

## **Constructing identity: An organizational autoethnography**

Professor Ken Parry

*Griffith Business School*

*Griffith University*

*Brisbane, Australia*

Email: k.parry@griffith.edu.au

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**Profile:** Ken Parry is Professor of Management at Griffith Business School. Prior to this appointment, he was Foundation Director of the Centre for the Study of Leadership in Wellington. He is Founding Editor of the *Journal of Management & Organization*. He is on the editorial boards of *The Leadership Quarterly* and the *Leadership* journal.

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### ABSTRACT

*Autoethnography is an emerging research method for organizational studies. It has been used for identity research, but not in organizational contexts thus far. The general topic of this research is about the creation of identity within organizations. This research looks at the constructing of a leadership identity using the methodology of autoethnography. This research is a pseudonymous autoethnography, meaning that the self-narrative is written in third person. Contribution to theory is implicitly built into the narrative, and explicitly discussed following the narrative. The role of emotion is important in autoethnography and crucial to this narrative. Constructing identity was found to be a 5-stage process. The achievement of paradox resolution and of a mild positive emotional state coincided with the construction of identity. Interaction and self-reflexivity were central to personal identity construction. An enhanced role for autoethnography in organization studies is proposed.*

**Keywords:** pseudonymous organizational autoethnography, identity, leadership, paradox, emotion.

### INTRODUCTION – ORGANIZATIONAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND LEADERSHIP IDENTITY

The creation and generation of identity within organizations has been the subject of a recent special edition of *Human Relations* journal. Without detailing all the extant research on identity here, there appears to be a need for further research into this topic. Leadership identity is proposed here as one aspect of organizational identity that requires further research. Autoethnography is an emerging methodology for organizational research, although it has been used for some time in understanding identity construction more broadly within the social sciences. Autoethnography is a reflexive research method. The role of emotion is axiomatic of this method, and this method uses discourse as data. For the main part, that discourse invariably is the first person account of the lived experience of one person. Within this method, contribution to theory can be incorporated into the first person narrative. Before I attempt to demonstrate this with the present case, I need to discuss the emerging role of organizational autoethnography and its potential contribution to the study of identity construction.

#### **Organizational Autoethnography**

Boyle and Parry (2007) contend that the prime focus of an organizational autoethnographic study is to illuminate the relationship between the individual and the organization. The autoethnographic method allows for insightful and emotionally-rich readings of organizational life. *Inter alia*, this approach enables the researcher to gain an insight into the construction of identity in organizations. This outcome is facilitated because identity bridges the conceptions of the individual and the social

structure within which the individual operates in organizational settings. Within autoethnography, the individual and their social structure are intimately connected.

The emotive affect of the narrative might be less powerful in organization studies than in the more harrowing narratives that traditionally emanate from mainstream anthropology and sociology, but from every individual experience comes a level of meaning for the reader. By its very nature, autoethnography is characterised by personal experience narratives (Denzin, 1989), auto-observation (Adler & Adler, 1994), personal ethnography (Crawford, 1996), lived experience (van Maanen, 1990), self-ethnography, (van Maanen, 1995), reflexive ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996), ethnobiography, (Lejeune, 1989), emotionalism (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997), experiential texts, (Denzin, 1997), and autobiographical ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Nevertheless, and unfortunately for organizational scholars, the use of autoethnography in organizational research is still in its infancy.

A central feature of autoethnography is the use of an aesthetic style of text, which may take a variety of forms – personal essays, poetry, short stories, journals, stream of consciousness, detailed unstructured interview narratives and other forms of fragmented writing. Through these (usually) first person accounts, the sometimes multiple and often fragmented leading self is revealed and delayed via stories of action, dialogue, linking of embodiment and emotion, fragmented thought and different uses of language. An increasing use of the first person in the write-up of organizational research indicates heightened acceptance of the self-narrative as a form of sense-making within organizational life. The commonalities between organizational ethnography and organizational autoethnography include the need for an aesthetic element – in other words, Ellington (2001) explains that it needs to read well, and the researcher needs to be able to write well and write truthfully. I am hoping that this autoethnography is true to Ellington's expectations. Certainly, all organizational research need to read well, so the point Ellington is making is that autoethnography must be an aesthetically appealing narrative as well as an effective explanation of phenomena.

