Conducting Ethnographic and Autoethnographic Research in Business and Management: Challenges and Opportunities

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Sommario

Il presente articolo esamina le sfide e le opportunità legate alla conduzione di ricerche etnografiche e autoetnografiche nel campo degli studi aziendali e gestionali. Sebbene questi approcci rimangano meno diffusi rispetto ad altri metodi, offrono possibilità distintive per analizzare la vita organizzativa dall'interno. L'articolo ripercorre lo sviluppo storico dell'etnografia e dell'autoetnografia, ne discute la diffusione nei diversi sottocampi degli studi aziendali e gestionali e riflette su questioni metodologiche ed etiche fondamentali. Attraverso due vignette basate su diari, una etnografica e una autoetnografica, il lavoro mostra come i diari possano fungere da strumenti analitici per collegare l'esperienza vissuta alle prospettive teoriche. In tal modo, l'articolo sostiene che l'etnografia e l'autoetnografia possono ampliare i confini metodologici e analitici della ricerca in ambito aziendale e gestionale, a condizione che le loro dimensioni relazionali, soggettive e narrative siano trattate con rigore metodologico, anziché costituire punti di debolezza.

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Parole chiave: etnografia, autoetnografia, diari, riflessività, metodi qualitativi, ricerca sul campo

Condurre ricerche etnografiche e autoetnografiche negli studi di economia e management: sfide e opportunità

Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges and opportunities of conducting ethnographic and autoethnographic research in business and management studies. While these approaches remain less common than other methods, they offer distinctive possibilities for analysing organisational life from within. The paper traces the historical development of ethnography and autoethnography, discusses their diffusion across different business and management subfields, and reflects on key methodological and ethical issues. Drawing on two diary-based vignettes, one ethnographic and one autoethnographic, the paper shows how diaries can act as analytical tools to connect lived experience to theoretical insights. In doing so, the paper argues that ethnography and autoethnography can expand the methodological and analytical boundaries of business and management research, provided that their relational, subjective, and narrative dimensions are treated as sources of rigour rather than as weaknesses.

Keywords: ethnography, autoethnography, diary vignettes, reflexivity, qualitative methods, fieldwork

1. Introduction

In a constantly changing and evolving world, it becomes even harder to grasp the complexities of organisational life. Ethnography and autoethnography are valuable, perhaps unevenly institutionalised across business and management studies, for addressing complex phenomena that would be challenging to examine through research methods that privilege distance and standardised measurement. Certain strands of business and management studies have become quite accustomed to resorting to ethnography (especially in organisation studies, consumer research, marketing and, partly, accounting), but ethnography is not always practised as a craft that requires methodological rigour and deep immersion. Bate (1997) and Watson (2010) stress this by inviting researchers to practice ethnography with the original spirit of deep immersion in the field and with a close involvement with the culture studied in its natural environment, rather than conducting hasty and limited "jet-plane ethnography'. Ethnographic and autoethnographic research is fundamentally (inter)relational (Hibbert *et al.*, 2010); hence, it entails shaping how things are experienced alongside those who are studied.

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This relational character of ethnographic research, as argued by Ybema *et al.* (2009), might lead to the creation of strong, long-lasting ties with the culture under study, in ways that other research approaches fail to achieve. Nevertheless, this matter of proximity to those studied is not without issues, as both approaches are often criticised for being too subjective or for storytelling that lacks scientific rigour (Delamont, 2007). While ethnographers immerse themselves in an unknown culture, autoethnographers analyse their personal experience to understand and make sense of cultural experience (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). Ethnographers, by nature, tend to be relativist, in the sense that they "break away from the positive assumption that scientific knowledge is a cumulative, unmediated, and complete representation of reality" (Van de Ven, 2007, p.47). This means that they should reflexively consider the implications of their presence in their field, becoming part of the intersubjectivity with the culture they study.

This paper discusses challenges and opportunities for doing ethnographic and autoethnographic research in business and management studies, as powerful methods for theorising organisational life from within, while taking into account the issues that have limited their diffusion, such as the abundant time demands for fieldwork, its perceived subjectivity and limited generalizability, characteristics that are even heightened with autoethnography, often perceived as too personal and self-indulgent. Ethnography and autoethnography can make an important contribution to business and management studies if treated as rigorous and reflexive modes of enquiry rather than as weak narrative practices. Specifically, they can expand the capacity of business and management research to discuss "how things work" (Watson, 2011), engaging with complex issues such as power relations, identity, emotion, and oppression. Ethnography and autoethnography are particularly relevant for governance-oriented research because they can illuminate not only formal structures, rules, and decision-making mechanisms, but also the more informal, emotional, embodied, and relational processes through which participation, accountability, leadership, and belonging are enacted in practice.

In light of this, the paper is both conceptual and methodological, presenting two diary-based vignettes to illustrate how ethnographic and autoethnographic material can support reflexive analysis and produce theoretical contributions. While both vignettes are centred on issues of inclusion/exclusion, the first looks at participatory governance practices in a member-owned football club, set up as a reactive response to the exclusionary governance of elite football, whereas the second shifts attention to the informal governance of belonging within an embodied organisational setting. The dance vignette shows how, even in the absence of formal decision-making structures, groups develop informal mechanisms that regulate access, legitimacy,

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visibility, and participation. From this perspective, governance is not limited to boards, ownership models, or formal rules, but also includes the everyday practices through which members make or break boundaries, enforce norms, and determine who can occupy a shared organisational space.

The paper is guided by the following research question: *how can diary-based ethnographic and autoethnographic vignettes illuminate the processes through which lived experience is interpreted, written, and transformed into theoretical insight in business and management research?* In doing so, the paper focuses on access, reflexivity, ethics, writing, and theorising as key methodological challenges that become visible through the two vignettes.

