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The ties that double bind us: career, emotion and narrative coping in difficult working relationships

Abstract

This article examines through an autoethnographic account how career aspirations and constraints may lead individuals to endure emotionally aversive situations. It presents evidence that individuals in such situations engage in emotion-focused coping through narrative, illustrated by the author's autoethnographic narrative of a difficult working relationship which developed into a double bind situation. The paper suggests that narrative coping in response to a double bind can actually serve to reify and prolong such situations. The paper concludes that autoethnographic research does not lend itself to simple organisational solutions. Possible avenues for further research are outlined and discussed.

Key words: autoethnography, career, double bind, emotion, narrative coping

Introduction

Within organisations individuals may often find themselves in situations in which they perceive themselves to be somewhat 'stuck'. Such situations will vary greatly in their duration and their salience to the individual: in some cases it may be a minor delay on a peripheral matter; in other cases the situation may be perceived as 'permanent' and a matter of central importance. In the context of career, we can discern two types of 'stuckness'. The first occurs when the perception of stuckness arises directly from the career itself – that is, where individuals perceive they have become 'stuck' in their career. An obvious example would be the plateaued manager (Ference et al, 1977), someone who has progressed to a certain level and realises that s/he will not progress beyond it. A second type of career-related stuckness arises where individuals perceive themselves to be stuck in an aversive situation, which they choose to endure in calculation of longer-term career benefits. Both types have potential to engender negative emotion, placing considerable demands on the individual's coping resources, in particular because the perceived inability to escape

the situation means that problem-focused coping strategies will be unavailable. The second type is the focus of the present article, and the aversive situation examined is that of a difficult working relationship with one's line manager.

I have suggested elsewhere (Blenkinsopp, 2006a) that 'narrative coping' can be seen as a response difficult career situations, presenting this as an emotion-focused coping strategy. In the present article, I suggest that in some circumstances such coping narratives can actually serve to perpetuate the difficulties they are intended to salve. In order to develop this argument, I will briefly describe the idea of career narratives, before examining the concept of the double bind, which offers insights into ways in which individual can become stuck as a result of difficult working relationships.

Narrative in career

The study of emotion at work has grown apace in recent years, but as Kidd (1998) notes, emotion continues to be 'an absent presence' in research on careers. This article forms part of a larger programme of research examining the role of emotion in career, which draws upon the sensemaking paradigm (Weick, 1995) to conceptualises the impact of emotion on career (and vice versa) as occurring through narrative – through the stories we tell ourselves and others to make sense of the emotional ebb and flow of our working lives. There has been a growing use of narrative methods in careers research (Cochran, 1990; Cohen and Mallon, 2001). However, the idea of career narratives is more than merely methodological. McAdams (1995) suggests that narrative is an old methodology in social science, albeit one that has gone through something of a renaissance in recent years. However, what is new is the development of narrative as a construct – "not only may human lives be examined through

storytelling methods, but human lives themselves may now be understood as narrative constructions" (McAdams, 1995: 207).

In the context of career, this suggests we might view a career narrative as more than simply a tale told to a researcher or an interview panel: the narrative *is* the career. This idea fits well with Weick's analysis of the boundaryless career (Weick, 1996). Weick and Berlinger (1989) suggest that, in the absence of 'strong' career situations which cue a 'standard' interpretation, we are forced to engage in significant sensemaking activity in order to answer the question 'what's the story here?' (Weick et al, 2005). The process is ongoing: although sensemaking may lead to a plausible 'story', which we enact, it is chronically subject to potential disruption through events which render the current 'flow of action…unintelligible in some way' (Weick et al, 2005: 409):

> [where] an expectation of continuity is breached…efforts are made to construct a plausible sense of what is happening, and this sense of plausibility normalizes the breach, restores the expectation, and enables projects to continue (Weick et al, 2005: 414)

The situations of 'stuckness' described above represent very obvious disruptions, but by their very nature they inhibit our ability to develop a new 'story': autobiographical narratives do not draw merely upon the past, they require some imagined, hoped for future to be sustained (Crites, 1986). Goldie (2003) argues a successful narrative about persons must have three characteristics: it should be coherent, meaningful and have emotional import. He suggests the inability to develop a successful narrative about events in one's life can cause an inability to achieve 'emotional closure'. He has in mind especially traumatic events, but it can be similarly destructive in more

mundane but still personally salient situations to find oneself unable to decide what the 'story' is and move forward on that basis. This may be true even when the 'story' is an unhappy one – a negative certainty may sometimes be easier to cope with than uncertainty. Although we may not seriously believe that an aversive work situation will go on indefinitely, we may still struggle to construct a plausible narrative which one could imagine enacting so as to bring the situation to a close. Nevertheless, we will be likely to engage in ongoing efforts to construct such narratives.

Much of this narrative work may be confined to what Goldie (2003) terms narrative thinking. He suggests that although narrative is usually thought of as 'something that involves written, or spoken, or signed, language', it can be readily widened to include thought. A narrative can be merely thought through, 'there need be no communicative event'. Like any form of narrative, narrative thinking is composed with an implicit audience in mind, never more so than when the narrative is autobiographical. In some cases, it can be thought of a dress rehearsal: a performance to a sympathetic audience of one, through which the narrative is shaped and honed for some future audience.

