

**Feeling your way forward : questions about
autoethnography, embodiment and sensemaking**

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Feeling your way forward: Questions about autoethnography, embodiment and sensemaking

Paper for the 10th Annual Liverpool Ethnography Symposium, 26-28 August 2015, University of Liverpool

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1. Introduction

This is the story of a journey of inquiry, which has now turned into a journey of research. This journey is quite messy and personal, as is the ensuing story – but that is also part of its fascination and strength. It is multi-dimensional, encompassing two work lives, a shared private life, a shared dance life, a journey in time (nearly two decades so far) but also in spaces (dancefloors, universities, other organisations). It connects dance competitions with organisational life, dance performance with organisational performance, leader-follower-ship on the dancefloor with leader-follower-ship in organisations (Matzdorf 2005, Matzdorf & Sen 2005, Matzdorf & Sen 2014), but also reflection on dance with reflection on work and reflection on relationships in general (and how to make them work).

Thought bubble 1 (Fides):

Writing this paper turns out to be really difficult – I keep losing track, can't structure my thoughts, and keep coming (back?) to a point where I don't know what I'm actually trying to say...

After various reiterations, here is where I got to:

- *This is not a neatly structured paper about a research approach/strategy/methodology. It's about the confusion I'm in, trying to write a research proposal for my PhD application.*
- *Every time I follow another reference and look at another paper, I go 'ahhhhh...' – it usually opens up another perspective, clarifies or explains something I'd felt unsure or muddled about. It also changes what I've been thinking, and I need to add something to my paper, or make changes. WHEN WILL THIS END? Or is this the 'never-ending paper'? How do papers ever end???*
- *I keep reordering paragraphs and thoughts – but every time I do it, something else doesn't fit. See questions above.*
- *All I know is that this is about autoethnography (yes, I think that's what my co-author and I are doing), embodiment (a lot of our learning and 'knowledge creation' happens on our feet and/or in close bodily contact and/or through doing), and sensemaking (yeah, well, it sort of happens, but not always in the way I would expect it to!). How these things hang together or not is not entirely clear yet.*
- *The boundaries between research and experience, between work life and life outside work, between categories and entities such as 'me as a dancer', 'we as a dance team', 'me as a researcher', 'we as a research team', 'me as a working person' sometimes become so fuzzy and blurred that they are almost indistinguishable. It is difficult to keep enough 'distance to reflect' – and difficult to find a methodological approach that covers all this and helps to make sense of a wealth of felt, sensed, experienced data, as well as the multi-level reflections on those data – which sometimes become data themselves: a process of hermeneutic reiteration.*
- *So I wonder just how much I need to apologise for the muddle... or not? If there's a neatly structured, ordered, tidy way of writing about muddles, please let me know! Answers on a postcard, please...*
- *Since things aren't neatly structured, I've put in those 'thought bubbles', documenting the struggle to find the 'right' methodology.*
- *...erm, actually, is there one???*

2. Methodology

Given that our research evolved ‘organically’ from our learning, reflection and inquiry with regard to our dancing as well as our professional lives, it is perhaps not surprising that our methodology is nearly as messy as life itself!

Unlike ‘traditional’ ethnographers, we did not start out as researchers, immersing ourselves into a culture – we were already part of it when we decided to look at it through a research lens. So strictly speaking, we are not participant observers, but observing participants. Is there a difference? Does this pose different questions of research ethics, if we attend dance lessons and competitions and then write down our observations, or take notes of what others have said or done, at times without letting them know? As amateurs and active dancesport competitors, we also have to ensure that we are not trespassing on ‘professional ground’ – in England, where we mostly compete, amateurs are, for example, not allowed to teach *any* form of dancing. To our knowledge, there are no regulations banning dancers from using their own experiences for academic research, and none of our analytic, interpretive or theorising work, or our workshops, are teaching anyone to dance.

