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Title: Doing Ethnography in a Paranoid Organization: An Autoethnographic Account

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to examine what we can learn from an autoethnographical approach about public administration. In this context it presents and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of autoethnography.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper is based on a case study of E-rail, a European national rail service subject to extensive negative press coverage. The autoethnographic accounts, based on interviews, observations, phone calls, e-mails, and other informal interactions with the organizational members, highlight the researcher's entry to and exit of the organization.

Findings: The paper mobilizes issues concerning gaining access and building trust with participants in the field as empirical material in its own right, arguing that challenges involving 'being in the field' should be highlighted to provide new types of knowledge about the organizational phenomenon under study – in this case the rise of organizational paranoia.

Originality: This paper uses autoethnography, which is rare in public administration studies, and discusses the distinct features of autoethnography as an ethnographic approach to public organizations. It argues that autoethnographic accounts of fieldwork relationship highlight and challenge the boundaries of the kind of research questions we might ask – and the kind of answers we might provide – about public administration.

Keywords: Public administration, paranoia, ticket inspectors, organizational ethnography, autoethnography

Introduction to Autoethnography in Public Administration

The number of autoethnographic studies has increased the past 50 years motivated by turns in social sciences towards a blending of genres of writing, heightened (self)reflexivity in ethnographic research, an augmented focus on emotions and criticism of the objective, generalization of knowledge claims (Anderson, 2006). In political science research, however, is autoethnography rare (Burnier, 2006), though Rhodes (2007) presents the advantages of using thick descriptions obtained and communicated through confessional tales. Thus, this paper seeks to explore, demonstrate, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using autoethnography, especially in the context of conducting fieldwork in public organizations in a state of crisis or change. It is concerned with the research question: What can we learn from an autoethnographic approach about public administration?

In this paper, autoethnography is defined as "not focusing on self alone, but about searching for an understanding of others (culture/society) through self. Thus, self is a subject to look into and a lens to look through to gain an understanding of a societal culture" (Chang, 2008, 49). Autoethnographic accounts are often used to describe the cultural experiences of the researcher's *own* culture or at least of a culture in which the researcher is deeply immersed. In this paper, I argue that autoethnography can also be used by ethnographers situated partly outside the organization as a way of narrating experiences concerning difficulties in negotiating accesses, informal interactions with organizational members, conflicts in field relationships, or involvement in internal political matters. Experiences of this nature may often be silenced, but mobilizing them is nevertheless important – not only to provide a better or fuller understanding of the organizational phenomenon under study, but also to provide a different kind of knowledge about organizational life in public administration.

According to Doloriert and Sambrook (2012), one of the main advantages of autoethnography is that it can provide stories that would otherwise be silenced with a voice. Jonas, Adams, and Ellis (2013, 35) also argue that autoethnography "breaks silences surrounding experiences as they unfold within cultures and cultural practices. In privileging subjectivity, personal voice, and emotional experience, autoethnographies subvert traditional norms of scholarships that silence the 'complex and fragility' of life" (citing Tillmann, 2009a, 95). Difficulties in gaining access, obstructions to building trust, restrictions from organizational gatekeepers on research output, and other dark aspects of 'being in the field' are often silenced in ethnographic works of public administration and of organizations in general. They are difficult to capture in formal recordings as such matters often are a result of a special atmosphere, an ineffable tone or a certain spirit among the organizational members. These types of matters may also be difficult to disclose as doing so might put the researcher and the organization of study in a vulnerable position. Nevertheless, insights into the more problematic aspects of 'being in the field' are important as they increase our reflexivity on the kind of research questions we are able to ask and the types of answers we might provide in studying public administration.

In this paper, I call attention to the significance of an autoethnograhic approach to studying public administration. To accomplish this, I first introduce the topic of 'access' before turning to relevant literature for understanding the specific context of the E-rail case study - a public organization in a state of crisis when faced with extensive negative press coverage. A presentation of the case further illustrates this before the paper focuses on the autoethnographic account of entering and exiting the organization under study. Finally, a discussion presents the implications of doing autoethnography on E-rail specifically and for research on public administration in general.

Access Issues in Public Administration

Ethnographic research often discusses and sheds light on how to gain access to conduct fieldwork, but this is primarily looked at in terms of how difficulties can be avoided (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2003). Practical issues, such as failed attempts to gain access, restrictions forced upon the researcher, or the researcher's involvement in internal political tensions, are rarely disclosed in ethnographic writings, even though these matters often heavily influence the research questions, design, field work, analysis, write up, and publication.