Narrative thinking is crucial to understanding situations of the type examined in this article, since they typically produce an injunction upon open communication with the other parties to the relationship, and leave the individual locked in an inner dialogue, in which various possibilities are narrated, but not towards action. This has the potential to produce what a reviewer on the first draft of this article described as a "one sided narrative" – an inward looking, obsessive narrative largely unchecked by

an external view. The nature of such narratives have important parallels with the double bind concept.

The double bind

The double bind concept is at once simple and complex. In everyday usage, the term is broadly analogous with Joseph Heller's Catch-22 – a no-win situation categorised by a combination of logic and paradox. The term was coined by Bateson, Jackson, Haley and Weakland (1956) from their studies of schizophrenia, which they suggested may have roots in 'pathogenic' patterns of communication. They identify several 'ingredients' necessary for a double bind situation, see table 1.

Table 1: 'Ingredients' for a double bind situation (from Bateson et al, 1956: 253)

Requirement	Elaboration
Two or more persons.	Of these, we designate one, for the purposes of our definition, as the "victim"
Repeated experience.	We assume that the double bind is a recurrent theme in the experience of the victim [such that] the double bind structure comes to be an habitual expectation.
A primary negative injunction.	This may have either of two forms: (a) "Do not do so and so, or I will punish you," or (b) "If you do not do so and so, I will punish you".
A secondary injunction…	…conflicting with the first at a more abstract level, and like the first enforced by punishments or signals which threaten survival. This is commonly communicated…by nonverbal means.
A tertiary negative injunction prohibiting the victim from escaping the field.	…it seems that in some cases the escape from the field is made impossible by certain devices which are not purely negative, e.g., capricious promises of love, and the like.

Wagner (1978) suggests there is a general organisational double bind arising out of the tension between the rational model of organisation and the needs of individual organisational members. Following Thompson (1967), he suggests that organisations impose 'norms of rationality': members operate within individualised 'spheres of action' which constrain individuals to a rational set of behaviours when seeking

solutions to "career-related problems" and the demands placed on them by the organisation's internal social system (Thompson, 1967: 106). If individuals eschew these norms, they will find that their 'spheres of action' are reduced by the organisation in order to 'buffer' these deviant individuals from the rest of the organisation (Wagener, 1978: 788). Individuals are therefore faced with a choice between rejecting the organisational norms and accepting the career consequences , or accepting these norms and dealing with the resultant internal dissonance. In exploring this tension, Wagner draws upon the idea of the double bind, but for simplicity categorises the multiple *levels* of communication into just two *modes* – analogic (intuitive, and concerned with emotional aspects of the individual and his or her relationships) and digital (specifically linguistic, and concerned with the naming of objects and events). These two modes bear some similarity to Bruner's more widely known distinction between narrative and paradigmatic ways of knowing (Bruner, 1986). The digital mode is more precise and less equivocal, and allows for logical analysis. The analogue mode has greater capacity to capture and express feelings, but allows for greater error and misunderstanding. Wagner suggests that translation from one mode to the other "is tenuous, because of the differing natures of each". The digital mode is dominant in organisations, and the organisation's primary negative injunction is thus:

> You will behave predictably by digitalising your interpersonal interactions. Failure to do so will result in a reduction of your sphere of action, thus reducing your power, authority, responsibility, status and credibility as a member. (Wagner, 1978: 791)

He suggests that the secondary negative injunction arises from within the individual, and proposes that there will be individual differences in the extent to which the

primary negative injunction elicits a response which creates a double bind situation. To develop this argument, he draws upon the typology of organisational members proposed by Presthus (1962). Despite being over 40 years old, this work is more relevant than ever because of the increasing emphasis on normative techniques for management control (Barley and Kunda, 1992). Presthus suggests individuals fall into three types in terms of their response to organisational insistence on compliance with the prevailing rational norms – ambivalents, indifferents and upward mobiles. *Ambivalents* publicly reject the organisation's norms, and experience a reduction in their spheres of actions as a result. *Indifferents* also reject organisational norms, but do so by withdrawal, dealing with the internal dissonance by actively enacting their own norms, values and beliefs outside of work. *Upward mobiles* positively identify with the organisation and its norms, and are rewarded for this. Wagner suggests that only upward mobiles might be expected to find themselves in double bind situations: ambivalents and indifferents reject the primary negative injunction, either by non-compliance or by a minimalist and instrumental response.

So, how do upward mobiles perceive a secondary negative injunction? Wagner suggests that this comes from their efforts at identity construction. Weick (1969) suggests organisational members strive to make themselves both similar to and distinctive from their colleagues. The tension is obvious – upward mobiles need to be seen to fit in, but also need to stand out in order to progress their careers, and are thus caught in a paradox – their desire for self-identity pushes them to accept "arational norms", but their acceptance of the organisation's rational norms prohibits this (Wagner, 1978: 792).

The secondary negative injunction thus comes from within, and can be stated thus:

> I must think and act analogically in order to fully understand myself and my relationship with other people. (Wagner, 1978: 792)

The key point to stress is that upward mobiles are careerists – they have a sharp eye for what it takes to get on, and yet are double bound by conflicting messages.

