Mixing work with therapy: a work based autoethnography

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Abstract

Soft skills programs (SSPs) for staff are now an established part of staff learning and development in organisations. The lived experience of university staff attending these types of programmes has until now remained largely unexplored. As part of a professional doctorate in education, I used autoethnography to investigate the 'social world' of SSPs within my own university, from a dramaturgical perspective. This paper recounts my experiences as participant-researcher on a women's development programme, including the personal, social and ethical challenges it presented. I describe the SSP 'social world' as a blend of therapeutic and entrepreneurial, in which, with the aid of dramaturgical devices (e.g. role play, imagination games) participants examine their feelings, values and relationships, and share aspects of themselves with others. Emergent themes included relationship building, emotion work, self-promotion and assertiveness, and performing. Inhibiting factors to full engagement and emotional disclosure also emerged and in my case included identification as an academic, my position as a researcher and my critique of the 'neoliberal' norms and messages endorsed through these programmes. One criticism is that by promoting individualism and self-responsibility, the institution partly absolves itself of its corporate responsibilities to staff in terms of wellbeing, care and job security. Nevertheless, these programmes are an engaging means of addressing the growing demands of career management in universities and fulfil a social purpose in increasing understanding between different sectors of the organisation.

Keywords
Soft skills, higher education, staff experiences, autoethnography, professional doctorate, interaction rituals

Introduction

Autoethnography is a useful methodology for exploring feelings connected to continuing professional development, but the autoethnographer needs to recognise and manage its various implications for their own mental wellbeing. As part of a professional doctorate, I participated in a series of 'soft' skills programmes (SSPs) provided for staff within my university. By soft skills, I refer to non-technical interpersonal, people or behavioural skills (Weber et al., 2013) which, although

largely work-oriented, can equally apply personal goals. . A characteristic of soft skills is the emphasis on the affective (as opposed to purely cognitive or practical) domain. On many soft skills programs, feelings, including 'gut feelings' associated with intuition, are accepted as phenomena to be acknowledged and utilised, not dismissed or derided, albeit in an 'emotionally intelligent' way (Goleman, 1996; Salovey & Mayer, 1989). Although development of some soft skills can arguably be achieved through individual and E-learning these types of skills are arguably best developed and practised in groups- through discussion, case studies, games and role-play (Hromek & Roffey, 2009; Wats, 2009).

In this paper, I focus on my experiences as actor-autoethnographer on a women's development programme, drawing on interaction ritual theory to explore the particular features of these 'in work but removed from work' programs. I reflect on the cultural blending of the therapeutic and entrepreneurial on SSPs and its implications for those, such as myself, who participate in them. The melding of personal and professional roles for the ethnographer can be tricky messy business and there were a multiplicity of identities (researcher, employee, participant, work colleague) which I took with me, or which emerged, during my time in the field. I consider my ambiguous position in the SSP social world and ask, where exactly does my role as lone researcher end, and that of 'fellow participant,' begin?

Study context

What makes us decide upon one path in life over another? Within my professional practice as a therapist, personal and interpersonal skills have been essential components of my practice toolkit, the beating heart of my endeavours. Like others working in a therapeutic culture, I regard the capacity to reflect on my own and others feelings as pre-conditional to both personal growth and professional success (Moon, 2004; Schon, 1983). When I re-entered academia as a lecturer in 2002, soft skills were largely absent from the general menu of staff development activities. It is with considerable interest that I have witnessed, and been part, of a cultural shift whereby personal and professional competences have become a central component of every staff member's annual review, and an integral to the modern career

portfolio. At the time of this study, I could have chosen to enrol in any number of soft skills courses such as time management, developing personal resilience, coaching for managers, leadership skills, mindfulness for stress reduction, mental health awareness and a selection of gender- specific personal and professional development programs. Having undertaken two studies of personal and professional development programs for students (Fixsen & Ridge, 2012; Fixsen, Ridge, Kirkpatrick, & Foot, 2015) exploring this type of learning and development in a staff context seemed an interesting and appropriate topic for my doctoral thesis. My purpose was not to evaluate the courses themselves, but to explore a largely unchartered dimension of modern university life, including the relationships and areas of tension that emerge from my observation of and participation in them. In my personal sphere of influence, the information and insights gleaned from this study could then be used to inform my own personal and professional development including in the designing of soft courses for students and staff.