The paper makes two main contributions. First, it clarifies the relationship between ethnography and autoethnography in business and management studies by conceptualising them as approaches positioned along a continuum of reflexive involvement. Second, it develops diary-based vignettes as analytical devices through which methodological challenges, including getting access, reflexivity, ethics, writing and theorising can be made visible.

2. A brief History of Ethnography

Anthropologists began to conceive fieldwork as we currently understand it during the mid-nineteenth century, often joining explorers, missionaries, and other Western travellers to study the evolution of culture in tribal societies (Stocking, 1991). Van Maanen (1988) underlines that, however, the most popular method at that time was the "armchair" type of anthropological enquiry, in which researchers, in the comfort of their offices, relied on vast reading material from sources such as missionaries, traders, and scientific expeditions. Another form of communication for anthropologists was correspondence with pen pals, to whom they submitted sets of questions to ask the natives, which were then returned for analysis (Stocking, 1984).

A new conception of fieldwork was introduced by Franz Boas in the United States and Bronislaw Malinowski in Britain, as Van Maanen (1988) and Stocking (1984) argue. They were the first anthropologists to introduce and then pass down the practice of fieldwork as something to experience personally within the culture being studied, rather than relying on secondary sources. Malinowski (1922) suggested that the use of participant observation was a way to understand the native point of view, although, as Van Maanen (1988) notes, the release of Malinowski's diaries (1989) of his fieldwork among the natives of the Trobriand Islands in the South Pacific showed how prejudiced and ideologically biased he was.

Anthropology has not historically been the only discipline to contribute

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to the development and diffusion of fieldwork and ethnography as a method. Progressively, the more imperialist form of cultural studies has developed into more reflexive forms. The credit mainly goes to the Chicago School of Sociology, or, as Van Maanen (1988, p. 17) defines it, the Chicago School of Urban Ethnography. Cunliffe (2010, p. 228), paraphrasing Blumer (1954, 1969), states that members of the Chicago School explained their need to undertake fieldwork and interpret the "new natives" on the premise that "we act on the basis of the meaning of things, and that those meanings are created in social interactions". For the Chicago School, fieldwork was a crucial step in understanding the empirical world they studied. Students at the School, encouraged by people like Robert Park, John Dewey and Ernst Burgess, started exploring the streets of Chicago "as if they were remote and exotic settings" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 18). Those students were not specifically trained in conducting fieldwork, as Park, for instance, gave them very little guidance. Despite the Chicago School's efforts to promote ethnography among sociologists, Van Maanen (1988) states that Park and his colleagues did not succeed in elevating ethnography to the same status it has in anthropology, leaving it a niche method.

Ethnography in management studies has a more recent tradition than anthropology and sociology. Czarniawska (2007) says that management research saw rapid development in the 1950s and 1960s but mostly aligned with quantitative methods that were also becoming prominent in sociology. However, classic sociological ethnographies like Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943) have had a profound influence on studies of work and management, as they highlighted how social order could be grasped by observing everyday interactions and informal arrangements. For instance, one of the early examples was Dalton's Men Who Manage (1959), which examined how managers actually behave beyond formal structures, teasing out the unwritten rules of survival and success in corporate life. Similarly, Roy (1959) used the term "Banana Time" to highlight how workers coped with their repetitive jobs by relying on workplace rituals, which fostered social cohesion and provided them with some degree of structure. Gouldner (1954) studied a gypsum factory to witness first-hand the applicability of Weber's theory of bureaucracy and discovered three distinct patterns of bureaucratic rules, based on the acceptance of the rules by workers and managers: *mock* bureaucracy, *representative* bureaucracy and *punishment-centred* bureaucracy. In different ways, these early works were seminal in demonstrating the ongoing production and reproduction of control, consent, resistance, and informal practices within the everyday life of workplaces.

Progressively, in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars became more interested in studying organisations as cultural and symbolic worlds and how culture

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creates meaning for organisational members (see, for instance, Pettigrew, 1979; Smircich, 1983). This cultural turn proved significant for ethnographers, as it enabled scholars to study the enactment, reproduction, and daily evolution of organisational culture, moving beyond managerial accounts to investigate it from the perspective of organisational members. During these years, Van Maanen (1975) wrote his seminal ethnographic work on the socialisation (and indoctrination) processes of U.S. police recruits, undergoing police training himself and patrolling to better grasp how recruits acted and thought. This work also later led him to theorise about ethnography in his masterpiece, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (1988), which became a go-to guide for all ethnographers in the world.

In the 1990s, ethnographers explored culture from different perspectives, heavily influenced by Labour Process Theory (LPT). Kunda (1995) took the perspective of managers and engineers to show how a strong corporate culture can act as a sophisticated form of normative control, influencing employees' emotions and thoughts. Collinson (2010) studied how blue-collar male workers in a truck manufacturing plant survive the hardships of factory life by constructing masculinity, and creating a counter-culture made of irony, humour and group solidarity against strong managerial control. Delbridge (1998), instead, spent time undercover working in two different manufacturing assembly lines that followed principles of Just-In-Time (JIT) and Total Quality Management (TQM). He showed that, while these manufacturing systems were presented in much of the management literature as empowering for workers, they were instead instruments of hyper-surveillance, which often resulted in self-disciplining/self-monitoring teams, and that workers still found ways to creatively resist and preserve some autonomy.