Gaining access to an organization often requires a dual effort that involves gaining access to the organization through the gatekeepers and to the individuals in the organization. Thus, negotiating access often takes multiple steps to convince both management and the employees of the relevance of the study (Czarniawska, 2007). When formal access has been achieved, several rounds of renegotiating with organizational members may still be needed to build a trusting relationship (Czarniawska, 2007). The researcher's role may similarly be constantly contested, as management may cast the researcher in the role of the expert or evaluator who is assisting management, but are simultaneously concerned about the image of the organization the researcher depicts in subsequent publications (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2003). Gatekeepers can restrict access and monitor the information provided to control or divert the lines of inquiry. Employees may also question the researcher's intentions and loyalty if they believe the researcher is sent by the management and thus refrain from participating or hesitate about speaking their minds if they do participate.

Difficulties in navigating fieldwork relationships, however, should not only be seen as practical obstacles, but as empirical material in their own right. Hammersley and Atkinson argue that: "The discovery of obstacles to access, and perhaps of effective means of overcoming them, itself provides insights into the social organization of the setting or the orientations of the people being researched" (2003, 41). In the following, an autoethnographic approach is used to highlight

how negotiating access helped provide a deeper understanding of E-rail and the implications of extensive, negative media attention on organizational beliefs and practices.

Public Administration under Scrutiny

As a result of increasing distrust in governments and public institutions (Janoff-Bulman & Parker, 2012; Kramer & Pittinsky, 2012), public administration appears to be under constant scrutiny – both by the media and the public. Potential reputational crises seem to lurk around every corner as negative stories about organizations – and public organizations in particular – are omnipresent in the media (Korn & Einwiller, 2013). Despite this, the internal implications of increasing distrust have been scarcely researched within the context of public administration. Thus, one of the guiding research questions in my fieldwork was how extensive critical media attention influences organizational life and the members' mindset and way of working.

Case studies on public institutions describe the significant internal consequences of negative media attention. Dutton and Dukerich (1991) demonstrate, for example, how employees and management in the New York Port Authority responded to negative media coverage on its handling of homeless people by actively engaging in rebuilding public trust with new strategies for dealing with the tainted issue. A study of the Swedish police shows how the police sacrificed two officers after a racism scandal to rebuild public trust and restore their image (Rennstam, 2013). In the case of an American university that was the brunt of negative media coverage concerning its highly valued attributes and relative ranking to other universities, Elsbach and Kramer (1996) demonstrate how faculty began identifying with their university's other prestigious but not publicly recognized attributes. These studies show that negative media coverage propels organizational members to engage in various behaviors and discursive reframing to restore their public image and smooth over the internal tensions that arise when the public image clashes with the internal organizational self-

image. The case study in this paper, however, describes another response to the loss of public trust resulting from excessive negative media coverage, organizational paranoia, which, though subtler and more indefinable, guides organizational sense-making and behaviors.

Empirical case studies on organizational paranoia are limited, despite its argued relevance among social psychology scholars, most notably Kramer (2001). Based on clinical experiments, surveys, and anecdotal material, Kramer defines organizational paranoia as:

> A form of heightened and exaggerated distrust that encompasses an array of beliefs, including organizational members' perceptions of being threatened, harmed, persecuted, mistreated, disparaged and so on [….]. These perceptions include suspicions that others are exploiting, harming, or deceiving one, along with preoccupations and doubts regarding their loyalty or trustworthiness (2001, 6).

Organizational paranoia significantly influences the sense-making process of individuals employed in the paranoid organization. Images of the self and others become distorted and thus change the beliefs and actions carried out by organizational members. In this paper, paranoia is not used as in a clinical diagnosis, but as a metaphor for understanding the intra-organizational consequences of extensive negative media coverage.