One of the challenges and sometimes difficulties is the fact that we are both researchers and subjects within this process (Ellis et al 2011). The boundaries between research and experience, between work life and life outside work, between categories and entities such as ‘me as a dancer’, ‘we as a dance team’, ‘me as a researcher’, ‘we as a research team’, ‘me as a working person’ sometimes become so fuzzy and blurred that they are almost indistinguishable. It is difficult to keep enough ‘distance to reflect’ – and difficult to find a methodological approach that covers all this and helps to make sense of a wealth of felt, sensed, experienced data, as well as the multi-level reflections on those data – which sometimes become data themselves: a process of (hermeneutic?) reiteration.

Thought bubble 2 (Fides):

What causes me a bit of a problem is the notion of ‘insider’. If one of the purposes of ethnography is to “provide an ‘insider’s perspective”, what happens if you’re not a proper ‘insider’ anywhere?? What if you’re an ‘oddball’, on the edge of the group – a member but not ‘properly’ integrated?

What you get is an ‘insider-but-not-quite-insider’ view – is that an advantage or a disadvantage? How much ‘insideness’ is required so that you honestly say that this is ethnography? But then there are always degrees of ‘insideness’, whether or not you are a researcher.

The other thing that nags me is the fact that I haven’t really been open about my research interest within the competition scene – only told one good friend. As individuals and as a couple, we are ‘odd’ enough as is, and I don’t want to jeopardise our chances as competitors. In fact, I am not even sure whether this snippet should be included in anything that might be available in the public domain. I’ve got a very recognisable name, and there’s no such thing as privacy on the internet... On the other hand, there is such a thing as research ethics and integrity, which are important to me – and currently I feel a bit like a ‘mole’...

Ellis et al (2011) acknowledge this complexity of “relational concerns” and concede that autoethnographers mostly “have to be able to continue to live in the world of relationships in which their research is embedded after the research is completed”.

On the other hand, when it’s autoethnography, can I assume that I’m always and automatically inside myself (except when I’m ‘beside myself’)? When I am looking at dancesport, when exactly is it autoethnography and when ethnography? Even when I’m writing about other dancers, there is always a certain amount of autoethnography involved. Or is there...? When am I a dancing researcher, and when a researching dancer?

In terms of Ellis et al’s classification (2011) we see our story as reflexive and co-constructed. In some ways we do seem to fit into the “analytical ethnography” strand more than into “evocative ethnography” (Anderson 2006), because we conceptualise, contextualise, analyse... but on the

other hand, we do want to hold on to the sensory (and sensual?) experience, the “I *know/recognise* good leader-follower-ship when I *feel* it, with my body, when I encounter it” – and whilst we might not be so ambitious as to “want to change the world by writing from the heart” (Denzin 2006), we do want to share our experience of change, movement, harmony, disruptions with others and enable them to have such experiences for themselves – and make their own sense and draw their own conclusions from the experience.

In terms of ethnography or autoethnography, we did not start as researchers and ‘enter’ the dance world or our working lives, but we started in these situations and chose to apply the ethnographic lens to them.

We work together in our dance ‘team’ and our research, but also separately as individuals in our work lives, with complementary sides of the leader/follower relationship in both dance and work. In our dancing, work and research we are a two distinct individuals with different perceptions, different ways of learning, different views, but as a dance team we are also an ‘entity’. This adds another layer of complexity to our endeavours – from a research ethics angle as much as from an angle of validity and integrity. Ellis et al (2011) put it very succinctly: “Autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical *and* emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena.”

However, there is still a question in our minds about the style or type of auto (nor not) ethnography we pursue. Are we realist ethnographers, autoethnographers or, analytic autoethnographers? One thing we perhaps are not is evocative autoethnographers, though there is some argument about the definition of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner 2006).

Being in a dance partnership, a life partnership and a research partnership (but not a work partnership) means that our autoethnography is entwined, with differing viewpoints, approaches, and interpretations.

The learning journey, while co-constructed, is unique to each of us. We also have different agendas with the research, with the leadership and followership journey, and we put the learning to different uses.