It would be misleading to treat Wagner's conceptualisation as a double bind per se. Instead, it can be see as a description of the paradoxical nature of organisational communication which provides the context in which specific, localised double bind situations can arise. This article examines an example of one such situation, taking an autoethnographic approach, which lends itself to the kind of detailed, reflexive inquiry required to explore these complex issues.

Autoethnographic methods

This section is intended in part as a 'normal' methodology section, explaining to the reader what I as the researcher did and why. Autoethnography is a rapidly developing approach to research, described by two of its main proponents as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The approach draws upon a range of ideas, and researchers come to autoethnography from a range of disciplines. For organisational researchers, perhaps the most useful influence comes from C. Wright Mills distinction between troubles and issues:

> *Troubles* occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his (*sic*) immediate relations with others; …*Issues* have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. (C. Wright Mills, 1959: 8, italics in original)

Autoethnographic research is principally of interest where one's own *troubles* also happen to correspond to wider issues. Sometimes this correspondence will be clear, for example there is much autoethnographic work on illness, self-evidently an issue as well as a trouble. In other cases, autoethnographic researchers present their own 'troubles' on the basis of a judgement that they will have some resonance for others. Observational comedy treads a similar line, for which comedians have developed a stock phrase – "Is it just me or….?". In search of new material, comics find new areas of life to explore, always risking a response from the audience of, "Yes, it's just you". In the context of this article, I suggest that my *'trouble'* (getting into a double bind relationship with my line manager) is a common 'issue'; that is to say, it is widely experienced and reflects common power relations in organisations which in turn reflect wider social patterns.

Although ethnography is now widely used within the social sciences, it came out of anthropology and this was also the field in which the earliest recognisably autoethnographic work was done. As Buzard (2003) makes clear, in its earliest form autoethnography was a response to longstanding issues within anthropology concerning the construction of 'subjects' as the exotic and the Other, and the reawakening of interest in 'domestic' anthropology. By contrast, my interest in autoethnography stems from a very different methodological issue, namely the difficulties involved in gathering data on both the long arc of career and the short run fluctuations of emotion (Blenkinsopp, 2006b). My own autobiographical experiences

therefore become ‘data’, available for analysis in much the same way interview transcripts might be. Nevertheless, the reflexive nature of autoethnography is retained and can be found not only in the ‘data’ but in the writing, consistent with the idea of writing as a ‘method of inquiry’ (Richardson, 1994). The article therefore includes not merely the author’s analysis of his experience, but also some reflections on the process of writing, identifying ways in which particular interpretations or analyses have been developed.

Validity is a significant issue for autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that autoethnography can be judged partly in terms of its evocativeness: it is valid if it evokes in the reader an emotional and empathic response, and in organisational research one might also add, if it evokes a sense of recognition – work is one of the commonest experiences in any culture, and so an autoethnographic piece might be expected to be recognisable. This is an interesting and extremely useful proposition, as it potentially allows the researcher to offer an account of rather complex situations and test its validity in part by the very simple act of presenting the description to others. This is an important consideration for the autoethnographic researcher – Coffey (1999) notes that such research risks self-indulgence, and this may act as a very practical rein on such tendencies.

Verisimilitude is another important aspect of autoethnographic validity: the autoethnographic account presented below does not lay claim to the usual claims of objective or scientific accuracy, its validity lies more in it being an honest and accurate description of how I experienced the situation. It is less important whether these things occurred exactly as I describe them, but crucially important that the

account honestly reflects *my* perception and analysis of the situation at the time. As I will indicate, the 'facts' of the situation gave rise to a narrative of a double bind situation, which persisted and shaped my perception of all subsequent events. This is very relevant because, as I suggest below, the double bind situation is inimical to reality testing – any and all actions which might resolve the ambiguity of the situation are 'risky' and therefore 'impossible'. Perception therefore feeds upon itself with the risk that each new piece of information serves merely to confirm the existing interpretation.

Autoethnography raises two particular ethical issues over and above those already inherent in ethnography. The first concerns the accuracy of the account. Anthony Burgess suggested we 'forgive' Marco Polo for relating as fact events that clearly cannot be true, because he is reporting what others told him, but are less forgiving of Benvenuto Cellini who describes unbelievable events he claims to have witnessed personally. Where a work is autobiographical, the author is implicitly making claims for the accuracy of a record which are greater than those made by authors who are presenting the accounts of others (and their interpretations of them) – Lejuene calls this the 'autobiographical pact' (Lejuene, 1989).

Although it is legitimate, and indeed necessary, to apply a degree of editing to any ethnographic account, working with one's own experience as data means that the researcher is acutely aware of the complexities and subtleties of the situation. Denzin (1994) talks about epiphany in hindsight, and the autoethnographer has to take care to distinguish between their perceptions then and now. These difficulties can lead to an excess of caveats and nuances within the writing, which are intended to avoid misleading the reader, but may serve simply to confuse.

The second ethical issue concerns anonymity and confidentiality. Whilst such issues are present in ethnography, they are more pronounced in autoethnography. In the case study below some details (including all names) have been deliberately altered, to preserve anonymity. Yet the fact that the author is the main protagonist means that the location and the other protagonists could be identified with a little detective work – by contrast, the locations of the research site in several classic ethnographies remain a matter of speculation to this day.