Presenting the Case Study

My interest in how extensive critical media attention influences organizational life, the organizational members' mindset and work, motivated my choice of E-rail as a extreme case (Flyvberg, 2006). E-rail[1], a European national rail service had been subject to several public

[1] For reasons of anonymity, E-rail is a pseudonym and the country of operation is not disclosed.

scandals and hence extensive news coverage. From July 2010 to July 2014, a major national tabloid published 888 articles on E-rail, 86% of which were negative. Why this attention? In 2000, the company had purchased new trains that turned out to be so flawed they could not operate, leaving angry commuters to deal with repeated delays due to the old trains. There was also dissatisfaction with the management's financial conduct as the organization had run a deficit from 2007-2011. When it was made public in 2011 that E-rail had illegally used taxpayer money to run rail services in another country, criticism only increased. The aforementioned tabloid often featured articles portraying E-rail as greedy, unfair, and unprofessional, and its ticket inspectors as evil henchmen accused of kicking off, locking up, fining and verbally or physically abusing kids, the handicapped and other vulnerable passengers. These stories then traveled to various media platforms along with follow-up stories, background stories and letters from the readers. The media's narration of evil ticket inspectors who treat customers poorly is intense and repeated over and over again.

As a result, ticket inspectors were selected as the primary target group for this study, also because I had observed how they were often blamed for late trains, dirty trains, overcrowded trains, lack of information and much more. Ticket inspectors were often the sole representative of their organization in critical situations, where they more or less successfully were trying to maintain a service-oriented tone when interacting with frustrated, angry, and sometimes threatening customers. Despite these strains, celebrating 40 years of working with the company was not unusual among ticket inspectors. The average length of service among the participants in this study was 19 years. In addition to checking tickets (which is in fact not first priority), the job description of ticket inspectors includes ensuring safety, selling food and beverages from a trolley, providing traffic information and cleaning the trains. Depending on the size of the train, they often worked alone or in teams of two or three. A union representative described them as free ranging birds because they worked without direct supervision, which meant they had sole responsibility for making the right

decision and taking action in critical situations, such as with acutely ill passengers, violent episodes, vandalism and suicides from jumping in front of the train.

The autoethnographic tales presented in the following are based on my interaction with E-rail managers and ticket inspectors. The empirical material comprises recorded and transcribed formal interviews with ten ticket inspectors that lasted about 60 minutes each, though one lasted about 90. I also observed and recorded four information meetings, in addition to collecting corporate information material, PowerPoint presentations, employee magazines and union newsletters. I quickly discovered, however, that my less formal interaction with organizational members for gaining and maintaining access was just as valuable in aiding to an understanding of the impact the extensive negative press had on the organizational culture. Consequently, e-mail correspondence, text messages, telephone conversations and initial meetings with the organization was documented in a fieldwork notebook (FWNB) and also used in this study. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

The empirical material will be presented as an autoethnographic narrative to illustrate what can be learned about E-rail in particular and public administration in general using an autoethnographic approach. As explained earlier, autoethnographic accounts are often used to describe the cultural experiences of the researcher's *own* culture or at least of a culture in which the researcher is deeply immersed. In my case, due to the limited access I was granted, I was unable to gain deep, insider knowledge. I was not, however, in a position of complete exclusion either. As a result, I used my role as a privileged outsider who was investigating E-rail up close and personal but also from afar to actively demonstrate how organizational members would embrace me in situations they perceived as safe, but pushed me away and kept me at a distance in situations of uncertainty. A discussion of the potential and problems involved in using autoethnography in the

context of public administration based on the E-rail case study will follow the autoethnographic tales.

Approaching E-rail

In the fall of 2011, I approached E-rail and explained my interest in frontline personnel working in trains and how outside criticism influenced their processes of identification with their employer. Via e-mail, I set up a meeting with an executive manager, Linda, who was responsible for long-distance and regional trains. She invited Eric, who was the ticket inspectors' union representative, to participate.

At the meeting, Linda explains that E-rail is going through a transition: "We're going through a shift in our culture and priorities. We're not supposed to control tickets any more, but instead to provide service. … Riding the train without a ticket no longer means a fine. The most important thing is that everyone has a pleasant journey, including people who don't pay" (FWNB, April 18, 2012). A little later, she explains the rather radical step of not fining passengers without tickets: "The society around us is changing, which is why we must change, too. Our customers expect more. They'll no longer tolerate being left at the next station because they don't have a ticket" (FWNB, April 18, 2012). She thinks that my research is timely because it might contribute to this cultural change initiated by management and assist in its implementation by employees.