3. Personal (parallel) journeys in sport and work

Our personal journey of discovery is both in competitive (amateur) ballroom dancing (also known as dancesport), and also in leadership and followership in our working lives. It includes noticing parallels, analysis of our experience, reflecting on the systemic parallels, and feeding this back into our dance learning (which has become more sophisticated as a result), as well as feeding back into leadership/followership in organisational contexts, both from a practitioner and an academic viewpoint. So our professional journey(s) and our dance journey(s) have been one big and rather complex process of cross-fertilization, with the research journey triggered and accompanied by many ‘aha’ moments.

Part of learning to dance competitively at a high level has been learning to reconnect to our bodies, to our senses, to make sense of our own actions and each other’s re/actions. It has proven impossible to produce a high level performance without embodiment, without ‘being in the moment’, being with one’s partner, constantly monitoring their body with one’s own, whether as leader or follower, whilst still performing one’s own role without getting lost in that monitoring (cf. Tremayne & Ballinger 2008). Sharpening bodily proprioception has been a long and arduous journey (and we are still travelling, it is a never-ending journey!) to reaching improvements, but mental proprioception has also been part of this – and sharpening the senses needed to be successful as dancers has also sharpened the senses through which we perceive our work environments and work lives.

However, embodiment in the sense of the close, inseparable connection between thinking with the head and thinking with the body, is causing problems – not so much at the ‘applied’ end, for

example when running workshops, but to quite an extent when it comes to publishing and presenting our research.

A few moments from on the floor:



Thought bubble 3 (Ramen):

It's paradoxical – the more chances we have, the better I think we could do, the more nervous I feel, rather than feeling confident. "It's yours to lose." I feel it in my stomach – I don't feel confident until I'm on the floor, then the training, the hard work, takes over. I know what I'm doing, prepare, initiate, partner moves, I move into space. It becomes a rhythm, at one with partner, with music, initiation, my movement, her movement, together, monitor, lead, shape, move.

It seems to go on forever, with split second monitoring not just of my partner, but of all the other couples in the vicinity. I don't recognise them as individuals, except rarely, even though I know them all – they are patterns of movements, I read and predict where they will go next. Do I need to modify and change what we are doing as a result of what they will do next? Do we need to wait for a moment, to pause, or do we need to sweep boldly into the space and make them wait? What do I need to communicate to my partner before she takes the next move? Is there space? Do I need to change the direction? Will that direction change cause other issues? Can I just cut out a section of choreography if couples are in the way, and move into space?

Did something go wrong? How do I correct? Are we still in sync? If I carry on will it get better or worse? Will she recover? Will I recover? Can I turn it into a different movement? Did she or I do something different, from a different part of the routine, and can I pick it up from there? Will she follow me seamlessly? Or will it disintegrate? If it's irrecoverable, do we have a standard 'emergency' restart? Do we continue from the next figure? Will it confuse or be obvious? Can I lead the recovery clearly? What is the right thing from a 'leadership' perspective? Looking back at video recordings, these 'moments' are often invisible fractions of seconds, but when in the middle of it, it feels like a huge mess and so, so obvious to anyone looking. The key is how well you recover, how well you hold the frame, and how intentional you make the pause look before you restart or continue. No-one knows your choreography, so if you diverge, repeat a side, do something funky, no-one knows, as long as you don't give the game away. Keep looking confident!

When the music stops, it feels like it's been mere seconds - this is at odds with having felt every split second, every moment, every mistake, every hesitation. Afterwards, it's a mash of movement and colour and you're not quite sure which bits you messed up. And each of you is sure it was a different bit.