While Cunliffe (2010) argues that we still have too few business and management ethnographies, in the late 1990s and especially in the 2000s, ethnography has been increasingly acknowledged as a distinctive approach to studying complex environments, and the proliferation of methodological texts and edited collections has contributed to its success (e.g. Neyland, 2008; Ybema *et al.*, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). This emphasis on reflexivity is part of a broader interpretive shift in organisational research, in which conventional ideas about neutrality, detachment and transparent representation have been increasingly questioned (Cunliffe, 2003; Johnson and Duberley, 2003). Moreover, ethnography expanded into other subfields of business and management beyond organisational studies. Despite some scholarly resistance (as underlined by Jönsson and Macintosh, 1997), ethnography has been used to show that accounting must not be understood merely as a technical system, but rather that calculative practices are deeply embedded in organisational routines, power relations, and professional

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identities. Since Hopwood (2013) called for accounting to be studied in its organisational and social context, a few ethnographic studies in accounting and accountability have been published, including Dent's (1991) work on the implication for new accounting practices in organisational change towards the reconstruction of organisational culture, Kornberger *et al.*'s (2011) work on how professional identities, career progression and managerial subjectivity are produced inside a Big Four accounting firm, and Torchia *et al.*'s (2023) study on how an alternative, semi-professional football club in the UK strives to promote inclusive accounting and accountability practices while trying to adhere to its core values even in its darkest times.

Marketing and consumer research has become one of the richest subfields for ethnography, following seminal articles like Arnould and Wallendorf's (1994) methodological piece on how interpretive ethnography can support marketing strategies, and Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) work in consumer research that looks at Harley-Davidson bikers, labelling them as a consumption subculture and Kozinets (2002a) exploration of an antimarket event as a site for emancipatory dynamics. Kozinets is also credited with developing netnography in the 1990s to study online communities (e.g., Kozinets, 1998, 2002b, 2010).

Information systems and technology have also been a fertile ground for ethnographic enquiry in workplace studies. These works shifted the attention from formal organisational structures to how work is actually accomplished in situated activity. Suchman's (1987) study at Xerox on Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) challenges the assumption that human action is contingent, improvised, and often dependent on local circumstances, rather than the simple execution of plans. Barley (1986)'s study on CT scanners in radiology departments shows the impact of technology on roles, routines and structure and similarly demonstrates that technology does not always have uniform organisational effects. Barley's ethnography shows that the same technology may lead to different structuring processes, depending on occupational roles, interactions and local work patterns. Orr's (1996) work further develops this perspective by showing that photocopier repair technicians' diagnoses are not merely the application of formal "by the book" repair procedures, but a situated practice that combines practical reasoning, technical knowledge, customer accounts, and storytelling. From a methodological perspective, Barley's (1986) study is also very significant because it does not rely solely on ethnographic data but also includes more formal comparative and quantitative elements, such as regression analyses. This hybridity suggests that, at least in some strands of organisational and management research, achieving legitimacy requires ethnography to be paired with methodologies more recognisable to mainstream audiences. The article shows both the promise and

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the challenges of ethnography in achieving legitimacy in business and management studies: while ethnographic observations were seminal for understanding how technology becomes embedded in everyday work practices, the study also reflected a field in which "pure" ethnography was not yet easily accepted as sufficient evidence.

3. The Emergence of Autoethnography

Autoethnography is not detached from the broader ethnographic tradition; it emerges from it, further questioning the role the researcher plays in the production of knowledge. As Hayano (1979, p. 99) suggests, to some extent, "the problems of auto-ethnography are the problems of ethnography compounded by the researcher's involvement and intimacy with his subjects". This work is often cited as a reference point, as it defines autoethnography as the study of the social world in which the researcher lived, emphasising not yet so much the evocative side of personal experience and personal writing, but rather the insider position of the researcher within the culture studied. With the reflexive and postmodern turn in the social sciences, autoethnography changed profoundly, and greater scrutiny was placed on how the researcher's presence, positioning, and narrative choices shaped the field's accounts. In this context, autoethnography emerged, making the researcher's experience much more visible and felt. Its methodological consolidation is associated with the work of Carolyn Ellis and Artur Bochner at first, and later with Tony Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and others. Ellis and Bochner's influential work, which stresses personal narrative, reflexivity, and the researcher-as-subject, defined autoethnography as both a method and a form of writing. Later, Ellis's seminal work, *The Ethnographic I* (2004), further helped establish autoethnography as a genre in which lived experience, narrative craft, and cultural analysis are deeply interconnected. Ellis *et al.* (2011) describe autoethnography as both an approach to research and writing that uses personal experience to analyse and understand culture, stressing that it is a method, a process and a product at the same time. Autoethnography becomes a mode of enquiry that binds the "auto" and the "ethno" together, allowing the researcher's experience to shed light on wider social, cultural, political, and organisational dynamics and to channel cultural analysis through the researcher's lived experience.

One of the main debates in autoethnography was the balance between evocation and analysis, with evocative autoethnography challenging more conventional academic writing through its emphasis on storytelling, emotions, and the ability to affect readers through appealing narrative (Bochner and

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Ellis, 2016). However, this orientation fuelled criticism and led to the development of new approaches to address excessive subjectivity and a lack of analysis. On one side, Ellis *et al.* (2011) stress the need for new forms of inquiry stemming from the "crisis of confidence" that social sciences had since the 1980s with established ontological and epistemological stances, claiming that autoethnography "accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis et al, 2011, p. 274). On the other hand, Anderson's argument for analytic autoethnography (2006) entails seeking a broader understanding of the phenomenon studied and a theoretical contribution, stressing that personal experience should be connected to theory building, thereby bringing autoethnography much closer to classic ethnography in sociology. Anderson's conceptualisation of analytic autoethnography is highly relevant to business and management studies, where narrative richness and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) need to be balanced with a strong conceptual and theoretical contribution.