At the close of the meeting, we decide to proceed with the research collaboration, though Linda has some reservations as she is concerned that I might reveal my research results to the press and that they will be used to harm the organization – or that my results may cause internal dissent between management and employees. I assure her of my good intentions and we settle on a confidentiality agreement. Full access to the organization is granted and I am allowed to participate

in information meetings on the new culture initiative. In addition to being allowed to conduct 20 interviews with ticket inspectors, I am given permission to shadow ticket inspectors on the train.

Inside E-rail

Shortly after this meeting, Eric invites me to present the research to all the union representatives, so that they can tell their members about the research project. At the meeting, the representatives explain that the negative media attention has had a significant influence on their work: "We're no longer allowed to fine or to kick passengers off the train. The management is too afraid that it might end up on the front page of the tabloids" (Union representative, FWNB, April 30, 2012). They further explain that the management does not back them up in cases where the press criticizes the ticket inspectors. Recently, stories in the news had suggested that ticket inspectors were paid too much and that was one of the reasons why E-rail was financially on the verge of collapse. One union representative states, "But they don't say anything. They don't back us up" (FWNB, April 30, 2012). Concerned that management might recommend biased participants, the representatives suggest that participants should volunteer or be appointed by union representatives.

Consequently, Linda, Eric, and I later agree that the ticket inspectors should volunteer to participate and were recruited via a message the union representatives put on their lunchroom notice board stating they should contact me directly. I wonder if anyone will contact me, but Linda and Eric convince me they will, stating: "You'll get tons of feedback", and "Be ready to be overwhelmed by responses". I write the invitation to participate in the research study, the union representatives post them, and then nothing happens. No response. Not a single one. Utter silence.

Meanwhile, I am invited to participate in four information meetings marking the launch of the new service culture program. At one of the information meetings, I manage to recruit

one ticket inspector, who happens to study management on a part-time basis. In a subsequent e-mail, he explains that he prefers to meet at a café and not at E-rail's facilities, because he worries someone might listen in. "If we meet at the train station (…), then we can 'hide' at a café. It's more discrete this way" (Christian, August 16, 2012). We find a café and we carry out the interview even though he looks terribly worried when I take out a tiny recording device. "You can't be serious? Are you going to tape it?" I persuade him to allow me to tape it, but he talks in a small voice the entire time. I sense he is not comfortable.

One interview completed! A start. My phone does not ring and my e-mail inbox remains empty – and I begin to feel desperate. I contact a mid-level manager I met at an information meeting and he gives me the contact information for three of his employees so I can contact them directly. I send them a short e-mail explaining who I am, the purpose of the research project, and that I would like them to participate as anonymous respondents. Two of the ticket inspectors are willing to participate, but the third one refuses, stating:

> Thank you for your e-mail. Unfortunately, I can't imagine anything except that this study would become biased, because voluntary participation would inherently only attract the most motivated people. I read your announcement on the lunchroom notice board and I had pretty much decided not to participate. That you – perhaps because of a lack of volunteers – are now trying to recruit specific employees doesn't do your cause any good. On the contrary, it reeks of "propaganda" (August 30, 2012, Albert, e-mail).

I interpret this e-mail as an example of the limited trust between employees and management and that Albert had mistaken me for being someone sent by management and not for being an

independent researcher. I begin to feel desperate. Five months have passed since the first meeting, I only have three interviews and no idea of how to proceed.

Feeling a bit discouraged about the research collaboration, I contact Linda again, asking if she can suggest possible interviewees. She refuses with the following e-mail: "As you probably know, we are in the middle of a change process that is being met with quite some resistance. It is unlikely that my encouragement would give you more respondents☺" (September 2, 2012). I feel discouraged but also intrigued. Are people afraid to talk to me? I try to contact Eric via e-mail and by phone but without luck. I wait and wait. Finally, I manage to get through but we only have a short conversation. I barely get to say who I am before he cuts me off, "I heard your message and read you reminders. But I really don't have time to deal with this." Me: "Sure, can I call you back …?". Him: I can't help you now, goodbye." Then he hangs up. I stare at the phone and wonder what is going on. It has now been six month since our first meeting, where both Linda and Eric agreed to the research collaboration, but right now it seems like no one is willing to talk – or even help me to get in touch with someone who will. As a final attempt, I call Linda again. I suggest that she sends me a list of 50 random names and numbers for ticket inspectors and that I will contact 17 of them directly. She agrees to this and finally sends a list of 50 names after a couple of days. I am relieved. At last, it finally seems like the project will take off.

