



Sport management, gender and the ‘bigger picture’ Challenging changes in Higher Education—A partial auto/ethnographical account

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses mainly on a the author’s current experience of Higher Education and of a module concerned with gender, difference, sport and leisure made available to students studying for sport and leisure management degrees. It reviews the changed nature of the curriculum in the shifting socio-economic climate, suggesting that the neo-liberal¹ turn influencing Higher Education in UK is reinforcing an organisational (university) culture which is counter productive to fostering critical gender and race awareness in both staff and students within restructured sport management programs. The approach I adopt in writing this paper is partly auto/ethnographic and as such, on occasion, it looks at the previous research and current experiences through the eyes and emotions of a senior woman academic located within a changing ‘new’ university culture. Auto/ethnography as research approach and autobiography as learning medium are considered. Like this abstract, I move in and out of centring myself in the text whilst interweaving writing in a more neutral ‘academic’ form.

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1. Auto-ethnographic and feminist approaches to sport management

Auto/ethnography has been understood for many years as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). A shift from reflexive ethnographic work to naming and acknowledging auto/ethnographic work in sport has been occurring over the last few decades. These personal accounts take different forms but all centre the author, their experiences and feelings. Reflexive ethnographic work, which encourages careful and public interrogation of the researcher’s background, assumptions and values, has been the approach of many educational and other ethnographers both male and female (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995 and Burgess, 1985). During the 1980’s feminists undertaking ethnographic research were in something of a dilemma. Through ‘doing’ research we ethnographers were living what appeared to us, to be paradoxes; in balancing commitment to interpretive ethnography and acknowledging feminist theory. The notion of one feminist epistemology, that

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¹ I refer here to neo-liberalism as, ‘associated with the extension and enhancement of the market economy during the late 1990s and early twenty-first century’ (David, 2005: 113 [David, M. (2005). Feminist values and feminist sociology as contributions to higher education pedagogies and practices. In S. Robinson & C. Katulushi (Eds.), *Values in higher education* (pp. 107–116). Shropshire: Aureus Publishing Ltd]). The main aspects of neo-liberal ideology might be identified as the rule of the market, cutting public expenditure for social services, deregulation, privatisation and so forth. Chiapello and Fairclough [Chiapello, E., & Fairclough, N. (2002). Understanding the new management ideology. A transdisciplinary contribution from critical discourse analysis and new sociology of capitalism. *Discourse and Society*, 13(2), 185–208] critically analyse Neo-liberal Discourse and its hegemonic practices in management, providing a theoretical framework for the ‘new spirit of capitalism’. Capitalism is slippery, ‘it constantly transforms itself’.

is one Truth claim to represent all women, contradicted the then developing notions of the partial nature of knowledge and the experiences of feminist and critical ethnographers (see Humberstone, 1997, pp. 202–205). A number of texts were published by women engaged in ethnographic and anthropological research exploring such questions as, ‘can there be a feminist ethnography?’ (cf. Abu-lughod, 1990). In looking at this ‘awkward relationship between anthropology and feminism’, Strathern (1987) and Stacey (1988, p. 22) argued that neither can challenge the other, but rather, for each their perspectives are central to their practices so they can only ‘mock’ each other. Ethnography, they argue, is concerned with the day-to-day nature of human practice and agency and so with exploring and making sense of the culture of those practising their lived experiences. The centrality of the researcher as the research ‘instrument’, drawing upon their empathy and concerns for the participants in the research process, is paramount for pro/feminist researchers and ethnographers. Stanley (1990, p. 209) further argued that by providing an ‘intellectual autobiography’, the credibility of research is made visible.