Organizational autoethnography is a new and emerging genre of organizational research. The publication of some such research is commencing. Yarborough and Lowe's (2007) anguished yet endearing account describes the impact upon leadership and motivation during senior management

succession at the first author's family business. The intertwining narratives of fear, grief and hope experienced by the family business 'heir' demonstrates how autoethnography can play a vital role within small business research. This work also illustrates that autoethnographic accounts can be authored successfully by more than the 'author as data'. In effect, it opens the door to the prospect of 'co-constructed autoethnography'.

Riad's (2007) joyful and insightful account of accommodating motherhood and academic life clearly confirms much of the extant literature about the nature of work-life balance. As well, Riad was able to differentiate between the notion of 'balance' and 'choice', through exploring the notion of how each individual will live out their own balance, sacrificing neither 'work' nor 'life' by having to choose one or the other.

I contend that much of the value of autoethnography comes from the emotive impact that facilitates an understanding about organizational processes and therefore the subsequent cognitive impact upon individual identity within organizations. Also, I contend that the intensely personal process of identity construction is best documented through an autoethnographic approach.

Yarborough and Lowe's central identity of heir apparent to the family business is as an amalgam of four other identities. The use of techniques common in fiction writing work to expose the development and construction of identities central to the ethnography, without a compromising authenticity or rigour. A plausible defence of the validity of such an 'amalgam character' can be found in Bhaskar's (1978) work which challenges the notion that there is only one interpretation of reality.

Yarborough & Lowe's work illustrates that there is significant potential for co-constructed organizational autoethnography, particularly in organizational settings where it is difficult for a solo ethnographer to observe mundane actions or processes. Boyle and Parry (2007) identify that the strength of organizational autoethnography is demonstrated through its ability to weave the extant literature into the narrative that the author presents. To do so is normally proscribed in mainstream organizational research methodologies. However, in organizational autoethnography, it is a strength. One example of the narrative being woven in with the extant organizational literature is Edgar Schein's fascinating (2006) story of the journey that was his career.

I contend that organizational autoethnography is a valid and fruitful method with which to contribute to our understanding of the constructing of identity in organizations.

### **Autoethnography and identity**

The methodology of autoethnography has a rich history in identity research within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. This is particularly so with studies on race, gender and social conflict. Recent examples include Olson (2004), Jovanovic (2003) and Rambo (2005). However, this author found no literature about identity in 'organizational' studies using autoethnography. Therefore, the richness of research in other arenas suggests that there is great potential for autoethnography to make a contribution to research about identity within organizational settings. It is this opportunity that the present research seeks to take advantage of.

The recent literature on identity within organizations is dominated by the notion of occupational identity (Ashcraft, 2007) and institutional or organizational identity (Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger, 2007; Whetten, 2006) rather than individual identity within the context of organizations. Indeed, a special edition of the *Academy of Management Review* was devoted in 2000 to organizational identity and identification. Most of that special edition was devoted to organizational identity rather than individual identity. Although the concept of individual identity has been around for a long time, much of the literature on organizational identity seems to reflect a pursuit of a 'corporate' identity more so than the pursuit of individual identity within the organizational context. Therefore, it is in the spirit of the latter pursuit that this autoethnographic research is conducted.

*Research objectives.* The research objectives of this work are two-fold. The first objective is to extend the use of autoethnography in organizational studies. The second research objective is to examine the construction of an identity in an organizational context, via the medium of a substantive case study.

### **METHOD**

The research methodology is that of autoethnography. This research is an attempt to progress to use of autoethnography in organizational research. It is also an attempt to use an innovative methodology to investigate identity development in an organizational setting. The methodology is innovative because it has seldom been used in organizational research. Moreover, I am attempting to innovate with the application of autoethnography as it is now being applied to organizational research.