I make calls. A few people refuse to participate but, in the end, I manage to set up seven more interviews. Convincing them that it is safe to participate is not easy. With Dan, for example, I spend the first 15 minutes of the interview explaining that the ticket inspectors' names and identities will be camouflaged, repeatedly ensuring him that tracking him down would be impossible. I end the interview by reassuring him that no one knows about his interview and that he is completely anonymous. Despite this, Dan text messages me an hour later: "Hi, thanks for a good meeting. Even though you said everything is anonymous, I just want to ask you, that you – under no

circumstances – reveal my name to management. Good luck with your project. Dan." While doing my fieldwork, I encounter an ambivalent attitude among the participants, who on one hand were scared of talking to me, and on the other hand also were eager to their frustrations with me.

Insiders' Perspectives

To provide a deeper understanding of the rise of a paranoid mindset among the organizational members, I present accounts from the interviews on how excessive negative news coverage influenced the employees. In the below account, Eva describes her response to an incident covered by the media that most of the participants, unprompted by me, touched upon about a ticket inspector who allegedly had locked a girl in on the train:

> There was this case in [name of city][2] (…). She locked up this girl, but she hadn't. Not at all. But all of us know this girl's mother. She's a real bitch to be honest. It ended up on the front page of [the tabloid] and E-rail's management responded by raking her over the coals. They simply raked her over the coals, so that she had to take sick leave. This is management doing this. Not only that, in the end there was nothing to the story. She didn't lock anyone up and she was subjected to a grueling examination. It was good front-page material. But, oh, [management is] reluctant to deal with [the tabloid] and all that, so they don't stand up for their employees. No, they don't (Interview, Eva).

This story hold explanatory power to the ticket inspectors in illustrating the point that management does not support its employees when they face accusations in the press. This situation appears to spark a heightened distrust between the management and employees. Noah also talks about this:

[2] Eva is referring to a tabloid story entitled, "E-rail Locked Me In", about a 12-year-old girl allegedly locked in a separate room on the train while the ticket inspector fined her for not having her ticket ready.

> The entire [work] environment, all these stories in the newspapers, and the orders – one after the other, day after day, means that the train personnel started … (…) They walked with their heads bowed, looking sad, apathetic and without any enthusiasm. The enthusiasm you see among train personnel in the meeting area comes out as hugs and a welcoming atmosphere, we're very friendly people and smile at our colleagues. However, as soon as you start discussing your work, there's not much eagerness left. […] I still like my job, but I don't love E-rail. I really don't anymore (Noah, Interview).

The sense of distrust between employees and management also means that employees rarely complain to their managers, because they fear being reprimanded or dismissed. Instead, they try to work under the radar:

> Researcher: Who do you trust as a ticket inspector?
> Sophie: We trust each other – and we keep ourselves under the radar as much as possible, just taking care of our jobs. Those who do stick their necks out, get a nasty beating (Sophie, Interview).

As such, the lack of interest in participating in this research project is, according to Sophie, simply due to the fear of talking to any outsiders:

> People are scared. When I did this student assignment, I needed someone to fill in a questionnaire. I had to promise them anonymity. Everything was also confidential; no

> one here knows anything about it – and they will never know, because I burned the shit. (…) However, if I hadn't provided full anonymity, I wouldn't have gotten any answers at all. (…) It's easier when you're on the inside. If you're an outsider, it's difficult, because they're always afraid. They would like to tell you – and people really have a lot to tell, but they are afraid to (Sophie, Interview).

Exiting E-rail

After conducting only ten interviews, I become ill due to unexpected complications while pregnant, and with no prospect of getting better for at least a year, I devise a new strategy. I contact Linda, the executive manager, explain the situation to her, and suggest sending a preliminary report with my findings from the first ten interviews. One of the reasons the participants give for agreeing to talk to me is that they want the management to know how dissatisfied they are with the management style, the workload, and the work environment. I feel obliged to give this information to management to allow them to respond immediately – and not 12 months later. I also simultaneously hope that the preliminary report will legitimize my return to investigate the issues raised in more depth. The preliminary report comprises direct quotes divided into overall themes such as trust, commitment, service orientation, willingness to change, the joys and challenges in everyday work life, and management communication. I make an effort to balance the positive and negative aspects of the ticket inspectors' work while staying true to the stories the participants tell. I send the report via e-mail to Linda and to Eric, the union representative, and also ask for permission to send a copy to the participants to keep them updated.