Soft skills in Higher Education

With the withdrawal of public funding Higher Education (HE) has become an increasingly competitive environment, with staff members expected to adopt institutionally driven performance measures to control their attitudes and behaviours and control negative emotions. Many blame neoliberalism for this trend, and for creating a free-market society in which people are viewed either as commodities (in the form of human capital), or as producers and consumers of them (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Sennett, 1998). This market driven focus has resulted in a boom in the corporate staff sector within HE, and a large increase in "para-academics" (Macfarlane, 2011) with managerial responsibilities (Floyd and Morrison, 2014), requiring new skill sets. Soft skills programmes (SSPs) may be a way of helping staff to cope with navigating staff through a rapidly shifting landscape, and acquiring the new skills sets required within it.

In addition to staff retraining, soft skills programmes also can serve other purposes, such as increasing employee engagement, improving organisational attitudes and establishing good interpersonal relationships and communication networks

(Venkataramani, Labianca, & Grosser, 2013), thereby increasing 'emotional capital' within the organisation (Gendron 2005). In Sutton's study most teachers thought that regulating their emotions enhanced their teaching effectiveness and conformed to their idealized emotion image of a teacher (Sutton 2004). In addition to their role in promoting personal wellbeing and productivity, staff training initiatives, in particular those run through HR departments, maintain a close association with performance in terms of economic and organisational goals.

At the same time, there are likely to be factors that deter staff from voluntarily attending these types of programmes, such as being too busy, or feeling disinclined to put in the extra time or effort required. There may also be ideological reasons why academics in particular can be reluctant to engage in soft skills activities. Trained to be hypercritical, academics may be more inclined to dissect and unravel some of the concepts underpinning soft skills programmes, and may respond to these initiatives with suspicion and cynicism.

Methodology

A wide range of methodologies and approaches have been used for professional doctorate studies (Costley & Armsby, 2007). On considering the complexity and the highly subjective nature of my area of study, I felt that a qualitative, interpretative approach would be most likely to bring rich data (data with depth and breadth), which would allow for different viewpoints and insights into the area under study. Attempting to separate myself completely from my data was unrealistic given that my study took place within my own place of work. I therefore made a decision to use autoethnography for my fieldwork and interaction ritual theory to aid in the interpretation of my findings and conclusions.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method which fully acknowledges and utilises the insider/outsider juxtaposition, by exploring the personal experiences of the researcher through social, cultural and political contexts (Kelley, 2014). In so doing it 'challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act.' (Carolyn Ellis,

Adams, & Bochner, 2011: 1). More an art form (Duncan, 2004) than a science, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography (Eastman & Maguire, 2016; Carolyn Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010) . I follow in the footsteps of other autoethnographers who have explored within their own higher educational institution, including Sparke's study of embodiment in academic culture (Sparkes, 2007) Hayler's narrative on the professional identity of university lecturers (Hayler, 2011) and Doloreit and Sambrook's combined tale of the PhD thesis and viva voce (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2011).

As a member of staff within the institution, I regularly work and interact within and around 'the field' of my enquiry, however this is not analogous to 'doing' fieldwork, which I take to mean a type of inquiry characterised by personal involvement, commitment, and recording of data, aimed at gaining some understanding that can be shared with others (Wolcott, 2008). All autoethnographers have to work with 'partial' sides of themselves (Picker, 2014), however when undertaking autoethnography for a professional doctorate the boundaries between my different roles (employee, student, researcher and colleague) felt particularly porous. In the event I resolved to assume a co-presence in a more collective narrative, along side my co-participants and various project stakeholders. Much more than a solitary tale, this story is that of the staff member navigating her way with others through an increasingly unstable and uncertain HE work environment.