We are using dance as a metaphor for leader/follower relationships, but at the same time also as a 'real thing' in its own right: an experience of leadership/followership – a context which poses tasks/challenges such as decision making, relationship building, building trust, leading, following, listening, responding, initiating, navigating, planning etc. in a real-time situation. These are all activities that happen in organisational life as well as in dance and thus offer the opportunity to explore those parallels and, as a result, to develop transferable skills. The tricky bit is that these things happen concurrently, not sequentially in a neat chronological order – that's the messiness of 'real life' (Tomkins & Eatough 2013). People 'think on their feet', i.e. make decisions with and through their bodies and emotions, as well as their minds (Jordi 2010, Finlay 2006, Varela et al 1992) – so using dance as a medium is an opportunity to become more aware of one's own actions, reactions, behaviours and behavioural patterns, as well as exploring how these create and impact on relationships and interactions. More radical researchers argue that cognition and the body are actually inseparable (eg Sheets-Johnstone 2011).

We have taken our inquiry along two different pathways:

- a) We use our own experience, perceptions and reflections to explore the complexity of the leader-follower relationship.
- b) Since we run workshops with managers and postgraduate students, using dance as an experiential learning medium, we use their feedback and what they tell us about their experiences. This helps us not to get too 'stuck' in our own 'dance world' and adds valuable comments from what are mostly non-dancers (with few exceptions) or at least non-competitors. It also helps us to

establish whether this sort of experiential learning can be a useful approach beyond the competitive sports world.

Thought bubble 4 (Ramen):

Now working in a much bigger team, working on a vital part of a national infrastructure, located in a large open-plan office, I find that it feels like a dance – constantly navigating a crowded and complex environment, leading, being led, teaching, being taught, sensing what others are doing, using my peripheral vision, moving around in a shared space – between desks, between groups, between tasks, between layers in the organisational hierarchy... working to stay grounded, keeping my balance, my weight over my feet, preventing myself from being pulled or pushed off balance.

By this, I mean that many of the tasks that I learned to do as a leader in competitive dance have parallels in the business world. For instance, in dance, I learned to keep my peripheral vision in play, and look for spaces to move into, what others were doing, what space they were going to move into, whether I would need to stop, and to be able to communicate that clearly to my partner. In my current job, I need to be aware of the work others are doing, and how it will impact my own work, or how I can help or mesh with the other areas of work, to prevent 'collisions' that take time and energy to resolve. In reviewing other's work, having my own reviewed, in explaining parts of the system, understanding and having other parts of the system explained to me, in interacting and communicating clearly with people in other teams and parts of the organisation, and in making trade-offs between one task and another, I can feel the strong parallels with competitive dancing.

Our dance experience has had a serious impact on our working lives, where each of us in their own role realised that there were strong parallels and useful lessons to be applied. Interestingly, when we were invited to share some of these discoveries, we found that our stories, our demonstrations, and the opportunity to 'try things out for themselves' made sense to others and helped their understanding of their roles in their own organisations. Subsequently we have developed an 'Exploring leader-follower-ship' workshop, offering others a structured and gently facilitated framework for embarking on this journey of discovery.

This approach is different from management training, which tends to pick out individual skills/tasks/competencies and focus on them in a seemingly rational, often utilitarian way, providing 'toolkits' to achieve simple cause-and-effect chains.

Thought bubble 5 (Fides):

Do I know what leadership is? And good leadership at that? Not sure I do, but I can feel if I'm dancing with someone who makes a good leader for me – I can tell from the outcomes: the way we move together, the way we are 'in sync' with each other and the music, the performance we can produce together, the ease with which I can play my part, the way I feel comfortable and confident in my body and my movement, the trust I put into my partner and the trust I can feel from them.

*This also means that I can't tell someone else what is good leadership or good followership for them. They have to work it out for themselves – all I can do is tell them what works for me, and show them ways to find out what works for **them**.*

4. Issues/challenges

What makes our journey particularly interesting for us is the fact that our explorations of both 'spheres' (the dancesport circuit and the work environment) has led to mutual influencing - our reflections relating to work help us to make sense of and inform our dancing, and our dance experiences have helped us to make more sense of leader-follower-ship in the organisations. Sometimes we are dancers exploring the world of work, sometimes we are organisational members exploring the danceworld. Does that make it harder to write about those explorations? Yes, it does - because often there is confusion and a lack of clarity...