This is the story of Ken. 'Ken' is a pseudonym. Within autoethnography the case narrative is traditionally from the author or from someone else reflecting on their personal experience. In the present case, an attempt is made to conceal the identity of the author, without compromising the impact of the autoethnographic genre. The case is written from the perspective of the third party, although it clearly purports to be organizational autoethnography. The use of a pseudonym enables the usual level of subjectivity and emotion to be integrated into the research. It also allows for a more objective appraisal of the emerging theory than might otherwise be the case with an autoethnography. It is an attempt to integrate third person anonymity into what is otherwise a very onymous genre of research. Hence, this research is that of a *pseudonymous autoethnography*. There is no one organization within which Ken's identity has developed. However, he has worked for three similar organizations in the same industry for several years. It is that amalgam 'organization' that is the vehicle for this autoethnography.

Ellis and Bochner (1996, 2000) have reminded us that autoethnography expresses how we struggle to make sense of our experiences. In this case, Ken is attempting to make sense of his experiences and his social interactions as he develops his identity as a leader. He is attempting to make sense of how that identity develops and how it manifests itself in organizational life. Because I am telling the story of 'Ken', I am engaging in narrative analysis. It is what Boje (2001) might call microstoria analysis. It is the story of one person. The story is from the perspective of Ken, although it is related here by the author.

### **Data**

The data are constituted by the reflexive narrative of the story of 'Ken'. This is self-narrative discourse. The story is told by Ken, although it is related here by the author. Because the story is related by the author, most of the discourse is in the third person. However, from time to time the author quotes Ken, and consequently this discourse is related in the first person. The narrative includes feedback from other people, and includes discussion of the negotiated interaction between Ken and other people with whom he works in his organization. In effect, it is 'shop floor discourse'

that is analysed. Therefore, the data consist of much more than the self-reflexive musings of Ken.

The data also include the interactive discourse between Ken and his colleagues.

### **Analysis**

The analysis is also undertaken by Ken, and related here by the author. Ken tells his story, and interprets it as he goes. I am proposing that autoethnography does not have to always be in first person from the 'mouth' of the subject. The author does not have to be the subject of the research.

Indeed, if the author was always the researcher and also always the subject of the research, autoethnography would soon be redundant as a research method. If that were the case, all we would have is academicians telling their own story about themselves. Apart from the fact that the sources of research would soon be exhausted, the research findings would soon become skewed and unreliable.

Consideration of the emotional impact of the subject's narrative is an axiomatic component of autoethnographic analysis. Hence, this analysis frequently incorporates consideration of the emotional impact that is included within the story. Indeed, it soon emerged that the variable of emotion was an important feature of the emerging theoretical explanation. Emotions are discussed in terms of Shaver et al.'s (1987) taxonomy of emotions, as represented in Figure 1.

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Insert Figure 1 here

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One piece of research which uses data from a large representative sample might have an impact upon a reader due to the cognitive nature of its analysis and discussion. Conversely, another piece of research, using data from a sample of just one person, might also have an impact upon a reader due to the emotional and evocative nature of its analysis and discussion. Whatever the research method that is chosen, I contend that the impact of the research comes from the reading by the individual reader. Therefore, a subjective and reflexive study with a very small data set can be just as effective in generating knowledge as research from a large generalizable data set.

This research is based around just such a small and non-generalizable data set. Therefore, in this research 'n' equals 1 and it is the story of the subject, from the perspective of the subject. This does not exclude another person being the author who tells the story of the subject, and still from the perspective of the subject. Ethnography is when the researcher tells the researcher's story about what

the researcher found. Autoethnography can be when the researcher tells the subject's story about what the subject found. In this case, I am telling Ken's story.

### KEN'S STORY

Ken always thought he was "lousy" at leadership. He didn't know how or why. His father was a career soldier, so leadership figured prominently in discussions at the table and in front of the television. In spite of all the discussion, Ken was always a follower and never a leader. "Dad was always in charge. We were soldiers in his platoon", Ken said. He was the youngest in the family of three children. People were always less likely to take notice of his opinion and more likely to listen to his older siblings. He never seemed to be able to demonstrate a leadership influence over others. Even from an early age, this led to *apprehension*<sup>1</sup> about what life might hold. Life meant working for many years. That work meant working with other people. Sooner or later he would become some sort of a manager and have to exert an influence over them. He would have to demonstrate leadership. "Frankly, I was scared shitless about it when I was a young bloke", he confided.