Interaction ritual

As a social scientist by nature, I have a strong interest in what people do when they are in one another's presence (Hausmann, Jonason, & Summers-effler, 2011), including the performing of social phenomena known as rituals. Goffman challenged any special status ascribed to social ritual by focusing on everyday ritual acts played out within social situations, (Goffman, 1959, 1967), the vast repertoire of which includes all the exchanges establishing how people interplay (Collins, 2004). With its potential to generate new insights, interaction ritualism has a strong intellectual history, including a long tradition in education (Gallant, 2013; Simsek, 1997), and has been previously used in ethnographic studies (Picker, 2014). Of particular relevance

to this study are theories of impression management within different social regions (Goffman, 1959, 1967) and in this case work-related contexts. This is done collectively through a performance involving actors and audience. Everyday interactions are performed in various regions,' which Goffman referred to theatrically as the front region ('front of stage'), the back region ('back of stage') and so on, with the latter perceived as a more liberal area of self-expression (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2015). For Goffman, the modern actor is a self-conscious, face saving individual who attempts to communicate particular picture of who they are and how they wish to be perceived by others. When ritual proprieties are broken or misunderstood, moral uneasiness and feelings of embarrassment result (Goffman, 1967: 12).

Another conceptual device I employed in analysis is that of a 'social world.' Social scientists use the term 'social worlds' to describe a whole array of different formations and systems. While theories concerning social worlds abound (Clarke, 1991; Ewing, 2005), sociological perspectives of social worlds can be said to share certain common assumptions: that there are predictable social relations in the world; that social situations will recur in certain patterns; and that social situations follow courses that can be understood (Ballantine and Roberts, 2009).

Data collection

My work in the field took place over a period of eighteen months, however the account I describe in this study concerns a women's development course with a 4-day attendance programme. All work was conducted according to the university code of ethics and was approved by the university research ethics subcommittee. Participants were informed of the lead researcher's role in advance, so that any objections could be expressed. A potential dilemma of participant observation is the effect that my role as observer could have on the situation (Robson, 2000) After introducing myself as a researcher to participants, I explained the nature of my research, participated in the various activities along with others, and used interpersonal skills to establish a natural rapport with different group members (Robson, 2000: 197).

Throughout my time in the field, I kept extensive notes, both handwritten and spoken into my iPhone. To allow for greater involvement in the program timetable, I did most of my note taking in the periods between activities, or while a facilitator was taking the lead. When I felt it important to fully engage in an experiential activity, such as during a role-play exercise or in a highly interactive workshop, I waited until the evening or the following morning to write about my experiences and observations. In this way, I was able to keep a detailed field diary of my autoethnographic reflections, to reflect on my own feelings as an individual and as a member of staff working within the university, note any changes taking place in my feelings and attitudes during the course of my fieldwork, and revisit emerging ideas and theories. Fieldwork for this study was extensive and included participation and observation, stakeholder discussions, and interviews with participants from a cross section of SSPs and work sectors. The following narrative explains the early stages of fieldwork, when I was still 'finding my feet.' I focus on this period because it describes me at a time when I was most conscious of the tensions between my personal and professional self. I have left the following section in the present tense to remain true to the recording style of my journal.

Findings from a women's development course

Day one: Relationship building

I begin my fieldwork by attending a four-day women's development programme. The programme has been offered to female staff from across the university, however this year I am the only faculty staff member. Unusually for me I arrive early, and to pass the time I converse with the woman nearest me. She is friendly and chatty, and we talk about the self -help books on display. It is only an ice- breaking conversation but it helps me to feel less alone. I'm conscious that the facilitators know I am a researcher. Will they be watching me taking notes?

Once everyone has signed in, the two facilitators address us as a group. The first one is a dynamo, and oozes enthusiasm. We begin with the ground rules: confidentiality, respect, there are no magic answers. 'Now it's quiet,' she says, 'but in an hour' she

tells us with gusto, 'we will struggle to get you all to shut up!' 'It all about you,' the second facilitator tells us, 'and having fun.' I watch them perform for us, and wonder if I ever sound that confident and doubt it.

Our first task is to get to know other members of our 'home group.' I am placed with three young women from corporate services. First impressions, we will get along okay, but part of me wishes I was with more mature women. Too quickly I feel the 'mummy' of the group. The youngest is shy and sweet; I want to protect her from any upsets. When she can't think of anything to say I encourage her. I weigh up how much of my life I would disclose to her.

In the afternoon we have a 'whole group' activity, where we circulate in what feels like an adult version of musical chairs. Just as I am beginning to feel more relaxed, we are asked to get into twos and I realise that everyone else is paired up. In an instant, I am transported back to my school days and feel *'left out of this game.'* But the facilitator intervenes and suggests that we work as a threesome. I later note in my diary how these concerns about social acceptance and rejection surface in me during group selection exercises, and it leaves me wondering whether I am a 'rejection-sensitive' person (DeWall & Bushman, 2011), or if everyone feels this way.