In my own work, I turned to autoethnography in part because of the extraordinary richness it can provide. It is difficult to imagine a participant so willing to expend the same time and effort on recollection, reflection and analysis of their lived experience as the researcher – especially not on demand, and focusing upon the issues the researcher wishes to explore. The insights gained through this process offer considerable potential for theory development, working with what Weick (1989) termed the 'disciplined imagination'. That is certainly the basis upon which I have sought to draw upon the autoethnographic case study, to which we now turn.

The double bind – an autoethnographic account

An office in a hospital building. A young man sits slumped in a chair next to a desk, still wearing his coat, an unzipped blue windcheater. With his hands in the coat pockets he pulls it around himself like a blanket. He looks forlorn and yet annoyed. At the desk sits the woman whose office it obviously is. She looks at him with concern.

Fiona: So then, what's the matter?
John: I've just been told off by Catherine.
Fiona (laughing): Told off?!
John (nods, looking gloomy): Uh-huh.
Fiona (realising he's not joking): What did she tell you off about?

John: Oh, various things. (In an offhand manner, he gives a few examples.)
Fiona: Oh well, I mean, well it's not exactly serious stuff.
John: No, not really.

There is a long pause. Fiona looks at him expectantly, waiting for him to explain.

John: You know, the thing that really gets me is, she never bloody tells you anything positive, do you know what I mean? We dealt with that case on Ward G, and it was awful, really serious stuff and really awful, and pretty much all of our colleagues know we had a hard time with it, even though they don't know the details, and they've been really supportive…and Jane [Fiona's manager] *was really good with you about it, at least once she 'got' what it was like…and I got nothing from Catherine, no 'well done' or 'thanks' not even a 'how are you holding up?' Nothing during, nothing after.*
Fiona (pursing her lips in sympathy): Mmmm, well Jane wasn't a lot of help until she started to understand what a big case it was.
John (ignoring this): When I came here, the salary they offered me was less than they advertised, because I was quite inexperienced and Roger said they'd give me the support to get up to speed, and then they'd review it. Then of course, he didn't get the job, and Catherine came in, and I wasn't about to say to her 'guess what, I'm dead inexperienced but quite cheap, now about this development plan your predecessor promised me…'. So, except for a bit of help from Elspeth early on, I just got on and did the job, working all hours like a bloody idiot. Do you know Sean [the other Personnel Manager] *earns over a third more than I do?*
Fiona (surprised): No, really?
John (warming to his theme): Did I tell you what she said when I told her I'd been worried that she might let me go when she first arrived, because I didn't have much experience and it had been a risk Roger had agreed to take, not her?
Fiona (surprised): No! What did she say?
John (dryly): She said if I didn't hear anything from her, I should assume I was doing a good job.
Fiona (puzzled): Oh. Well, that's a good thing isn't it?
John: Well, that's what I thought at the time. It was only later I realised she didn't mean 'if there's a problem I'll you know', she meant 'you won't get any feedback at all unless there's a problem'!
Fiona: Oh dear. Oh, that's not on. How can she manage people like that – she's the HR Director for God's sake!
John: Quite. She would understand this if she was advising another manager. It's like a blind spot, we [the staff who reported to Catherine] *all seem to have this problem with her. I think that's what makes it so difficult – I feel like I should talk to her about it, tell her how I feel, but I think she'd just be bemused. [Pause] And that would make it even worse. I know if I did tell her, I'd either get angry or upset – and either way, I think I'd probably end up in tears! [Fiona laughs] In fact, that's how I picture it, I start getting it off my chest and end up sobbing incoherently in her office, while she looks embarrassed and moves papers around the desk waiting for me to compose myself.*

This was the first time I gave Fiona a full rendition of the number 'How do you solve a problem like Catherine?', but it wasn't to be the last, nor was she the only person to

have to listen repeatedly to this 'song' (thank heaven for patient colleagues). Perhaps I should have committed it to plain verse – if I had, it would have run something like this:

> I must tell her about it, but if she doesn't
> React the right way it'll be even worse
> And I can't face it getting any worse
> And when I think about it I don't think
> She would react the right way and so I
> Definitely won't tell her and to be
> Fair to her, if I'm not going to tell
> Her then I can't be mad at her for not
> Doing anything to help me but having
> Said all that, I am mad at her, damn it!
>
> And getting madder by the day.

The 'it' which I wanted/didn't want/must/couldn't tell her was a complex of issues, which in essence boiled down to a perceived lack of emotional support. My working relationship with Catherine did not begin under ideal circumstances. I'd been appointed by her predecessor, Roger, and arrived to find he was leaving and Catherine was about to start. Roger had appointed me despite my inexperience, judging that I had the right attributes to develop into the role. He expected to have to live with that decision, but Catherine had no such obligations and as HR Director I imagined she would be horrified to discover Roger had lumbered her with a Personnel Manager so inexperienced, especially since the hospital was embarking on a major change programme at the behest of the new Chief Executive. When she announced, shortly after arrival, that she had been instructed to make budget cuts to an amount which was almost identical to my salary costs, I feared the worst. I therefore spent the first six months or so at Thorpeton attempting to mask my inexperience from Catherine, by adopting the risky strategy of avoiding approaching her for support, relying instead

upon my own limited knowledge and experience, and what I could discreetly glean from colleagues through 'casual' conversation, to deal with the numerous HR issues which came my way, many of which were entirely new to me. I also threw myself into the work, perhaps unconsciously attempting to make myself invaluable and invulnerable through garnering plaudits from the general managers.