In his final year of high school, the coach made him the captain of the cricket team. This *confused* Ken because he still didn't think he was much good at leadership. "Actually, I still wasn't sure what leadership was. I was captain, but was that leadership? The coach made me captain, but I think that was only because I was the less of a ratbag than all the other chaps", he said.

Ken learnt about leadership when he started doing graduate study. He discovered the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), and used it in his research. As part of his research, he got himself profiled using the MLQ. Colleagues filled out the questionnaire, and provided data about how frequently they thought Ken demonstrated certain leadership behaviours. To his *surprise*, his MLQ profile said that he was quite good at certain leadership factors. "I didn't realise I was actually good at some of these things – well, some of the time, anyway", Ken told me. This was a pleasant surprise to him, and contradicted some of his preconceptions about himself. During discussion about leadership, indeed during a discussion about the use of metaphors as a tactic associated with intellectual stimulation, a colleague from private industry told Ken that he often spoke in metaphors and analogies. She explicitly and qualitatively reinforced the finding from his MLQ profile that Ken demonstrated the intellectual stimulation factor of leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> Emotions will be identified in *italics*. See also Figure 1.



Already, his emotions were moving from *apprehension*, a component of the *fear* factor, to *surprise* and even to *hope*, a component of the *joy* factor. Yes, there was the possibility of hope about the future and about Ken's ability to demonstrate leadership. He was getting this message from the people he lived and worked with. Even better, Ken was starting to think that maybe he had always been better at leadership than he had previously believed to be the case. As well as experiencing some hope, Ken was at once both *regretful* and even *anxious* that he might have been demonstrating leadership in the past without even realising that he was doing it. "Heaven's above", he said, "what other leadership have I been demonstrating and I didn't even realise it? Even more important ... what bad leadership have I been demonstrating and didn't even know it?"

It got better. Ken was working with Bruce Avolio at a university seminar in Melbourne. Bruce was one of the authors of the MLQ and a world authority on the study of leadership. Ken addressed the seminar about the topic at hand. A few years later, when recounting the event, he could not even recall what he was talking about. However, he did recall saying something about the nation facing a general election, and us having a "real opportunity" to "make a difference" for our industry. He was talking about the tertiary education sector, and he mentioned a "great challenge", and a "grave responsibility". He spoke slowly and solemnly, and he recalled having the undivided attention of the audience. Whatever he said, it seemed to go over well. At the next break, he passed Bruce Avolio at the door to the men's bathroom. "That was good stuff you said back there, Ken", he said. "It was actually quite charismatic. Well done". Ken recalled another occasion when a colleague said he was charismatic. His surprise started to develop into *astonishment*. "The last thing I ever expected to be accused of was being charismatic!" However, his *hope* became stronger.

His emerging confidence was tempered by a new understanding. By this time, Ken had completed his PhD on the sociology of organizations. He knew that charismatic leadership was an attribution, and a highly variable one at that. The work of Boas Shamir (Shamir, 1992; Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993) made that clear. But, he did have more confidence.

While doing his PhD, Ken had read about personal ethnography (Crawford, 1996). He decided to do a little personal or what he called "self-reflective" ethnography on himself. He did the MBTI (Myers et al., 1998) and got his 16PF (Cattell, 1989) profile. He also read up about the big-five personality factors and their links with leadership. Against the big-five, he concluded that he was

highly introverted and highly neurotic. He was reasonably conscientious, no more than moderately agreeable and relatively open to ideas. These findings moderated the emotions that he had been experiencing. He was neither as apprehensive nor as hopeful as he once was. This moderation of emotion was clearly a function of the knowledge that he had now gained about himself and his interaction with other members of his society. “It makes a bit more sense to me now”, he said. “I can see why I had trouble with this leadership thing over years. At least now I know why I had trouble with it, and what parts of my personality account for that.”

Interestingly, he felt apprehensive AND hopeful at the same time. He was hopeful because some research showed that conscientiousness (Cable & Judge, 2003; Judge et al., 2002) and agreeableness (Smith & Canger, 2004) were associated with leadership. He was apprehensive because extraversion, not introversion, was related to leadership (Cable & Judge, 2003; Judge et al., 2002); and that neuroticism is negatively related to leadership (Smith & Canger, 2004).