Historically, in business and management studies, autoethnography has had a more marginal role than ethnography, but it has increased in relevance and influence, especially in organisation studies, critical management studies, and international management, where issues of identity, emotion, embodiment, reflexivity, and professional experience are prominent. In this regard, Humphreys (2005) article on reflexivity and autoethnographic vignettes is relevant because it emphasises the role of personal narratives as an analytically enriching tool for qualitative management research. Similarly, Learmonth and Humphreys' work on academic identity (2012) shows how autoethnographic accounts can help study identity in professional contexts like business schools and higher education institutions. Karra and Phillips's (2008) article on "researching back home" uses autoethnography to tease out the tensions of conducting international management research in one's own cultural setting, showing how autoethnography can cast light on the unstable boundaries between being an insider and an outsider in cross-cultural research. Their research helps analyse the implications of the researcher's presence in the field, as someone deeply embedded in a network of cultural, linguistic, and institutional relations rather than a neutral observer. Marengo *et al.*'s (2026) recent work on the New European Bauhaus sheds light on dialogic accounting accountability practices that promote social and environmental sustainability in an EU-funded, collectively managed community gardening project, through a "collaborative autoethnography" (Chang *et al.*, 2016). To sum up, despite being less widely used, autoethnography is equally important for business and management studies because many organisational phenomena are lived and processed internally before being articulated

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externally. Hence, autoethnography provides methodological tools to analyse such experiences in ways that move them from being anecdotal to analytically meaningful. At the same time, autoethnography can be even more methodologically demanding than ethnography to justify its legitimacy. This depends heavily on how well the researcher can connect experience to analysis, moving away from simply presenting personal narrative to actively contributing to existing debates. Moreover, it requires an even greater attention to "relational ethics" (Ellis *et al.* 2011, p. 281), as autoethnographers write about others just as much as they write about (often intimate) others, requiring particular care in the ethical issues of their study, as "they also have to be able to continue to live in the world of relationships in which their research is embedded after the research is completed" (*ibid.*, p. 282).

4. Methodological Considerations on the Relationship between Ethnography and Autoethnography

Both ethnography and autoethnography share a deep commitment to context, experience, reflexivity, and writing as part of the research craft. In a socially constructed world (Berger & Luckmann, 2016), both approaches challenge the idea that researchers can be fully detached from the social worlds they study. Deep engagement in the field can produce thick accounts of organisational life, capturing phenomena that may remain inaccessible to methods that rely primarily on distance, abstraction, or retrospective analysis. Yet the distinction between ethnography and autoethnography should not be framed too rigidly. Although autoethnography places the researcher's self more explicitly at the centre of the analysis, ethnography is not entirely external to the researcher either. In both cases, fieldwork is conducted through embodied presence, relationships, emotions, memories, and interpretive positioning.

Recent work on reflexive and embodied ethnography is particularly useful for rethinking this boundary. Field-Springer's (2019) notion of reflexive embodied ethnography entails that the ethnographer is not a detached observer but an embodied co-participant whose presence, emotions, empathy and writing shape the production of knowledge. Similarly, Rosales and Babri (2023) argue that emotions in organisational ethnography should not be treated simply as biases or contaminations, but as resources for embodied reflexivity. These contributions suggest that ethnography already includes several dimensions often associated with autoethnography: bodily involvement, emotional display, relational positioning, and reflexive interpretation. Autoethnography intensifies these dimensions by making the researcher's lived experience in the field more visible and analytically central.

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The two approaches are therefore better understood as positioned along a continuum of reflexive involvement rather than as mutually exclusive. If ethnography examines how organisational practices can be interpreted and understood from within, autoethnography asks how the researcher's experience of inhabiting and living those practices can shed light on wider organisational and cultural dynamics. However, the "auto" does not replace the "ethno": personal experience becomes analytically meaningful only if connected to broader social, cultural, and organisational processes. Likewise, ethnographic fieldwork often includes autoethnographic elements; for instance, as in Field-Springer's case (2019), researchers might keep reflexive diaries about getting access, discomfort felt during fieldwork, ethical tensions, bodily reactions, or their changing position in the field.

This porous boundary becomes especially visible in relation to issues of access. Ethnographic studies often require a degree of access that is far from unproblematic or easy to obtain. Entering the field can be a difficult process, especially when the researcher seeks prolonged immersion and close observation of everyday practices. Although the idea of "studying the natives", inherited from early anthropology, may appear remote or outdated in contemporary research, the wider issue remains relevant: ethnographers must still negotiate entry into cultures and social worlds that are not readily open to them. Bryman and Bell (2011) identify access as one of the key difficulties of ethnographic research, while Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) emphasise the role of gatekeepers, trust, and ongoing negotiation. Organisational access is produced relationally through negotiation, relational work, and trust, and researchers may still face limitations in the situations they encounter. The presence of the researcher during overt fieldwork needs to be accepted, or at least tolerated, by the culture. This proximity might help the researcher ask difficult questions, but it might also help them avoid them to preserve the relationships that were created. However, autoethnography transforms the problem of access, rather than removing it altogether. Autoethnographers may not need to negotiate formal entry into an organisation as ethnographers do when entering companies, meetings, archives, or professional communities. Yet, belonging to the field does not provide unrestricted access to meaning, memory, vulnerability, relational permission, or the ethical right to discuss experiences involving others. The researcher may have privileged access to his/her own lived experience, but not necessarily to the intentions, interpretations, or emotional worlds of other participants. Insider status may also be a double-edged sword, making familiar arrangements and norms appear pretty ordinary and not analytically significant. Autoethnographic access is therefore displaced from the question of how to enter the field to the question of how to interpret, write, and ethically account for a field one already lives in.