To capture something of 'the work' into which I threw myself, it is important to describe the organisational context during this time. Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) argue that the influence of an organisation on the mood and emotion of staff is indirect: emotion is stimulated directly by specific events, but the organisation provides the context within which these events can occur. The context here was an organisation going through very rapid organisational change, in which the newly expanded HR function was heavily involved in a huge range of activities.
The culture of Thorpeton was one in which managers perceived that change was both necessary and possible, and that they were its primary agents. There were some very impressive managers (Catherine included) with clear ideas about what was required and how that might be achieved, and a positive view about the role of the HR function in these plans. It was therefore a very rewarding environment in which to be a Personnel Manager, but a rather intimidating environment in which to be an inexperienced Personnel Manager!

One outcome of increased capacity in the HR function was that demand grew to meet supply. Managers who had previously 'soldiered on' with certain staffing problems (typically performance issues) began to realise there was now an effective source of support. This created a peculiarly frenzied environment for the HR staff, who found

themselves being asked to help address issues which had been left to 'fester' for years. The emotional strain was significant. To take one example, dealing with poor performance on the part of a ward sister who has been 'getting away with it' for years produces a shock to the system.

The individual will, of course, be shocked but so will her staff, peers, union officials, staff in other clinical areas etc. Whilst the new approach appeared to be generally welcomed (even by the unions) it nevertheless required considerable effort in each and every case. Because of the novelty of the situation, managers often required support which went far beyond mere HR advice. They were unused to dealing with their staff in these ways, to the emotion-laden conflict situations in which they now found themselves. They turned to HR for support, but of course the HR staff themselves were not removed from these conflict situations.

So attempting to deliver the HR agenda engendered a wealth of emotion, and although by no means all of it was negative, it presented a challenge to coping. Professions which are replete with such challenges, notably health and social care, have well developed support systems for dealing with this. It is interesting that looking back, I can see that I had a host of colleagues who informally provided me with this kind of 'sounding board', some of whom were rather skilled in doing so. Nevertheless, I felt needed such support from Catherine, and my failure to get it was a cause of considerable anger through much of my time at Thorpeton.

Despite these considerable challenges, my initial strategy of 'work hard and avoid Catherine' worked reasonably well, and although I ended up putting in excessive hours to cope with the self-imposed additional workload, I was very productive and very happy in my work. Catherine's style was to make relatively infrequent contacts

with her staff, and so my strategy of avoidance was not noticeable. I went down well with the general managers, who reported good things back to Catherine, so for her part she was (she later told me) very happy with the situation.

It was only as I grew in confidence and became more willing to approach her on various issues that I started to notice her somewhat awkward management style. My perception is that she found managing staff rather difficult. Yet as she was blessed with a senior team composed of able and self-directed staff, this did not create many difficulties in terms of delivering a service. Where it did create difficulties was in terms of the emotional needs of her staff.

A colleague captured it well, comparing Catherine to her predecessor Roger, who had been rather good at providing emotional support – "Roger would sit you down, make you a cup of tea and listen to your troubles, although he wouldn't actually *do* anything". By contrast Catherine generally provided good advice and support on the 'task' side, but seemed unable to respond to, or indeed understand, her staff's need for emotional support.

Nevertheless, I coped reasonably well with the day to day emotional strain, and since in any event I was attempting to minimise my contact with Catherine, I could hardly protest at lack of support! The situation was changed radically by one episode, a prolonged disciplinary investigation into allegations of patient abuse. This distressing case stretched my coping resources to their limits and in the process revealed the full extent of the gap between the need for emotional support and Catherine's ability (or willingness) to provide it.

> *A large nursing office, just off a busy ward. A man and a woman sit in two comfy chairs, they look tired and unhappy. It is late afternoon, they have been conducting investigative interviews all day. The latest interviewee has just left,*

> *and they sit in silence. Suddenly the man turns to the woman and says, "I'm going to have to stop now". "Me too", she replies and then, after a pause, "Why do you want to stop?" "Because I feel like if we keep on going, someone is going to come through that door and say something like, 'You know, when she snapped that old lady's arm over her knee, I nearly said something'". She nods. They both seem close to tears. "It is a bit grim, isn't it?" she says.*

The investigation was a difficult period: uncovering what had occurred was distressing and the work involved extensive, adding to an already heavy workload. The investigation was carried out by myself and a clinical manager (Fiona) – over thirty staff were interviewed, some more than once, along with about half a dozen patients and visitors. The case took about six months to be resolved. Considerable effort was made to ensure the managers likely to hear the case were 'uncontaminated' by prior knowledge of it.

This was very appropriate in a procedural sense, but it made the situation problematic for Fiona and I: those who might have provided us with support (in my case Catherine) kept themselves at arm's length. This meant we got no emotional support during the case, but worse, we got none afterwards either as these key people never really understood why the case was so traumatic and hence why we were so badly affected by it.