Eric responds first: "(The report) is really good and interesting to read, and I am confident that I can use it in the future. I am, however, curious how Linda will react to the criticism directed at E-rail's management. It is really something we have tried to say to them for a long time"

(Eric, January 23, 2013). Linda's brief response arrives the next day: "Just a quick note. We do not think that the report should stand alone, so please do not send it to the ticket inspectors. We are, in fact, in doubt about whether there is any reason to communicate about this process at such an early stage" (Linda, January 24, 2013). I then receive an email from Eric:

> I e-mailed Linda yesterday that I do not agree with her decision. Even though it is a preliminary report, I think we should act on some of the issues. In fact, I think it would be completely irresponsible if we wait for the rest of the responses before we discuss and focus on these things. (…) We have had issues before when we did a report on our work environment (…). She didn't like that either and, at first, the management was totally against us publishing it, because it questioned in many ways if the management listened to their employees. (…) To be honest, I think you will have a hard time being able to complete the report, because they [management] would rather have it 'die a quiet death' (January 24, 2013).

Linda sends me a quick note asking me to send our formal, signed collaboration agreement, which she allegedly could not find. I begin to realize that, despite my good intentions, I have stirred up a hornet's nest as the report appears to have sparked a fire between management and the union. I decide to call Linda and when she answers, the tone is harsh. She argues:

> It appears as if you have uncritically noted what has been said and present this as if this is the image of us. However, you must also be aware that this is how the union will read it. They get further ammunition to portray us as a horrifying employer who does not care about our employees. To think that such a report can be kept within a

small group of people is rather naïve (FWNB, January 25, 2013).

My goal of giving voice to the employees is not appreciated and she also criticizes me for, on the one hand, "walking straight into the trap set by the employees" and for "uncritically holding the microphone to let them speak", but, on the other hand, admits that "the report does not tell us anything we didn't know already". The issue, however, does not appear to be the content of the report, but the fact that the union representative (who had been involved since the beginning, upon Linda's initiative) also received the report. She claims they will use it against the management. I ask her again if I can send the report to the participants but she tells me not to.

To my surprise Linda calls me a couple of days later. She warns me that the union intends to send the report to a national tabloid and that I should prepare an answer in case a journalist contacts me. I begin to feel a bit paranoid myself. I call the head of my department to come up with a plan in case somebody calls. And he calls the university's press office. We decide that I will reply with no comment. The day after Linda calls again; she wants to set up a meeting with the union representatives and me to discuss the results. I am excited about the prospect of them actually wanting to work with the issues raised instead of fighting each other and using the report as ammunition. I do, however, have a sneaking suspension that the meeting is more of a protective measure by the management. In case the press calls, they will at least have already taken action. Meanwhile, I am given permission to call the participants back and give them a summary of the preliminary report. I explain my findings to them and that there will be a follow-up meeting with the management and the union to determine if any action should be taken based on the report. The participants respond positively and seem happy about the prospect of improvements.

A couple of days later, I receive an email from Linda stating that they had jointly agreed with the union to keep the report internal. I am relieved. I do not, however, hear from her or

Eric about our proposed meeting. A year later, one of the participants tells me that he never heard anything further about the study after we had spoken. Eric tells me that he never heard anything about sending the report to the tabloids.

Learnings about Public Administration

The reputations of public institutions are on the line daily as they face constant scrutiny from the media. As a favorable target for journalists, public administration appears more vulnerable than other institutions to media attacks. Public organizations are often institutions that people love to hate because everyone has contact with them and they are often dependent on them. This phenomenon is reflected in the numerous press stories on the theme 'people against the system', which attacks the conduct of public institutions. With the rise of social media, public organizations – now more than ever – are held accountable for their conduct by politicians, the press, and the public. Developing a mildly paranoid mindset can, in this respect, be a productive strategy to guard the organization against media scandals. However, this study also demonstrates organizational paranoia 'gone wild'. An autoethnographic approach allows us to make the more subtle, ineffable negative effects of organizational paranoia visible. When approaching the organization the following characteristics stood out: 1) the selective attention towards threatening information; 2) the belief that one has been singled out for persecution; 3) the employment of safety behavior; and 4) the self-fulfilling prophesy of paranoia.

