
Cooperative inquiry Exploring questions of common concern. Sharing our learning. Engaging in reflective dialogue.	Peer Coaches Group A	4 meetings over 6 months July 2014 – Jan 2015	Audio recordings of meetings. Papers, correspondence generated by the participants. My own field notes and personal reflective log
Cooperative Inquiry Exploring questions of common concern. Sharing our learning. Engaging in reflective dialogue.	Peer Coaches Group B	4 meetings over 9 months July 2014 – March 2015	Audio recordings of meetings. Papers, correspondence generated by the participants. My own field notes and personal reflective log

Table 2: The research design of activities and data collection with peer coach cooperative inquiry teams

Conclusions and Next Steps

The first year of my research journey involved a personal exploration of my team coaching practice along with a similar exploration of becoming a researcher. I have learned a lot about action research and will certainly want to utilise such approaches in the future, particularly when the participants have a shared interest in the research question as a way of solving organisational challenges. However, autoethnography has provided a more suitable methodology for research in my context providing rich sources of data. In year two I intend to reflect on my coaching year by interpreting my experiences (Denzin, 2014) and creating an autoethnographic text (Adams, Holman

Jones& Ellis, 2015) that opens up the deliberations and considerations of team coaching to others. Whilst my analysis phase is in its initial stages such that I do not intend to share findings here, it is perhaps relevant to share some brief and early reflections of my experience:

- With my client teams autoethnography freed me up from applying a strict plan, act, reflect, and plan cycle to my coaching sessions to a more naturally emerging reflection-in-action approach.
- I was able to explore a particular phenomenon in participation with others without the consenting participants having to engage equally in the research process. My primary relationship with my client teams was as their coach; their primary relationship with me was as clients, not research participants.
- The experience of cooperative inquiry with fellow team coaches was an inspiring, and supportive process. For example, the simple question of ‘what are you drawing from when you are coaching the team?’ resulted in deep thinking as tacit knowledge was teased from the subconscious and made explicit creating a rich dialogue about purpose, philosophy and approaches with coaches generously sharing their inspiration, values and techniques.
- Peer coach discussions supported my reflexive approach. As I reflected on my own practice and the team coaching literature I raised questions such as: ‘what is my intention here?’ ‘Or ‘what am I paying attention to?’ By asking the peer coaches the same questions I was both reassured by their interest in the relevance of the questions and stimulated to question my own biases or assumptions as I heard their responses. Our dialogue about the relative importance of goals and performance, relationships and learning began to echo the wider debate and I expect that through analysis of this data I can add something to the existing research base.
- Autoethnographic texts inspired me to write more freely. I gave myself permission to write in ways that seek to evoke emotional connection with my readers.
- Finally, in exploring my research identity autoethnography inspired me to be myself, to research my context in my way.

I would recommend autoethnography to coaches who are interested in exploring their own practice. By immersing ourselves in our coaching practice whilst collecting the field notes and data for later analysis we can elucidate the choices we make and the knowledge we draw from to respond to the particular challenges of our coaching context. By sharing our stories we contribute to the wider understanding of what it means to ‘be a coach’.

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