In the aftermath of the case, I experienced difficulties in coping with work, which I viewed (thought not in any thought-through manner) as something like mild post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet I was uneasy about this: I felt the case had not been 'bad enough' to have got me in such a state, but was unable to deny that, for whatever reason, it did appear to have 'got to me'. This was a very personal response and one which was, in Wagner's terms, difficult to 'digitise' – and therefore very difficult to raise with Catherine.

The 'telling off' conversation with Catherine which I described to Fiona took place a few weeks after the case had been completed. It marked a low point in our relationship, and I grew increasingly bitter. She was well within her 'managerial rights' to raise the issues, they were not trivial, and I learned from these mistakes. But I felt strongly that she had not earned the 'moral right' to raise them. The mistakes I'd made were not in any simple way caused by the emotional difficulties of the case, but they were errors I wouldn't have made a few months earlier.

I was struggling to cope, and not getting support from the person who was supposed to support me. The conversation cemented in my mind the view that she didn't have a clue how I felt, how difficult the job was, how traumatic the case had been. I therefore reasoned (wrongly, I now believe) that it would be pointless for me to try to explain these things. It became a major issue for me – friends, family and colleagues could see the case was taking its toll, but my line manager apparently could not. I had found myself in a double bind situation.

Discussion

Analysing the double bind

Before examining the account in more detail, I want to set out the primary, secondary and tertiary negative injunctions of this double bind as I perceived them:

Primary: *You will deliver on the organisation's HR agenda, flawlessly and comprehensively, or you will lose your job.*

Secondary: *You will behave as if the primary injunction is reasonable and you will not require any support from me, because none of this ought to be especially difficult for someone in your position to cope with.*

Tertiary: *You cannot leave, except at considerable cost to your career.*

None of these injunctions were communicated in anything like this explicit fashion. Each injunction can be seen as a synthesis of numerous messages, many subtle nuances of communication, including my potentially idiosyncratic interpretation of the nature of my role, the organisational culture, the experience of my colleagues, the expectations of managers etc. This is characteristic of a double bind – the individual receives conflicting messages, yet is unable to comment upon the contradictions. Kafka describes the individual as being 'inundated by paradoxical communications, coupled with taboos against "metacommunicating" about these paradoxes' (Kafka, 1971: 234).

The primary negative injunction

Having worked for several years on temporary contracts, often at some distance from home, I was somewhat more alive to job insecurity than my colleagues, and perhaps therefore primed to interpret situations in these terms – hence my over-reaction to the Catherine's news that she had to make budget cuts. My anxiety was not lessened when, within my first few months at Thorpeton a number of managers were 'moved on' as a result of their failure to perform. I didn't know them, or the 'back story' to their departures, but I got a strong impression that the claim they had failed to perform was not exactly clear cut. I therefore had a nagging sense that I had joined an organisation impatient with anything less than excellent performance. I knew I had much to learn, and was worried that I would not get time to learn it. This anxiety led to my quixotic response of attempting to achieve flawless performance whilst avoiding making contact with the person most able to support me in doing so.

The secondary negative injunction

The salience of the secondary injunction arose as a result of the primary injunction. The 'injunction' to work without requiring any support from Catherine could have been of limited importance, but the organisational context described above meant that attempting to achieve flawless performance necessarily meant engaging actively with situations which stimulated considerable emotion, both positive and negative. In *Carry On Up the Khyber*, an officer retreats from fierce hand to hand fighting back into the besieged consulate building, where the consul remonstrates with him for having a dishevelled uniform. In similar vein, it appeared Catherine simply did not 'get' the emotional dimension to some of the difficult situations with which her staff were dealing. Her apparent failure to appreciate this led me to question the legitimacy of her expectations – 'how can she demand performance when she refuses to provide support?' Of course, the double bind situation meant I was unable to communicate this to her.

The tertiary negative injunction

It was career considerations which served to 'make' me remain in that setting, and therefore in that situation. My career ambitions led me to take the calculated risk of accepting a job for which I was apparently not yet ready *and* moving half way across the country to take it up. Once in post, it was career considerations which prevented me from 'escaping the field'. I knew that getting the Thorpeton post had been something of a fluke – my level of experience at that stage barely fitted me for the posts held by the Personnel Officers I managed. So, I could have left but only by taking a step down. And, by extension, staying down for longer – I knew it would take several years in a junior post to gain the sort of experience I was likely to gain in the first few months at Thorpeton. As time passed, and exit to a similar post became a realistic option, career considerations still served to keep me at Thorpeton, since the

experience I was rapidly gaining was unusually broad (due to the pace of change) and I could therefore envisage biding my time and making a promotional move.

This is a significant issue: these double bind situations persist partly because the individual tacitly accepts the prevailing social norm, what we might call a 'meta-injunction', that views career as important. In the case study I appear to direct my ire towards Catherine, but throughout this time I was at least as frustrated and angry with myself: the rational, calculating careerist self who demanded that the emotional, hurt and needy self remain in situ and 'suffer' in expectation of future career progression.

Narrative thinking in a double bind situation

I noted in the account that I talked to selected colleagues about my difficulties with Catherine, but these conversations represented just a small part of my 'talk' on this matter: in between such conversations, I ruminated endlessly, trying to find ways to resolve the situation. In part these ruminations were about weighing up the pros and cons of taking action, mainly in the form of grasping the nettle and talking to Catherine.