After this there is an exercise about what it means to be a woman. The group I'm with now is less placid. Some of young women have strong views. They say they want better drugs as solutions to their health- the older ones of us suggest they also consider alternatives. Maybe we think we have more experience of what it is to be a woman. There is a slight sense of friction, but it passes. As we exchange stories I start to warm up and relax. I begin to feel wanted by this group. I have been feeling like a 'dirty researcher,' but it seems they find my role interesting. There is some definite bonding going on. We are all girls together, and over the day we may become friends.

Day 2: Emotion work

'It's more about feelings today,' we are told. Some of the exercises involve examining and sharing our feelings in a group. The first person to speak says she is over emotional. 'This is a problem', she says, 'because people judge you by it.' I confess to being the same, and tell an anecdote about how I cried all the way through an important meeting. How I was angry with myself afterwards for not putting forward the points I wanted to make.

In different groups we are asked to consider what we would do if we won the lottery. How we would spend our money. But half of this has to go charity; it's not for us at all. Everyone is very quiet, as if they are deep in their imaginations. There is a definite sense of excitement at the idea that we have so much virtual money to spend. I find the first part of this exercise quite tricky. I won't give my money away lightly. I baulk at the idea that it might go into the pockets of charity administrators. Spending it on myself is very easy. I am a bit let down by my own materialism. Is this exercise about values or greed? When we share it becomes more fun. We all have problems selecting charities. We all wanted to see how our money was spent. We had some laughs about how to spend the money.

Finally, we watch a video about a horribly injured accident survivor, who overcomes his handicap and becomes a para-sportsman. I feel moved to tears (others are crying) and afterwards I question this type of emotional manipulation. Sometime later I hear 'through the grapevine' that the person who cried was asked to leave the room, so as not to upset the others. I feel mildly shocked by this. Where I wonder, does my role as researcher end, and that of 'fellow participant' begin?

Day three: Self-promotion and assertiveness

Today we have to consider our various skills. After a bit of encouragement each of finds skills to offer. I am pleased when someone from my group approaches me. 'You have the skills I'm most interested in,' in she says. 'If you run a course I'd like to come.' Self- doubt fades, a possibility I have put aside starts to reform in my mind. Maybe I'm too shy about some of the things I do. Maybe the facilitators are right, we

just have to go for it. But then I remember why it never happened. I was simply too busy, and probably still am.

Following on from this, we have a guest speaker. She's an executive something, and looks smart and intelligent. Some of the earlier speakers have come across as over confident and enthusiastic, but this one is also prepared to share her personal disappointments. Her story is touched with humour and, having gone through troubles myself, it rings true to me.

We then address confidence issues- things like 'I don't think I'm good enough', 'I'm not smart enough', 'I must say yes', et cetera. We are asked to draft an email in response to an aggressive email from a boss. The idea is to try to understand the boss's point of view and not be too passive aggressive. It prompts a lot of debate about whether to express feelings, admit mistakes or apologise. I realise that my usual response is to ignore or withdraw from conflict. 'Fear', we're reminded by the facilitator, 'comes in the way of assertiveness.' Fear that your feelings are not valued, that you are being a bully, that you might be the wrong, that people perceive you as aggressive. It's also about how women are perceived. I note to myself that my mother's negative response was generally passive aggressive. What effect did this have on me I wonder?

At the end of the day we practice our assertiveness skills in groups. I am working with two young women I do not know and I find their accents hard to follow. I play the beleaguered employee and my colleagues prove to be quite formidable as a boss and an observer whose presence induces an unexpected feeling of embarrassment. I want to 'save face' but I feel nervous and surprisingly irritated by my boss's intransigence and want the exercise to end. Following this exercise I feel hot and anxious. It was as if they were ganging up on me. My self-perception and self-image has been challenged by younger, less experienced colleagues and it takes me a while to reconcile this.

Day 4: Performing

Our final day of the program came at a busy time of year. I had to attend a meeting in the morning and do a presentation to management, where as a result of a sudden attack of stage fright, my presentation fails spectacularly in my eyes. This leaves me feeling pensive about why I can freeze up when I feel I am being watched and judged. What is it about 'performing' that phases me? It's pure Goffman territory, this need to keep up appearances, and the sense of shame attached to losing face. When I return to the program, ironically the groups are practising presentation skills in groups and I have a chance to perform my presentation all over again but unscripted. I am determined to do it properly and this time I 'win over' the group. It's such a relief to know that I could do this, even if it isn't of any real consequence this time.