It is through the personal accounting of the research experience that the social construction of the research process can be explored. Researcher–participant relations are recorded in much literature on ethnographic research in the ‘field’ and often but not always they are narrated in the first person. What is generally now understood as reflexive ethnography represents a range of research approaches in which the researcher’s personal experiences and knowledge of the situation are significant in understanding the culture and self (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Reflexive ethnographies may begin with personal experiences. Exploring those situated experiences, reflexive ethnographers attempt to make sense of their feelings and selves; they may use their personal experiences and relation with other participants in the research context to understand that culture and the participants’ experiences. In auto/ethnography, the self (auto) is positioned at the centre of the research, rather than centring the participants. In this way, drawing upon the self’s story and feelings, connections between personal experience and cultural context unfold.

Rinehart (2005) tracks this narrative turn in sport, drawing upon examples to show how personal narratives may provide useful models for sport management researchers and practitioners who wish to find out more about lived experiences and, ‘how sports management affects people and how sport managers interact with others’ (p. 497). These ‘tales’ in sport may focus upon the embodied experiences of the teller. Such stories are not primarily about the body but are tales told through the bodies of the teller (Denison & Markula, 2003; Sparkes, 2002). In this way the reader may identify in different ways with the author, making sense of the stories at both a personal and contextual level. At one level, there may be resonance with the author and their bodily experience; at other levels the author’s situated experiences become more accessible. These stories may be stories with no author comment. For example Bruce (2000) writes in the first person in ‘[N]ever let the bastards see you cry’ as a female sports journalist reporting on a male basketball team for the first time and the experiences of locker room sexist banter. Duncan (2000) writes of her life-story associated with physical activity through her bodily experiences. Whilst Sparkes (1996) in ‘Fatal Flaw’ tells his own story of embodiedness and the emotional experiences of serious injury for himself, previously a top class athlete. Personal accounts may also include the author’s interpretations of the stories juxtaposed within the text. Tsang (2000) explores her identity as a Chinese-Anglo heterosexual feminist through her accounts of critical incidents in her training for and performing in the Canadian Olympic rowing team. Fleming and Fullagar (2007) use ‘memory-work’ in researching and writing the importance of emotions in the construction of identities in sport, through Fleming’s reflection upon her sports life-story, which is told through autobiographic accounting. The account brings vividly to the reader the subjective gendering of the story teller as she both resists and acquiesces to the sports cultural ‘norms’. Moreover this form of auto/ethnography formed part of the authors’ pedagogic/supervisory process, exemplifying auto/biography or reflective accounting as a sensitive educational tool in the learning.

Much of the research I have been involved with over the last 25 years, I now identify as reflexive ethnography. This research has involved exploring participants’ experiences and understandings within particular outdoor, educational or sporting situation. Auto/ethnographers, according to Reed-Danahay (1997) may place different emphasis on auto (the self), ethnos (the culture) graphy (the research process). For me it is in the product of research, the writing that determines its auto/ethnographicness, with perhaps the exception of research which focuses upon the researcher’s own personal largely bodily experiences such as grief (Ellis, 1995), illness (Ettore, 2005a,b) or physical disability (see Sparkes & Silvennoinen, 1999). Auto/ethnographic narrative is first person writing. Much of my past writing has focused upon the cultural practices and understandings of participants, only rarely have I ventured into first person narrative. This paper moves between the use of ‘I’ and the more neutral discursive dialogue, the latter with which I am more at ease.²

2. Despair

[a] lot of the students have said that they don’t feel that this course (Gender, Difference and Leisure) is relevant to a sports degree course. I feel it’s because they’re not seeing the bigger picture-Zoe³

² Some auto/ethnographers express their feelings and emotions through poetry (see for example Spry, 2001). I have not used this or other writing tools frequently used by many auto/ethnographers such as writing narrative dialogue or ‘vignettes of experience’ for largely ethical reasons. Nevertheless, I do however express my own feelings and emotions concerning my engagement with the current culture, as an actor in that culture, in a more traditional writing style.

³ Zoe was a mature student who was studying for a degree in sport management and psychology and was particularly committed to learning. She eventually achieved the most successful student award. All the names of students in the text are pseudonyms.

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