However, I also expended considerable mental effort in narrative thinking, attempting to develop narratives that would make the situation more bearable. Inevitably, I also ruminated somewhat less constructively, re-playing certain events and conversations, or imagining dramatic speeches to Catherine as I carried out my fantasy of 'escaping the field' by resigning on the spot.

The narratives developed through this thought process took three forms: narratives which exculpated Catherine in some way, perhaps by stressing the unusual nature of the situation and my failure to raise my concerns with her; narratives which

emphasised the temporary nature of the situation, stressing that it would 'soon' be over and that the experience during this time would prove to have been worthwhile; and finally, narratives which re-told my 'problem with Catherine' story.

The first two narrative forms can be seen as efforts to overcome the double bind, the latter merely served to reinforce it. I was conscious of the surprising vehemence with which I returned to these negative narratives: the positive narratives were fragile and took effort to construct, whereas the tiniest setback in my relationship with Catherine would revive a full-blooded 'double bind narrative'. I had aspirations to move on, to find some accommodation with the situation, but even the tiniest aversive event seemed to return me to unhelpful rumination.

The key note of this extended emotional episode (Frijda, 1993), sounded repeatedly over the coming months, was my anger at what I perceived as Catherine's failure to give me the support I needed during and after a case which would have been hugely difficult even for a seasoned Personnel Manager, and which had knocked this relative greenhorn sideways. I would go back over the way in which we had been left to deal with it, the various decisions taken by more senior staff which revealed a lack of understanding of the unusually difficult and distressing nature of the case, the yawning silence which had followed its completion.

Over a prolonged period, despite experiencing the usual fluctuations in mood and emotion, I returned at ever-decreasing intervals to the double bind and the anger and distress associated with it, like a piece of classical music returns to its main theme.

What's so emotional about a double bind?

Considering the intense emotions it aroused at the time, it was surprisingly difficult to recapture my narrative thinking in a manner which accords with Goldie's three characteristics of a successful narrative. I initially treated this as merely a writing

problem, but I now believe the difficulty may reflect something intrinsic to these situations. I touched upon it when I referred to feeling that the case was not 'bad enough' to leave me so upset. What it reflects, I think, is the banality of the narrative thinking in such situations.

Bruner (1995) describes autobiography as 'a narrator here and now telling about a protagonist of the same name, there and then' (Bruner, 1995: 167). Yet the narrator, now removed from the situation, gains ironic distance, that is to say one's current perspective as narrator differs from one's perspective then as a protagonist (Goldie, 2003). The nature of a double bind is such that, after its resolution, it can be difficult even for the once-bound individual to understand quite how it managed to produce such intense emotions.

In the situation described in the case, I saw two options: to speak to Catherine, or to exit. Both were perceived as high risk. My judgement that, in career terms, the time to move on had not yet arrived made exit a risky option. Yet if I spoke to Catherine and she reacted in the 'wrong' way it would make the situation even less bearable, and in all likelihood force me to exit sooner than intended. At first glance, this seems like a settled position – I have resigned myself both to staying for now, and to not telling her. But of course, in practice I oscillated wildly between the two options, depending on events: sometimes my relationship with Catherine reached such a low point that I seriously considered resigning on the spot! I knew that at some point leaving Thorpeton would become a good move, but for the moment, remaining there was my least worst move and yet this rational assessment did not help me deal with the emotions involved in facing the situation on a daily basis.

An insight into why situations in which the individual is caught up in affect-laden career rumination can be so draining is offered by Baumeister, Faber and Wallace (1999). They suggest that the self is 'built upon a very limited psychological resource that is used in a wide range of volitional activities, including choice, active (instead of passive) responding, and self-control' (Baumeister et al, 1999: 52) and note that this resource is used 'in a wide assortment of self-control operations including affect regulation, thought control, task persistence, physical stamina and impulse control' (Baumeister et al, 1999: 52). Where an individual draws upon this resource in ongoing acts of emotional regulation, this provides a drain on this limited resource. The model also suggests that situations can have an impact which may persist for some time after the situation appears to be resolved (for example, the conclusion of the disciplinary case). It is important for individuals and organisations to recognise this – the individual may feel that s/he has 'got over' a particular situation, and be right to do so, but will need to recognise that s/he will nevertheless require some time to 'replenish' the psychological resource. Stuck in a double bind situation and ruminating constantly upon it, I never gave myself time and space to replenish my resources. Although my constant rumination on the situation was initially born out of an attempt at narrative coping, it served to perpetuate the situation by focusing my attention on the double bind. Nolen-Hoeksema (1991) suggests that rumination is a particularly poor coping strategy, associated with depression, and that distraction is generally a more effective strategy.

Escaping the double bind

My narrative thinking about my working life at Thorpeton eventually became so dominated by the perceived double bind situation that it became a personal 'canonical

form' (Bruner, 1986) for my career narrative, such that all events were interpreted in those terms and were fitted into this 'story', regardless of their goodness of fit. It would have taken a considerable shift in the 'real' situation to produce events sufficiently ill-fitting to force a revision or abandonment of this narrative, and of course such a shift was unlikely because I interpreted almost everything Catherine did in terms of this narrative. This meant even positive actions on her part made little difference: they were 'too little too late', or a reminder of previous events – 'she's supporting me 100% on this, but where was she when I really needed her?'. A good example of this was a major error I made, after being wrong footed by a union official as a result of getting too emotionally engaged with a case. This error incurred the wrath of Thorpeton's Chairman, and it must have been tempting for Catherine to step back and leave me to deal with him. Instead she provided a much needed buffer and offered sound advice for reaching some sort of détente with him. Yet, at the time, what I focused on was the fact that the *emotional* support was as lacking as ever!