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Reflexivity is central to this reframing. For Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), reflexivity means that researchers are part of the social worlds they study, regardless of their epistemological or ontological stance. Findings are shaped not only by participants and phenomena, but also by the researcher's presence, position, interactions, and interpretive choices. This does not undermine ethnographic knowledge; rather, it clarifies the conditions under which such knowledge is produced. Reflexivity challenges the idea that researchers can report an external reality without being actively implicated in the research process. At the same time, reflexivity should not become so self-absorbed as to prevent meaningful analysis. A diary entry about anxiety, embarrassment, or discomfort becomes analytically valuable when it moves from self-description to conceptual insight, for instance, into professional identity, power, legitimacy, organisational culture, or embodied norms.

Embodiment further complicates the relationship between ethnography and autoethnography. Chadwick's (2017) work on embodied methodologies warns against treating the body purely as an object to be described in language. Embodiment also appears through silences, hesitations, contradictions, affective intensities, bodily discomfort, and modes of representation. Lyle *et al.*'s (2024) discussion of embodied reflexivity similarly suggests that the body can function not only as something to be studied but also as a (powerful) way of knowing. This is especially relevant for organisational research, where power, belonging, discipline, exclusion, and identity are often experienced before being explicitly articulated. From this perspective, the researcher's bodily and emotional responses can serve as methodological resources through which organisational dynamics become visible.

Academic writing is another relevant issue for both ethnography and autoethnography. Conventional business and management literature values clarity, theoretical positioning and explicit contributions. This might be less standardised in ethnographic and autoethnographic writing, especially in confessional ethnographic tales (Van Maanen, 1988) or evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis *et al.*, 2011). However, writing is a key part of the method, not just a stylistic matter. Through writing, the researcher can convey the lived experience and connect it to theory. The main issue is striking a balance between evocative/confessional and analytic writing, so that the text conveys both the lived experience and supports conceptual arguments. Hence, a diary vignette must be properly introduced, contextualised, and analytically interpreted; otherwise, it risks becoming little more than decoration.

Ethics is also very challenging. As Ferdinand *et al.* (2007) argue, research should be conducted on the basis of informed consent (to the extent possible) to protect both the research and the participants from real or potential harm.

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However, they contend that two contrasting positions on ethics exist: on one side, the "traditionalists" believe that ethics in research should be much regulated and that, while doing management research, one should follow the principle of reciprocity, namely a "mutually beneficial exchange involving participative or collaborative working arrangements based on mutual trust" (*ibid*., p. 520); on the other side, the "radicalists" instead argue that ethics is a reflexive process that abstracts from codes and guidelines, and the researcher evaluates such issues depending on the situations faced. We argue that researchers should try to protect anonymity or alter identifying details when possible and seek consent when specific organisations or individuals are represented in recognisable ways. In ethnography, but especially in autoethnography, ethical reflexivity entails a deep responsibility towards others and oneself.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that ethnography and autoethnography should not be treated as distinctively separated approaches. The distinction is therefore best understood as a matter of reflexive intensity rather than strong methodological opposition. While ethnography focuses on the social world encountered through fieldwork, autoethnography focuses on the researcher's involvement in that world. Both approaches rely on transforming situated, embodied and relational experience into theoretical insight. In the next section, we present and discuss two vignettes to illustrate how diary-based materials can be framed, presented and analytically interpreted to advance research in business and management.

5. Ethnographic and Autoethnographic Diary Vignettes

The following vignettes are based on ethnographic and autoethnographic research conducted directly by two of the authors and are centred on the theme of organisational belonging and inclusion in two very different settings.

The ethnographic vignette revolves around FC United of Manchester, a fully member-owned semi-professional football club in Manchester (UK), founded in 2005 by disillusioned Manchester United fans seeking to run football more democratically. It recalls one of the early days of getting to know the culture as an outsider, and of starting to understand fans' perceptions that Premier League football has progressively driven away a wide range of traditional fans due to high match prices. The encounter takes place on a Saturday afternoon before an FC United match at Bury's stadium, Gigg Lane, which the club rented for ten years before moving to their own stadium in Moston. This diary entry was reconstructed from memory shortly after the encounter.

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I arrive at the ground reasonably early; it's my first journey on the 135 bus from Manchester City centre to Bury. There are quite a few FC United fans on the bus talking to each other. I observe them and soak up all the experience in. Once we get to Bury, I notice that the streets around the stadium are a bit quiet, not empty, but different from the sensory overload of Serie A and Premier League football I was used to: not that many police officers, fewer barriers and fewer branded surfaces trying to direct bodies and attention. Yet, the atmosphere is very lively: people buying beer, a father and his son arguing whether they have time to get some chips from the stall before entering and so on. Nobody seems rushed; they are all pretty chill. I pay at the gate, and near the turnstiles, I begin speaking to this man in his late fifties, wearing a faded red and white scarf. After a brief chat, he notices my accent.

"Weird accent, man, it sounds northern (British) but also foreign at the same time!"

"Ahah, I'm Italian indeed, but I've been living in the UK for a few years, must have picked up the accent a little bit. I'm a young academic, I just started researching FC United".

He laughs softly. "Research? On this lot?"

I explained to him that I am interested in supporter ownership, alternative governance models and that FC United really caught my attention, as a fellow football fan. He nods, but his attention shifts briefly towards the stadium entrance where people are slowly gathering.

"You know what really pushed me out? It wasn't even the football. I just felt that the game stopped being for folks like me".