The selective attention towards threatening information: Both management and the employees were worried that information would be twisted or misused by outsiders, primarily the press. Even rather mundane and subjective work experiences were deemed dangerous as employees were afraid they would be fired or at least reprimanded if the management heard their stories. Thus, the employees were anxious that I might disclose their names or be discovered, which is why

interviews often took place outside their usual work environment. Providing reassurance concerning their anonymity and that their real names would not be used was vital to get people to talk. Management similarly required a confidentiality agreement at our first meeting and despite their initial commitment to the research collaboration, the process was dragged out and commitment decreased as I began to scratch the surface and conduct employee interviews. After writing the preliminary report, management said that it would be highly damaging if the report fell into the wrong hands as they were anxious about how it would look on the front page of the tabloids. All information was understood a potential threat, which is why the management worked hard to control the whereabouts of the preliminary report and to silence it.

The belief that one has been singled out for persecution: Both management and the employees behaved in ways suggesting they believed they were the specific object of attention. The example of Dan, who wrote me after the interview, suggests that when I approached the employees about participating, some of them were concerned about why they had been singled out. In addition, people who agreed to participate were concerned about the management's watchful eye and how their statements might be used against them later. When I submitted the preliminary report, the management's reaction indicated that they felt they were the object of unfair persecution and judgment by me as a researcher. They questioned my rigorousness, competence as a researcher, and whether I had hidden motives. Ross, Mirowsky and Pribesh (2001) describe one of the characteristics of paranoia as labeling others as being unsupportive, self-seeking, and dishonest. I received feedback of this nature from the management after submitting my preliminary report.

The employment of safety behavior: Chan and McAllister (2014) argue that, to shield themselves, employees who feel paranoid as a result of supervisor abuse often exhibit safety behavior such as: avoidance, compliance, help-seeking or aggression. In interacting with members of E-rail, similar reactions were encountered. The safety behavior the employees preferred was

avoidance, illustrated by the fact that no one approached me voluntarily to participate in the study. In one instance, when I contacted an employee directly, I was met with an aggressive 'get-off-my-back' response (Albert's E-mail). Most of the people who did participate did so in the hope of gaining a greater understanding of their situation and help in raising the difficult issues with management. Management's safety behavior changed in the process. They agreed to be part of the study at the beginning. It was my impression they did so to gain my approval of their managerial conduct, thus reducing the likelihood of harm. When I persisted with the study, despite their increasing avoidance and lack of commitment, their behavior turned more aggressive, clearly marking their discontent with the research project and me.

The self-fulfilling prophesy of paranoia: Here, I am writing a critical piece on an organization in crisis. My report exposed its flaws and weaknesses in a way clearly not intended by the management or me when I first approached them. Kramer (2001) and Chan and McAllister (2014), who point out the self-fulfilling nature of paranoia, argue that paranoid behaviors impel others to pay more attention to the paranoid individual and to monitor their behaviors more carefully, thus making the paranoid individual feel even more threatened. While conducting my research, I found that the more the organizational members tried to avoid me or push me away, the more intrigued I became. Similarly, I easily understand why journalists continue to pursue stories about E-rail and critically question the transparency and openness of the organization, which in turn causes E-rail to become even more withdrawn and closed to scrutiny. As a result, the probability that E-rail can successfully take initiatives to rebuild public trust and gain new legitimacy seems low.

Learnings about Doing Autoethnography in Public Administration

To date, little has been written with the specific purpose of shedding light on the difficulties, barriers, and negotiations associated with gaining access to the frontlines of public administration. Accounts of failed attempts to access public administration are rarely published and the important questions they raise are rarely discussed. If access is denied or restricted, how does this influence the kinds of research questions we can ask – and the kind of answers we can provide? How can we understand the micro level dynamics in public administration during times of crisis, change or transformation if we as researchers are shut out of the organization? In this case, the management and employees attempted to control the output of the research by restricting access. However, one could just as easily imagine that they might have controlled the output by demanding veto rights on the writing and publications (Rhodes, Hart & Noordegraaf, 2007). Thus, the power struggles and negotiations between researchers and gatekeepers and field study participants should not be ignored, but rather studied and transparently displayed to highlight what we can learn by conducting ethnographies in public administration during sensitive periods. I advocate for the use of autoethnography in this quest due to its distinct features.

Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013) identify five distinctive features of autoethnography: visibility of self, strong reflexivity, engagement, vulnerability and rejection of closure. I argue that these five features offer both potential and constraints when studying public administration.