Career considerations kept me in post at Thorpeton for two more years, and I struggled throughout this time. Resolution finally occurred through exit, and was helped by an exit interview with Catherine in which I said what I'd always wanted to say, and she, to her great credit, listened. Complete closure on the situation was greatly aided by my experience with the next HR Director for whom I worked. With Catherine, my shorthand description of our relationship was 'I respect her greatly, but I find her hard to work for': however, with my next bossI couldn't even say that I respected her, and that insight produced a near-instantaneous re-evaluation of my relationship with Catherine.

<u>Avenues for further research</u>

This account offers an instantiation, a worked example as it were, of the premise outlined in the introduction that emotion and career are linked through narrative. It also explores the relevance to careers of Wagner's organisational reframing of the double bind concept. Finally, it offers a useful illustration of how narrative thinking (Goldie, 2003) might relate to narratives told, and how narrative as an emotion-focused coping strategy might become dysfunctional through encouraging excessive rumination on a situation.. How might these be drawn together to develop avenues for further research and application?

The first step is to seek to clarify what exactly this account illustrates: how much is idiosyncratic, and how much typical. I have suggested that the overall situation can be understood in terms of a 'meta-injunction' to pursue a career, but as the case study makes clear, the stakes were especially high for me at that point in my career. By eliciting career narratives from a range of people, it would be possible to get a clearer understanding of the range of circumstances in which individuals will endure ongoing aversive situations in calculation of career benefits.

We might also want to consider whether narrative coping is a typical response, as I have implicitly claimed: perhaps there are individual differences in whether people tend to adopt problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping strategies in dealing with career-related difficulties (London, 1997). The article has drawn a link between narratives which cope and narratives which perpetuates, and this also seems an area worthy of further exploration. Coping narratives based on what Gunz (1989) terms a subsisting career logic (as opposed to searching or building career logics) may be less likely to lead to perpetuation: the individual effectively rejects the 'meta-injunction'

to actively pursue their career and so becomes free of the constraints which lock us into the double bind situations described in this article.

Even if s/he chooses out of convenience to remain in situ, the emotional tone of the situation is very different: linking back to Wagner and Presthus, such narratives effectively re-position the upward mobile as an ambivalent, or more likely, an indifferent (Presthus, 1962). Note that although this particular narrative coping strategy avoids the double bind, its impact on the individual may not be wholly benign: s/he has withdrawn from the field, and in the long run may lose out in career terms. The strategy also has implications for organisations – although the strategy might appear to be merely a reframing of the situation, it will be have implications for the individual's behaviour, most notably in terms of willingness to engage in organisational citizenship behaviours (Organ & Konovsky,1989).

These implications, for individuals and organisations, suggest there would be benefits in seeking ways to avoid double bind situations, although this would be an ambitious undertaking. M.C. Bateson (2005) suggests double binds are to be found everywhere, whilst Wagner (1978) suggests resolving the organisational double bind would require a reconciliation between digital and analogue modes of communication. We might therefore instead wish to focus on ways in which individual's might be supported to develop constructive responses to the double bind: to escape without practical withdrawal or actual exit.

Finally, we might explore the link between narrative coping and rumination, and how this might link to depression. Adverse occupational events are the major precipitating cause of first episodes of depression, and such episodes can be difficult to treat if the

individual has over-invested in a dominant career-related self-representation. The obvious research design would be the clinical case study, cited by Lazarus and Cohen-Charash (2001) as a model for investigating emotions in organisational life. Presenting a highly elaborated, longitudinal description of such situation provides a basis for future research into how such damaging situations arise, how they might be avoided, and what interventions might serve to address them. This approach is similar in some respects to autoethnography in terms of its detailed examination of individual life histories, and I want to conclude by returning to a consideration of the wider implications for autoethnography.

Conclusion

Autoethnographic research does not lend itself to simple conclusions. It suggests and evokes, pointing towards possible avenues for further exploration. Where might this take us? Can autoethnography lead directly to practical application? Psychiatrists write up individual cases for their peers, with the assumption that these cases can be used as a guide for treatment. And it is arguable that, though very different in style, the classic Harvard Business Review case studies of the 'doings' of Chief Executives are similarly idiographic in form. It would seem reasonable then to suggest that detailed autoethnographic case studies might offer important insights, as evidenced by the avenues for research outlined above. Although this might seem to strengthen the arguments in favour of autoethnography, it should be recognised that this places a very different interpretation of the value of, and rationale for, such research. Indeed, it comes close to echoing the traditional view that the appropriate role of qualitative research is to tease out the 'variables', in order that 'proper' quantitative research can be undertaken. Such issues take us back to the question 'what is autoethnography?', a

question to which I have suggested we are beginning to see answers which subtly impose a certain orthodoxy, which risks prematurely narrowing the possibilities of this fascinating approach.

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