Research note

I'M AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHER – TRUST ME

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ABSTRACT

Autoethnographers often face a disabling dilemma – how to deal with contested and sensitive information while meeting strict institutional ethics standards. This note explores an approach to this issue based on a researcher's attestations of validity and trustworthiness, with primary information safely sequestered behind a robust barrier.

INTRODUCTION

I am a permanent staff member of Capable NZ, where I act as facilitator, academic mentor and occasional assessor across a broad range of subject areas, from diploma to doctoral levels.

My research interest is governance in not-for-profit organisations and local government, specifically in *failure to govern*, a pervasive but surprisingly poorly examined (and little understood) feature of governance.

I am also a staff candidate for Capable's Master of Professional Practice (MProfPrac) qualification: in part to walk in my learners' shoes, in part as an opportunity to make sense of aspects of my extended experience as a governor.

CONTEXT

In my MProfPrac enquiry, provisionally titled "Failure to Govern: A Field Guide," I differentiate between failure *of the object* of governance and failure *to* govern. The former carries with it an implication that it is governance itself (the system) that fails; the latter that it is the actors – the governors – who fail. This far-from-trivial differentiation will be developed at length in my enquiry report. For the purposes of this note it is sufficient to establish the distinction.

Central to my enquiry is the dual proposition that governors are bound to fail – that failure is endemic, and inevitable – and that I can call on my experience (as a lay autoethnographer) at the front lines of governance to test that proposition. A chapter of the report systematically details the nature of my experience – as a serial governor in school, local government and community organisations; as a three-term (nine-year) district mayor; as a four-term (12-year) board member of a regional health and hospital service provider; and as a director and chairman of directors in the private sector. If failure is inevitable, I should have something useful to say about it.

DEALING WITH A CENTRAL DILEMMA

I do have something to say. But only if I can resolve an apparently intractable dilemma: most instances of failure (in my case, three of the four case studies I intend to examine in detail) involve contested narratives and negotiated or mediated settlements that include confidentiality agreements. It isn't legally (let alone ethically) possible to publish first-order accounts of these cases.

Inability to resolve ethical dilemmas of this severity has led, in van den Hoonard's (2011, p. 286) colourful language, to the pauperisation of the social sciences, as researchers have tried to fit their approaches to the technical demands of ethics codes. An "ethics chill," he says (p. 289) has arrived.

This note is an explanation – or more accurately an exploration – of a methodology that offers a solution to this common dilemma.

A DEFENSIBLE SOLUTION?

Of the four case studies, one, the disestablishment of the Southern District Health Board, is a matter of public record, was subject to extensive contemporary media coverage,[1] and is a topic I have already written about (Macpherson, 2013, 2015). The board's disestablishment occurred about 18 months after my four-term membership ended. I did not stand for re-election at the end of the 2013 triennium; the board was sacked in June 2015. The other three cases cannot be publicly identified, beyond stating that in each I was directly involved in a governance role.

Casting around for possible solutions, I found glimmers of hope in some work by Mischler (1990) on validation in enquiry-guided research. He (p. 419) argued that *validation* – "the process … through which we make claims for and evaluate the trustworthiness of reported observations, interpretations, and generalizations" – is more useful than conventional notions of *validity*. Mischler was proposing a departure from standard doctrine, focussing on how claims are made and appraised rather than the static properties of instruments and scores, relying more on an investigator's working knowledge and experience, and "aligning the process more closely with what scientists actually do … than … what they are assumed … and supposed to do."

Mischler's key questions are (paraphrased): What are the warrants for a researcher's claims? Could others judge their adequacy, determine how findings and interpretations were arrived at, and decide whether they were trustworthy enough to be relied upon? The answer is yes, he wrote, if the data *can be made available to other researchers*; and if the methods that transformed data into findings, and the direct linkages shown between data, findings and interpretation, are made explicit (Mischler, 1990, p. 429).

My take from this is that alternative approaches to validation, and departures from standard doctrine, are not only possible, but defensible. I saw an emergent possibility that the idealised dominant research model – with its reliance on experimental design, quantification and statistical analysis – does not provide true tests, but is (to borrow again from Mischler) a collection of methodic accounting procedures, a kind of rhetoric belonging to a particular form of scientific life, available to be contested.