Visibility of self: This article includes my own subjective experience as relevant 'data' and I embroidered on the confessional tale (Van Maanen, 1988) with multiple voices speaking on behalf of or about E-rail. The voice of management, employees, and the union are interwoven in my self-narrative as a researcher approaching E-rail. The self-narrative is, in other words, placed in a social context and offers a different opportunity for linking micro-level observations and experiences with macro-level theorizing, to understand this social context, i.e. the culture of E-rail.

In telling my story, I have attempted to capture the sensitive, subtle experiences of interacting with an organization marked by paranoia, something that would otherwise have been difficult to grasp and disclose.

Reflexivity: Autoethnography provides opportunities for increased reflexivity about the reciprocal influence between the researcher and the research setting under study. Self-conscious, personal engagement in autoethnography can be used reflexively as a medium for a deeper understanding of the self (Allbon, 2012) and the other (Andersen & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Moreover, reflexivity embraces postmodern criticism of the dominant, passive voice representation in realist ethnographies raised by e.g. Van Maanen (1988). In pursuing reflexivity, the research may provide a richer understanding of the situated and contextual nature of the culture or organizational phenomenon of study that would have otherwise been lost in realist tales or other types of social science research.

Engagement: Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) argue that autoethnography, in contrast to other forms of social science, provide more accessible prose and thus make research more available to the communities under study. Such availability may, however, also expose the researcher to constraints placed by the community, which may demand that they be allowed to approve, amend, or reject research during the publication process. Such constraints may be a particular concern for autoethnography in public administration, because participants are sensitive to public information about their organization. Research on publicly well-known and contested organizations adds another voice to the polyphonic public debate and struggle to define the dominant tale of 'who the organization is'. While I aimed at maintaining an impartial approach in studying E-rail, the research output was quickly interpreted as favoring either management points of view, supporting the union's messages or being biased towards the critical press. Thus, the research may be judged by criteria other than scholarly rigorousness, such as its ability to create headlines,

criticize the management, or criticize the employees – depending on the reader. In this way, the research may take on a life of its own not opted for or considered at the outset of the project.

Vulnerability: The autoethographic tales in this article uncover my own struggles and ambiguities as a researcher attempting to access E-rail. Such self-exposure also holds the prospect of both the researcher and 'the other' under investigation being criticized. Allen-Collinson (2013) thus argues that ethical considerations exist in protecting yourself and others particularly from the judgment of outsiders because the autoethnographic approach challenges the orthodoxy of the researcher as more knowledgeable. During this study I had ethical considerations, not only about exposing myself, but also members of the organization, especially because more informal conversations were included that proved vital to understanding the organization's paranoid culture. Thus, to reduce vulnerability and for ethical considerations, all names have been anonymized.

Open-endedness and rejection of closure: Autoethnography is often based on an interest in cultural processes. Its accounts often embrace the fleeting and situated characteristics of a study (Hermann, Barnhill & Poole, 2013). The tale of E-rail presented in this paper describes the researcher's entry into and exit from the organization, and new negotiations are taking place to re-enter. The culture of paranoia may be a characteristic of E-rail at a certain time and due to specific circumstances. A revisit may prove that the paranoia has dissipated, taken new forms, or grown. For now, my goal is to use autoethnographic tales to propel discussions on how public organizations react to crisis-like situations and on the (limited) role researchers can have for understanding the organizational dynamics and processes in such situations.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the use of autoethnography as a way to gain knowledge about organizational phenomena that may be difficult to grasp, in this case the rise of organizational

paranoia as a result of extensive negative press coverage. The autoethnographic tales show that there are organizational members who pay selective attention to threatening information and who believe they are being singled out for persecution and thus employ protective behaviors, such as avoidance and aggression. Issues of access and fieldwork relationships in the specific context of a paranoid organization magnify and become prominent - and difficult - aspects of the ethnographic research. One of the fundamental characteristics of ethnographic research is deep immersion, yet getting close to and personal with paranoid 'others' can indeed become challenging. This paper argues that these kinds of difficulties of 'being in the field' should be put forward to highlight and challenge the boundaries of the kinds of questions we might ask and the kinds of answers we might provide in studying public administration. With its distinct features of visibility of self, reflexivity, engagement, vulnerability and rejection of closure, autoethnography is an appropriate approach for bringing forward new types of knowledge and disclosing what would have otherwise been silenced.

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