If we consider research output as communication, we constantly bump into limitations: translating 'concurrent' into 'sequential', action into words, takes out immediacy and possibility for 'thinking on your feet', and the use of auto-ethnography and sensory ethnography (Nakamura 2013).

Nakamura (2013) discusses how sensory ethnography has attempted to address and involve an array of senses: the visual, olfactory, auditory... Interestingly, the one sense that seems to be conspicuously missing from her discussion of trends and possibilities in sensory ethnography is *touch*... which is the one sense that, in our view, has made the biggest difference to both our own learning journey and the 'leader-follower-ship practice' concept that we have developed through this. Moreover, it has been an essential and indispensable element of our research presentations so far.

Bringing these experiences into a learning context, we aim to facilitate "processes of integration through reflection" (Jordi 2010), but also "organic emergence of conscious meaning" (ibid.) and "non-conceptual dimensions" (ibid.) - in other words, bringing the senses into the process of sensemaking and creating a 'practice ground' for "participatory sense making" (Merritt 2013).

If this learning point requires immersing oneself into the experience (Stelter 2008)... what does this mean for ethnographic methods (Tomkins & Eatough 2013)? Do workshop participants need to watch a video or look at a hologram? How can we 'capture' the 4-dimensionality (3 spatial dimensions plus time) of our experience to communicate it to others? One way of doing it is to 'immerse' others in a similar situational context to enable them to have a similar experience. Another way is to give presentations with practical demonstrations and/or 'audience participation' at conferences, rather than just relying on paper-writing.

An occurrence at a recent conference illustrates this: After our talk about different types of space and their relevance in competitive dancing, a question came from the audience about power distribution between leader and follower: "You say that coaches say it is 51% to 49%, but in reality, how much power can the follower have?" So we walked into a bit of clear space in the lecture room and demonstrated how the follower a) picks up the invitation from the leader, b) enables the leader to move by 'creating' a space for the leader to move into, c) can make the leader fall over by blocking him/her! So we demonstrated that if the follower didn't move, didn't make space, then the leader was unable to move, physically falling over the follower, and no performance was possible.

We were also asked about how much verbal communication went on. Our 'nearly zero', response was met with some scepticism, but we demonstrated how it works. We took hold and, in a very confined space at the side of the lecture theatre, we improvised some waltz figures, not saying a word (and even without music), but we moved together, synchronised through the frame, the body language, turning and rotating, starting a larger movement to have to abort it a moment later as the space ran out, changing it to a turn into the opposite direction at the last moment. We used techniques that are normally applied on the dancefloor in what is called 'floorcraft' (avoiding other couples that get in the way). Fides as follower followed every move, while we explained (as we danced) that she had no idea what would happen next.

There was no further scepticism as the question was answered extremely effectively. Through the mixture of enactment, visual illustration and explanation, the audience 'got it' straightaway - it was clearer than any amount of verbal explanation, or even using photos: an interesting example of 'show me and I'll understand'.

So where does this take us? leave us? push us?

So far, we have had to present our papers *together*, meaning we both had to be physically present at conferences to be able to add the sensory evidence to our talks – neither graphs nor explanations nor videos quite ‘do the trick’. Will we have to continue presenting our research in teamwork?

We are still not sure whether we are ‘realists’ or ‘constructionists’: whilst we see leader-follower-ship as mutually constructed between leaders and followers, we shy away from looking exclusively at co-construction. Maybe our dance experiences have shaped us in this respect: Even though the competitive aspects of dancesport are almost entirely a matter of social construction (rules, regulations, conventions, performance, judging), we cannot help acknowledging certain realities, and the linkages between them (bodies, dancefloor, gravity, physiological limitations and ‘givens’, motion through space). As pragmatists we seek to combine the best of both worlds, so for the time being we have slight leaning towards what Dave Elder-Vass describes as ‘realist social constructionism’ (Elder-Vass 2012) – but in the first instance we are not looking for causal relationships, but for connections. Whether these are causal, emergent or something else, is another question...

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