Ken told me that he started to feel a sense of *melancholy* about the leadership that he might be able to demonstrate within his lived world. He was neither angry about the frustration that came with knowing that part of his personality was not compatible with leadership; nor fearful about the future as a highly neurotic introvert; nor overly joyful about the potential of being the occasionally charismatic, reasonably conscientious and moderately agreeable person. He was a bit of all those things. His emotions were more complex as a result of this realisation. However, they were less extreme, and this was because he knew more about himself and about the situation he was facing.

In short, he was experiencing the paradox of uncovering some positive leadership findings about himself, and knowing that he had a non-typical personality for someone who might like to be better at leadership. This paradox was both *surprising* and a source of *agitation*. “Why would people think that I am a good role model, and intellectual stimulating, and occasionally charismatic if I have such a non-typical personality for leadership?” he asked me in a quiet moment. I could not provide an immediate answer, so I suggested that he do some more research.

He applied Burke’s dramaturgical pentad (1975) to his relationship between himself and his world. “I have certainly got better over the years at getting up in front of an audience. It seems to work quite well now, although I am still not really sure how and why it works”, he said. He was not sure about how he was communicating with his audience, but what he knew about Burke’s

dramaturgical analysis suggested that it might provide some answers. Although he did not assiduously apply all five elements of the pentad exactly, he did come to some conclusions about the dramatic impact that he might have upon audiences. Ken concluded that he was good at

- creating a 'script' to reflect a message for an 'audience'
- making the 'performance' relevant to an audience
- generating an appropriate emotional and cognitive reaction within an audience

Not only that, but Ken also knew from his reading about leadership that the 'drama of leadership' is often mistaken for charisma, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational leadership. This knowledge became a partial reconciliation of the paradoxes that he was experiencing. He now knew that the dramatic role that he played in organizations would explain the attributions of leadership that were sometimes cast upon him. This knowledge, which helped to resolve the paradoxes he was experiencing, helped also to moderate further the emotional impact of those paradoxes. Indeed, a new emotional reaction emerged – that of *contentment*. Contentment is a sub-factor of *joy*. In other words, apart from experiencing a moderation in the impact of emotion, Ken was experiencing a move further from fear and sadness toward surprise and then joy as the emotions that he was feeling.

As a result of a. knowledge, b. paradox resolution, c. moderation of emotion, and d. a move from negative emotional impact to positive emotional impact; Ken experienced a greater level of reassurance with his ability to develop his leadership capability. He also felt greater confidence about the identity that he was creating. Part of his identity was that of a leader. Indeed, his identity was partly that of a charismatic leader. Ken was not a charismatic leader all the time. However, at certain times, and in front of certain audiences, he could portray a charismatic role to potential followers. Most of the time, he was a follower, or even just a worker doing a job. He felt confidence in being able to step into and out of his leadership role when and where it was required. Indeed, he could continue to be 'better' at leadership as a result of this realisation about how the leadership phenomenon actually worked.

## CONCLUSIONS

The first research objective of this study was to extend the use of autoethnography in organization studies. The second research objective was to examine the construction of a leadership identity, in this case via the substantive case study of Ken. The achievement of each objective is now examined.

### **The role of autoethnography in organization studies**

Fleetwood and Hesketh (2006) provide a persuasive argument that much organizational research can only explain the past and cannot predict the future, in spite of many claims to the contrary. It is still the responsibility of the individual reader to make up her or his mind about the predictive validity of what they read in scholarly journals about the experiences of others.

In this sense, organizational autoethnography has no less predictive validity than any other organizational research. In fact, the emotive power of this research makes it a more powerful explanation of phenomena. Therefore, this impact alone might make organizational autoethnography a more powerful research genre than many other organizational research methods. I see autoethnography complementing more traditional research methods rather than usurping them.