Our final task is to present to others what we have learnt and gained from the program. We met in our home groups to pull together ideas. In the knowledge that it's the end of the course, and our time together as a group, and it's nearly Christmas, the class in good spirits. There is singing, poetry, pictures and carols and we finish laughing and in a jolly mood.

Discussion

Autoethnography explores the self specifically to understand a greater social and cultural experience (Ellis, 2009; Spry, 2007). As an insider ethnographer, I was in the privileged and relatively unique position of having access to a social world that, from an in-depth qualitative perspective, has hitherto been largely unexplored. Yet, on further analysis my position in this narrative appeared decidedly complicated. A multiplicity of identities (researcher, employee, human being, participant, work colleague) emerged from this autoethnography, not all of which fitted neatly together. In this section, I consider my time on the women's development program, its highs and lows, and the challenges it presented to me as a 'social performer.' Universities are political areas, and I consider the practical challenges inherent in my employee-researcher role. Finally, I ask whether, these types of face-to-face staff learning and development programs still serve an important function within the organisational culture in an environment somewhat swamped by self-governance

practices and entrepreneurial messages. I begin with my interpretation of the SSP social world.

The SSP 'social world'

Part work venue and part social arena, the SSP 'social world' I entered was a curious blend of the therapeutic and entrepreneurial. Through a series of embodied and communal interaction rituals (Goffman, 1967), participants were encouraged to examine their feelings, values and relationships, and share aspects of themselves with others. Activities on the programme I attended revolved principally around relationship building, emotion work, self-promotion and assertiveness, and performing. Both the relatively discrete location and the confidentiality code (what's said in the room stays in the room) and 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979) (such as treating others with respect) helped to create some sense of safety within this world. The informal nature this world allowed ample opportunity for social networking, while the various discussions and games we engaged in encouraged reflexivity and self-appraisal. Gender specificity, such as the women's development program described, also contributed to the sharing of gender oriented sentiments (e.g. ' all women together') lending a more intimate feel to some the activities.

Inhibitions and suspicions

Inhibiting factors to full engagement and emotional disclosure emerged which in my case included my self- identification as an academic, my position as a researcher and my critique of certain 'neoliberal' norms and messages endorsed through these programmes. By their very nature people (and reluctantly I include myself here) tend to seek out those with similar profiles and interests, and the mixing of participants from different backgrounds and sectors on SSPs helps to challenge this parochial thinking. Despite the alleged weakening of dividing lines between academia and administration in favour of more flexible work practices and relationships (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2013) personal experience confirms that a definite 'tribes and territories' mentality (Trowler, Saunders, & Bamber, 2012) still exists between these divisions in HE. What appeared to define my identity on SSPs (my own and others' perception of me) turned out to be not so much my researcher role, but my

position and perspective as a faculty member. Besides our shared status as women, I knew little about the world of most of my colleagues from the corporate side of our university, nor they of mine, and at least some of our time was spent fathoming out each others' worlds. Years of organisational life had also, I discovered, left me with a criticality absent in the young corporate service women with whom I spent a fair portion of my time on SSPs. Had I been with a group of 'veteran' academics, our discussions might have been of a different nature, including veering towards 'back of stage' gossip about the organisation (Michelson, van Iterson, & Waddington, 2010). From the research perspective this behaviour felt 'professional,' but nonetheless detracted from the candidness of these exchanges. Despite these reservations, getting to know staff from corporate services on a more personal level was ultimately rewarding, and allowed me insights into a world rarely afforded to academics.