While we walk towards the stands, he tells me that he used to go watch Manchester United with his brother and later with his son. His description of the transformation unfolds almost chronologically: ticket prices rising, membership becoming harder to obtain and afford, hospitality expanding, and tourists replacing the familiar faces he has met for years.

"At some point", he says, "you looked around and realised that pretty much nobody around you was from Manchester anymore… You save money for weeks just to take your kid to Old Trafford, then you sit there and get told that football was becoming "global'. But global for whom?"

I ask him whether the issue was only economic.

"No!" he replies immediately. "It wasn't just the money. In a way, it was what that money meant for us".

He points towards the stands in front of us.

"Here at FC, you still feel like you are part of something. Not only because we are co-owners, but also because we are emotionally and morally connected.

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*You come here, and you don't find people that are trying to extract every last fuc**ng penny from you".*

The queue begins moving quicker, and before we separate, he looks at me once more and says:

*"You know what? The football is worse; the ground is worse, and it's not even ours! It's all smaller, but it's more human, and it's fuc**ng ours!*

As I write my notes later that day, one sentence remains underlined in my diary:

"It wasn't just the money. It was what the money meant".

This episode shows how ethnography can reveal the moral and emotional dimension of economic practices. Ticket pricing initially appears to be a commercial issue, yet in the interaction above, it becomes a symbolic example of exclusion, belonging, and recognition. The supporter does not view Premier League ticket prices merely as financial barriers; he stresses a deeper transformation in the relationship between football clubs and supporters, shifting it from an economic to a moral issue. The vignette also demonstrates the value of situated interaction, as the supporter's reflections are inseparable from the physical and social environment in which they are articulated, the stadium. Moreover, it displays the production of relational knowledge. The conversation unfolds through the initial recognition of difference, movement through the stadium's physical space, and mutual positioning. Here, the researcher's identity as an Italian young academic actively shapes the encounter itself, highlighting how ethnographic data are not passively collected but are co-produced through the development of networks of social relations. Finally, it illustrates how fieldnotes can become analytical tools. The sentence "It wasn't just the money. It was what the money meant" raises a broader theoretical issue: the commodification of football, the sense of exclusion, and the moral ownership in contemporary football governance. The supporter does not simply provide an opinion on pricing strategies but rather offers a narrative of dispossession and the search for more human approaches to organisational participation.

This vignette offers several methodological insights into the author's ethnographic journey. The episode takes place before the author officially joined the club as a volunteer, and it positions him as an outsider beginning to find his feet in the field. What he knew about the club came from things he read about it over time, but there he took the chance to conduct his first field trip and immerse himself in the culture. In this case, he decides to immediately declare his identity as a researcher and his intentions to the FC

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United fan, who appears welcoming and willing to chat. FC United is a club whose ethos is rooted in appreciating diversity, and here the author used his accent and different nationality to lead the fan to a brief discussion about losing roots and finding them again at FC United in a different form. The vignette also briefly brings together ethnographic and autoethnographic elements, as the researcher reflects on the episode and looks inward to learn more about himself and others, as Rosen (1991) would argue. The "it wasn't just the money" sentence underscores the encounter's significance and the space for reflection and imagination it creates in the researcher.

The vignette shows that access in ethnographic research is not simply granted through formal entry into an organisation. It is progressively negotiated through relational encounters in which trust, curiosity, identity, and openness matter. In this case, the identity disclosure is significant because it shows how ethnographic access may be facilitated not only by institutional permission, but also by the moral and cultural ethos of the field itself. FC United's identity as a supporter-owned club rooted in participation, inclusion, and resistance to the exclusionary governance of elite football created conditions in which an external researcher could be welcomed into conversation rather than treated with suspicion. The researcher's outsider position also becomes methodologically relevant. His accent, nationality, and unfamiliarity with the local supporter culture do not simply mark distance from the field; they become precious resources through which the conversation unfolds. Difference allows the supporter to articulate what FC United means in relation to loss, belonging, roots, and re-identification. The brief exchange, therefore, reveals something that formal descriptions of member ownership cannot fully capture: the club is not only a governance structure but also acts as a symbolic and emotional space in which supporters negotiate the experience of losing and recovering a sense of footballing home.

The sentence "it wasn't just the money" becomes the analytical centre of the vignette. It captures the supporter's attempt to distinguish FC United's emergence from a purely economic protest against ticket prices or commercialisation. For the researcher, the sentence opens a space for reflection and imagination: it invites him to consider member ownership not simply as an institutional arrangement, but as a moral and affective response to exclusion, displacement, and the perceived loss of roots in elite football. In this sense, the vignette displays how ethnographic insight can emerge from brief, situated encounters that can unsettle the researcher's prior assumptions and generate new analytical questions.

Finally, the episode also questions the boundary between ethnography and autoethnography. Although the vignette is primarily ethnographic, as it centres on an encounter in the field, it also contains an autoethnographic

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element. The researcher's interpretation depends on his own affective response, his recognition of himself as an outsider, and his inward reflection on what the encounter reveals about belonging, identity, and attachment. In this sense, the vignette shows that ethnographic fieldwork is never purely external: encounters with others also can reshape the researcher's understanding of himself, the field, and the theoretical significance of what is being observed.