Because of the arguable lack of predictive ability of most organizational research, autoethnography is well placed to be of use to the reader. I have explained earlier that the autoethnographic narrative is emotive and powerful. Such a narrative might well provide the reader with perhaps a better insight into what might happen in the future, than could the very objectivist and nomothetic research that has dominated organizational research thus far. The subjectivist nature of autoethnographic research allows the reader to empathise with the subject. As a result, vicarious learning can take place. I contend that cognitive learning also takes place because of the ability of autoethnography to build theory into the emerging narrative. This multiple learning, this vicarious and cognitive learning, provides autoethnography with great potential as a method for undertaking organizational research. Therefore, I hope that I have extended the potential role of autoethnography for a wide range of organizational studies.

### **Constructing identity as a five-stage process**

It is clear from Ken's story that leadership, within the context of the present research, is about getting people to follow willingly. Therefore, this research has not examined CEO identity, nor manager identity, nor even 'worker' identity, as did Grant and Shields (2006). It is a more general examination of leadership identity, although it is generated only from the perspective of one person's experience.

Ken's leadership identity was constructed via a five-stage process. Two important properties of that process were 'uncertainty resolution' and 'emotion'. The creation and resolution of uncertainty was an integrating theme of his identity construction process. At each stage of creation and resolution

of uncertainty, an affective impact was experienced. Ken engaged in discourse and independent learning until uncertainty could be resolved, and a positive emotional state could be achieved. By this state of resolution, his identity had completed its development. In fact, it was a need for uncertainty resolution and a desire for positive emotion that drove the identity construction process. Here are the five stages of the process of constructing Ken's leadership identity:

1. *Initial fear, based on uncertainty.* In the early years of his organizational experience, Ken sensed fear about the future potential of his organizational identity as a leader. In particular, he sensed fear about his ability to encourage other people to follow him willingly.

2. *Uncertainty resolution, resulting in surprise and joy.* His emotional experience moved from fear, based on uncertainty, to surprise and joy as a result of the resolution of the uncertainty that was realised over some years.

3. *Uncertainty confirmation moderating the surprise and joy.* The surprise and joy that he had experienced was moderated by the sadness and fear that came from the confirmation, or affirmation, of the uncertainty that he had been experiencing over time. Stages 2 and 3 operate concomitantly. Ultimately, as social interactions increase and as Ken's independent learning increases, uncertainty resolution seems to win out.

4. *Cognitive paradox leading to surprise and anger.* The realisation of a cognitive paradox led to enhanced and rejuvenated surprise, and even anger, as a result of continued anxiety over his identity.

5. *Paradox resolution leading to joy.* Finally, a resolution of that paradox led to a resolution in his mind about his leadership identity. This resolution generated joy, in the form of contentment, with his true leadership identity. In this case, emotions are not as strongly felt as in mainstream autoethnography. After all, this narrative is not about breast cancer or motherhood or physical violence. Certainly, there is an absence of this emotional polarity, but it is about 'everyday' experiences. Therefore, it is possibly more relevant to the lay audience.

Ainsworth and Hardy (2004) confirmed that organizational identities are constructed from many sources, including language, interactions, stories and discourses. The constructing of identity in this organizational environment is a function of interactions, discourse and of self-reflexive learning, all encapsulated within the self-narrative of Ken. From the perspective of other people, Ken's

leadership identity was in place purely as a result of the discourse that he engaged with those other people. However, Ken's perspective of his identity necessitated self-reflexive learning and sufficient time to resolve the paradoxes that he was experiencing.

Had I undertaken an ethnography of identity construction, vis-à-vis an autoethnography, I believe that the role of discourse would have had the primary role. For identity generation, the roles of discourse and reflexivity are both important. The role of discourse is very important in ethnography. The role of reflexivity is more important in generating an autoethnography. Therefore, because I undertook autoethnography, the role of self-reflexive learning was at least as important as discourse in the constructing of this identity. Consequently, the constructing of the identity took much longer than might otherwise be the case.

Ken's identity was not in place until a discursive interaction with other people reflected an identity AND Ken understood how and why his leadership role was to be enacted. Identity construction is about how one interacts with others AND about how one reflects upon and makes sense of those interactions.

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Figure 1: Taxonomy of Emotions – hierarchy of abstraction model