I also lean on the research utility of Wedel's (2009) suggestion that anthropologists should borrow from the ethics of journalism, with data gathered either *off the record* (used to advance the researcher's understanding or acquire other sources), *on background* (used without attribution), or *on the record* (used with attribution). She argued that each has a role when interviewing powerful informants, and that the anthropologist's code of ethics should reflect the real world.

What if, I wondered, my approach was essentially *off the record*, but with assurances that *the record* does exist as represented?

In a recent, extensively referenced metastudy of rigour and trustworthiness in autoethnographic research, Le Roux (2016a; see also Le Roux, 2016b) asserts that the criteria for determining trustworthiness should be aligned with the chosen research methodology. She notes Medford's (2006, not separately cited) criteria for evaluating trustworthiness: accountability, credibility and dependability; and Richardson's (2000, not separately cited) five criteria – substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity (agency within self-awareness), the impact the narrative has on the reader, and credibility. In summary, Le Roux wrote, these and other researchers (she lists around 20) cite criteria

including resonance, narrative truth, reflexivity, aesthetic merit, substantive contribution and utility, scholarship and plausibility as being fundamental to ensuring research rigour.

In response to this reading and the contemporary literature on failure to govern, as well as reflections on my research purpose, I am beginning to formulate the framework of a viable alternative to the standard doctrine.

Expressed as a thought experiment, this framework has two parts:

1. What if I gather together all of the extensive information available for each of my case studies, subject it to a structured, systematic analysis and then amalgamate or merge the key insights (however represented) in such a way that the primary sources cannot be identified, even by another intimate participant? Is what really matters that the second-order analysis meets Le Roux's consensus tests for trustworthiness: that the numbers are meaningful, could be reproduced, and can be relied on to inform further and future work? Is it the aggregate insights that matter, not the case study detail?

2. And, how to satisfy the need for transparency? What are the warrants for my eventual claims? How could a sceptical future researcher be assured that my aggregate results fairly represent the primary material, that they can be relied on as a basis for further work?

My proposed solution, and the rationale for this research note, is this:

3. The primary data will be gathered and analysed, and the analyses will be aggregated in such a way that the original sources are invisible.

4. Validation in the absence of primary source visibility will depend on the attestation of the researcher that the aggregate data fairly represents its source, and on explicit explanations of methodology. I will claim that this approach is defensible in an autoethnography, citing the sources above, and others.

5. With the institution's ethics committee and my facilitator and academic mentor, I will explore setting up an access protocol, with robust protections and specific exclusions, that could make the primary material and its analysis methodologies available under strict conditions, for legitimate research-only purposes. I envisage a formal document, analogous to a courtroom affidavit or affirmation.

Criticism of this proposal is welcomed. It is very much a work in progress. It does seem to offer a solution to an over-emphasis on methodological doctrine, and the chilling effect of institutional ethicists.

NOTE 1

What will the case study analysis comprise? For the three restricted-access cases it will include: journal entries, email, letters, briefing notes, professional advice, attestations to lawyers and to statutory referees (mediators), other third-party contributions, determinations and declarations. In the case of the SDHB it will include: media reports (reportage and opinion), meeting agendas and minutes, and previously published analysis.

NOTE 2

A referee for this paper recommended adding Caroline Ellis (for example, see Ellis 2007) and Art Bochner (see his year 2000 joint contribution, with Ellis, in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.) to the reference list, in order to extend this research note's reach to encompass philosophical interpretations of how truthfulness is established. Interested readers are encouraged to explore the writings of these two major figures in the field of autoethnography. A reflection on their significance is beyond the scope of this brief note.

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ENDNOTES

1   See https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/69465196/southern-district-health-board-dismissed-by-health-minister-over-deficits; https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/opinion-sacking-board-smart-move-minister.

2   QnewZ was the monthly magazine of the New Zealand Organisation for Quality (now discontinued). Copies were distributed to members, but the publication is not held in many public (library) collections. The author can supply copies of the two referenced columns.