In a world in which out of work friendships have been put under strain due increasing pressure and time at work, workplace friendships assume a greater importance for emotional support and wellbeing (Dickie, 2009). Studies suggest that emotionally supportive relationships may be considered more important to women than to men (Andrew & Montague, 1998; Morrison, 2009), including those in academia (Devos, 2004). In one study of work-based friendships, women were significantly more likely to perceive such friendship in terms of social and emotional support in times of stress, rather than for the career benefits or functional aspects of 'getting the job done' (Morrison, 2009). On the other hand, I remained conscious that as a work colleague I might well encounter participants and facilitators in other roles and in different situations, hinting at future intimacies or embarrassment if too much was disclosed. Other factors such as the open plan nature of some venue, and the natural propensity of people to gossip in the workplace (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Michelson et al., 2010) added to my concerns about the real extent of confidentiality on these programs. Participants I later interviewed expressed similar sentiments; one voicing concerns about the presence of managers on their program, another remarking that certain things were better 'safer to take outside.' Given the sensitive nature of some emotion-focused learning activities (such as sharing of personal

values, hopes and fears) managers may need to consider how best to provide learners with safe and politically neutral platforms from which they can work on themselves and make disclosures to others (Kahle-Piasecki, 2011; Parker, Hall, & Kram, 2008).

Life and theatre

As a social learning arena, the SSP social world had a distinctly theatrical feel. Participants, including myself, engaged in a range of solo and group performative exercises through learning games, role-play, presentations and more. Imagination games and role-play have long been used in education (Homrek and Roffey, 2009) and they added to the 'fun' element of SSPs. Dramatic strategies were also used in other ways, for example by bringing in 'role models' to narrate their 'success stories' or showing videos to illustrate the benefits of self-motivation. With their emphasis on experiential learning and self-reflection, SSPs are designed to be challenging, and participants, including myself, were made aware of this at the start of programs such as the women's development course I describe in this paper.

Theatrical devices are commonly used to facilitate personal growth and raising consciousness (Telesco, 2006). Adults in continuing education come with existing knowledge and skills (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) but also viewpoints, habits, values and mindsets accrued over years of internal and external reinforcement which together constitute their personal frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). These types of innovative, provocative activities an be employed to challenge and change 'hearts and minds,' but their use requires careful consideration and supervision (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller, & Schapiro, 2009) if they are to be more than just sources of amusement or emotional confusion for players (Fixsen, 2015; Mitchison and Khanna, 2010; Fisher-Yoshida, Geller, & Schapiro, 2009). Role play can involve the articulation of emotions which may contravene cultural conventions such as social distance (Goffman, 1963). What constitutes the 'best version' of ones self for instance, is highly dependent on the culture in which the actor is performing, and when a rule of conduct is broken, both actor and observer run the risk of becoming discredited and diminished in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1967). I found most role-play activities

acceptable, but there were times, such as during my mock meeting with an angry boss, when my professional 'persona' felt unduly threatened.

Without clear explanations and guidance 'experiential learning' devices can cause confusion for players, as the social codes (Goffman 1967: 9) governing such activities remains obscure. There is a risk that a player could inadvertently 'lose face' by behaving and answering in a manner that others might criticise. An example of this was the 'lottery game' where we were asked to consider our core values. In this case, the objective of the activity remained, for me at least, obscure, raising more questions than answers. Why did I need to consider these types of values in the first place, and what might I gain or lose from sharing them with others?

The video of the para-sportsman was undoubtedly moving, and contained a powerful message about achieving 'against all odds.' As dramatic devices, the emotional impact on adult participants of audio visual aids cannot be anticipated, but reactions they might create need to be addressed with sensitivity. In the example given of the crying participant the issue had to become a back of stage talking point, whereas some debriefing after the video might have allowed for a more complete resolution.

Emotion work and entrepreneurism

While their person-centred focus was no different from other personal development programs I have attended outside the workplace, the issues explored on the workplace based SSPs (e. g confidence, relationships) were largely framed within an entrepreneurial context. Some activities focused more on performance management (e.g. presentation skills), others on self-care (e.g. meditation, resilience), but there was a general blending of the two. This melding of the therapeutic and the entrepreneurial is, I suggest, a feature of our present, ethically confused modern life. What Furedi (2004) calls a 'therapy culture' has emerged, in which many everyday experiences are interpreted through emotive idioms, creating rather than lessening people's sense of vulnerability and emotional deficiency (Furedi, 2004, Ecclestone, 2007). From a critical perspective, self-development practices serve as a self-

governance tools (Kooiman & van Vliet, 2000), which through promoting individualism and self responsibility (Dilts, 2011; Peters, 2012) partly absolve the institution of their responsibilities in terms of wider staff wellbeing and corporate care initiatives. On a personal level I questioned the mixture of new work ethics this particular course appeared to promote as I felt the 'career athlete' (Kelly, Allender, & Colquhoun, 2007) did not sit that uncomfortably with my image of the perfect work-life balance.