The autoethnographic vignette takes place at a dance school in the north of Italy that one of the authors has attended for the past few years. The vignette is set in an adult-amateur modern dance course open to participants of all ages and skill levels. Starting as a small course with only a few participants, it gradually expanded into a class of about fifteen adults, whose members differed significantly in age and technical level. While some of them have a long track record in dance, others have only been practising this discipline for a couple of years. Despite the teacher's strong inclusive ethos and commitment to fostering a non-discriminatory atmosphere and informal governance in her school (at least for the adult course), as the course grows, differences among participants become more pronounced, leading to tensions emerging within the group. One of these stems from the frustration that more advanced dancers feel towards less experienced participants. As lessons progress and the recital rehearsals heighten emotional pressure, advanced dancers become increasingly uneasy about sharing the studio and performing alongside them. As a participant-observer, the researcher gains access to harsh truths that surface in conversations outside the ballroom. The following excerpt from the field diary captures a conversation between two advanced dancers (whom we will refer to as Victoria and Lucrezia) and the researcher, which takes place at the end of a lesson:

> *Victoria says she would rather have fewer classes per week, as long as they are not together with "them". Lucrezia and I agree that the course's management is still proceeding through trial and error, as this is only the second year with such a large number of participants. Of course, proposals can be made, but the final decision rests with Isabella* (the teacher)*. It is her school, and everyone is aware of Isabella's vision of what a dance school should be: a space grounded in inclusivity. Victoria laughs and says, "Just because the teacher works with disabled people doesn't mean we need to have disabled people in our class too!" I try to make her understand the value of the effort people put in. When someone is trying their best, what is the problem? The course is open to different skill levels, and if a person is genuinely committed, why shouldn't they be allowed to participate in the more advanced lessons and in the final performance? And, ultimately, how does their participation affect her personally? Victoria is blunt about it: "Passion is not enough; if the final*

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result looks awful, then who cares about passion?" What bothers her the most is that "some people" lack awareness of their own bodies and sometimes crash into her. She also says that she doesn't want class time to be slowed down by corrections directed at them: there is little point in correcting them when, in her view, they are already a complete disaster. I point out that they, too, value being corrected and have the right to receive corrections to improve. She dismisses my argument and pushes the point further, adding that she is tired of compromises over costumes meant to conceal what she calls "fat bodies" of some participants. On this point, Lucrezia agrees with Victoria but in a more resigned tone: if those women themselves do not perceive it as a problem, she argues, why should the rest of us? I venture to say that they do, in fact, experience it as a source of discomfort. Victoria replies that Anna clearly does not see her weight as a significant enough problem in her everyday life. She may feel uncomfortable about the costume, she says, but then she goes home and still eats a cream puff. I explain that I genuinely feel sorry that Anna does not feel comfortable, and that my intention is to make a collective proposal to change the costumes. It is true that Anna lives with those extra kilos every day, but the mirror in the dance studio is like a moment of truth, a confrontation with oneself, and for none of us is it pleasant to stand exposed before our own insecurities. Victoria and Lucrezia tell me that I am too sensitive and too easily moved by others' struggles. Dance, they argue, is not for everyone, and if Anna truly felt uncomfortable, she would simply stop attending. I remain in silence.

This episode illustrates how the organisational space of the class is permeated by informal hierarchies and embodied norms regulating who has the right to belong in the dance space and under what conditions, thereby shaping processes of inclusion and exclusion. Advanced dancers frame lower-skilled participants as "taking space", "slowing down the class", and lacking awareness of their bodies and spatial positioning. What initially appears to be a discussion of technical skills soon shifts to judgments about bodies, appearance, and legitimacy within the class. Because leading dancers perceive the studio as a limited resource – in terms of visibility in the mirror, physical space for movement, and access to the teacher's time and attention for corrections – they enact marginalisation strategies that reproduce exclusionary practices grounded in aesthetic standards of classical ballet. "Fat bodies" become easy targets for exclusion, and their removal is perceived as necessary to restore the previous status quo. The end-of-year recital intensifies these dynamics. As the recital is the moment of public display, dominant dancers feel heightened social performance anxiety. Weaker dancers are constructed as a reputational threat to both the dominant group and the class's collective image, thereby legitimising exclusionary practices by invoking concerns about collective performance and public representation. In this context, costumes function as tools that make bodies visible and subject to judgment.

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The suffering experienced by marginalised dancers is treated as evidence that they do not belong in that environment. Empathy is dismissed precisely because discomfort is the mechanism of selection through which informal leaders attempt to push marginalised bodies towards self-exclusion from the class. The researcher is neither among the executioners nor the victims. Still, she is subjected to pressure to conform: if she defends the marginalised, she risks exclusion from the dominant group; if she joins the leaders, she betrays her ethics. Her silence demonstrates the coercive power of informal leaders and the social pressure at play.

This vignette offers methodological insights into the specific challenges of autoethnographic research. Unlike the previous vignette, in which the researcher enters a field as an outsider and progressively negotiates access, the dance school vignette is set in a field in which the researcher was already fully embedded as a participant. Access, therefore, does not appear to be an issue of formal entry into an organisation, but rather a more complex issue of proximity, belonging, relational responsibility, and the ethical right to narrate shared experiences. The researcher is part of the social world she seeks to analyse and is herself exposed to its norms, pressures, and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

Methodologically, the vignette shows that autoethnographic access is never simply given. The researcher's participation in the class grants her access to informal conversations, embodied routines, judgments, and affective dynamics that would likely remain unavailable to an external observer who is not so embedded in the field. At the same time, this proximity creates several ethical and analytical difficulties. The exclusionary talks that she witnesses are not from the perspective of a detached observer, but as someone who needs to decide if and how to respond in the moment, whether to defend those being targeted, whether to remain silent, and how to manage the risk of becoming marginalised herself. Her silence, discomfort, and hesitation, therefore, become part of the data, not because they provide a private confession, but because they reveal the social pressures through which conformity is produced.