Despite these observations, these types of staff development programmes serve a useful function in large organisations. From a social interaction perspective, SSPs provide staff with opportunities to engage in relationship building in a relatively informal environment, where people are encouraged to exchange stories, air their feelings and views, and acquire information from one another (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As adult learning and development forums, SSPs offer a range of experiential learning activities that, by engaging staff in interpersonal work and reflexive performances, help them to develop competences and skills they can then apply in 'real world' contexts in order to progress within a performance managed system. From an entrepreneurial perspective, they are one of the more engaging means of responding to the growing demands of the new careerism in universities (Clarke & Knights, 2015). With working life increasingly an individual, digitalized pursuit and now relatively bereft of communal rituals, it could be argued that SSPs play a valuable role in creating, not only a pool of 'emotional capital' (Gendron, 2005) but a more socially cohesive body of staff. This is to suppose that those who attend SSPs are in need of acquiring soft skills and that these competences are usefully employed within or beyond the organisation.

Personal learning

The work-based researcher treads a delicate path, all the more so when exploring areas potent with emotion. As an insider researcher, I learned many lessons concerning the negotiation of political issues such as access, loyalty and following institutional protocols while retaining my autonomy and self-determination as a doctoral researcher. At times this was problematic, such as when a manager

expressed concerns about my taking of notes due to fears of confidentiality breaches. Discussion of my researcher role helped to resolve this matter, but made me more conscious of my anomalous position as part investigator, part cohort member on these courses. As well as negotiating my way in the SSP world, I had to negotiate with, and explore my personal values, preferences and boundaries, including what to share with others. Albeit in a limited and temporary way, I was party to the emotional life of my fellow participants, and the relationships I formed with some of them have continued. This in itself has ethical implications for insider ethnography, possibly with long term consequences.

It has taken me time and considerable soul-searching to untangle the complex and often ambiguous feelings I experienced during and subsequent to my fieldwork. While I enjoyed my time on these programmes it has not been without reservation. I found the format of some programmes repetitive and lacking in variety, and questioned certain life style messages and norms they promoted. On the other hand, I met many fine people and made useful contacts. I felt supported in a way that I find very touching and I hope that I gave some emotional support in return. I would hesitate to call any one SSP personally transforming but reflectively participating in different programmes encouraged me to explore my own identity, to question my personal preferences and prejudices and examine my own belief systems in a more critical and politically nuanced manner. I have experienced for myself the 'emotional medley' produced during group work with others, and learned or invented different ways of working and connecting with aspects of myself. For example, realizing my emotional attachment to the traditional values of academic life and my preference for scholarship over entrepreneurism helped me to appreciate what I see as my work ethos and 'mission.' As something of a personal development 'junkie' this study has led me to question my compulsion to attend more and more self-development courses and re-assess my existing skills sets and fundamental life values more judiciously.

Final thoughts

While still a relatively new method of exploring the culture of large organisations, with its politically conscious heritage (Ellis et al., 2011; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010), autoethnography has the potential to bring into view what would otherwise be out of sight (Rappert, 2010), and to challenge taken for granted practices and to suggest new ways of reordering internal systems. I began this study with some fundamental questions concerning the nature and purpose of SSPs and inevitably the conclusions drawn from this study reflect my personal experience of a selection of available programs at a particular point in my life. In an increasingly faceless world, I consider these face-to-face programmes represent one of the more meaningful and satisfying genres of staff performance management, and as such deserve to remain part of the organisational staff development menu. At the same, I perceive tensions between the modern emphasis on self, and the realization of a healthier and more engaged workforce. By promoting individualistic approaches to staff health and wellbeing, attention can be diverted away from wider issues of power and powerlessness and from the other problems associated with the increased privatisation and competition within higher education such as job insecurity and competing work demands.

This is not a direct criticism of SSPs practises per se, but more a concern about their replacement of other forms of staff engagement and consultation. Concepts of self-care have coloured many of the personal and career decisions I have made in my life, and I remain convinced that, when practiced authentically, SSPs render both society and organisations better places in which to live and work. This viewpoint reflects my own ontological and political position and to assume that other participants featured in this research project shared my personal opinions and concerns would be misleading.

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