The vignette also illustrates the paradox of disclosure in autoethnographic research and raises specific ethical issues, as the researcher's role was deliberately withheld from fellow participants. This decision was discussed with the school's teacher/owner, who served as the organisational gatekeeper and consented to the use of notes and diaries for research purposes. Specifically, disclosure to other dancers was not undertaken because it would likely have irremediably altered the interactional dynamics of the class, inhibited spontaneous conversations, and even potentially exposed the researcher herself to exclusion from the very social setting under study. However, we

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acknowledge that this form of non-disclosure is highly ethically sensitive and maintains the researcher's responsibility towards those represented in the account. For this reason, the vignette has been heavily anonymised: all names are pseudonyms, the school is not identified, detailed geographical information has not been provided, and the dialogue is presented as a reconstructed diary account rather than a verbatim transcript. The emphasis falls on the social mechanism through which belonging and informal management, governance and leadership are regulated, rather than on the personal characteristics or moral judgment of individual dancers.

Finally, the vignette complicates the boundary between ethnography and autoethnography. It is autoethnographic because the researcher's own experience is central to the analysis. Yet it is also ethnographic because this personal experience is used to interpret a broader social world: the informal hierarchies, embodied norms, and exclusionary practices through which the dance class regulates belonging. The self, hence, becomes the route through which the organisational dynamics of the field become visible. In this sense, the vignette shows how autoethnography can transform lived discomfort into methodological and theoretical insight.

6. Discussion

This paper argues that ethnography and autoethnography offer valuable opportunities for business and management studies, but only if their methodological challenges are properly addressed. Both approaches are strongly related: ethnography focuses on organisational practices, interactions and social worlds. Autoethnography, in contrast, emphasises the researcher's own experience to understand organisational and cultural dynamics. Considering them together enables business and management scholars to develop a more nuanced and reflexive understanding of the relationship between the field, the self and theory. It has long been debated that diary vignettes are often used as confessional, impressionist (Van Maanen, 1988), or, in the case of autoethnography, evocative tales (Ellis, 2004) to make findings more vivid. This paper aims to show that they can do more, such as revealing practices, making reflexivity visible, and connecting experience to theory. To do this, however, it requires careful design, as vignettes must be properly contextualised, ethically framed, managed, and analytically interpreted. The vignette suggests that the methodological challenges associated with both ethnography and autoethnography of access, ethical awareness, embodiment, emotional exposure, and writing difficulties should not become obstacles to grasping organisational life but are, in fact, necessary conditions for

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analytical reasoning. For instance, in the FC United vignette, the researcher's outsider position, accent, and early-stage access do not constitute limitations in the fieldwork but actually help shape the encounter and likely allow the supporter to define FC United as a space of recovered belonging. In the dance school vignette, what is on display is not only the researcher's personal reactions but also the unfolding of the informal pressures that help discipline belonging, exclusion, and dissent.

The analysis also suggests that the relationship between ethnography and autoethnography does not lead to a fixed methodological distinction. The FC United vignette, while primarily ethnographic, becomes partly autoethnographic when self-reflection becomes necessary to interpret the encounter with the fan. On the other hand, the dance school vignette is mostly autoethnographic, but it also contains ethnographic elements, as the researcher's experience is used to analyse a broader social world of hierarchy, informal leadership, ingroups, and outgroups. The distinction between the two approaches lies mostly in how the researcher's involvement in the field becomes analytically relevant.

The broader implications lie in the need for business and management studies for methodological pluralism capable of engaging with the complexities of organisational life (Watson, 2011). Ethnography and autoethnography are not meant to replace other methods, but to complement them by making visible aspects of organisational life that are difficult to capture otherwise. In particular, these approaches are very valuable for studying phenomena where lived experience really matters, such as identity, leadership, academic work, professionalisation, ethics, accounting and accountability mechanisms, and organisational change. Such phenomena often arise in fleeting interactions, embodied reactions, jokes, irony, tensions, and moments of discomfort. Ethnography and autoethnography are valuable not only for the thick descriptions they produce, but also because they allow researchers to closely experience these moments and analyse how organisational realities are lived. Moreover, they remind us that management knowledge is situated, relational (and written).

At the same time, this paper invites us not to overly romanticise these methods. Ethnography and autoethnography require considerable time, care, ethical sensitivity and a lot of writing discipline. They are long and immersive (Van Maanen, 1988; Watson, 2011), and there are no shortcuts to good ethnographic and autoethnographic work. They also require researchers not only to expose culture and organisational world, but also aspects of themselves and their own interpretive work. This can be both uncomfortable for researchers and a sign that the research they are conducting closely relates to the world(s) we live in.

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Finally, all the issues mentioned above can clash with the growing "publish or perish" culture, which is critically affecting academia, especially young scholars (Roth, 2005; Piercy, 2023; Wu, 2025), limiting their impact and diffusion. Luckily, several high-profile journals across different subfields of business and management are increasingly recognising the value of ethnographic and autoethnographic research, making it easier to break out of its niche.

7. Conclusion

Business and management studies require methods that can engage with complexity, ambiguity and lived experience and ethnography and autoethnography provide such opportunities. The historical development of ethnography and autoethnography has made them increasingly rigorous methods for business and management research, analysing how organisational life is reflexively experienced through the self. In this sense, the two diary-based vignettes presented above open windows onto organisational practices of inclusion and exclusion and how researchers' identity can be experienced through doubt and discomfort. Taken together, the two vignettes show the potential of diaries to connect lived experience and theoretical insights.

If conducted carefully, ethnographic and autoethnographic research can deepen our understanding of organisational life and considerably expand the methodological imagination of business and management scholarship.

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