



## Article

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**At-home ethnography: A method for practitioners**

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## At-home ethnography: A method for practitioners

### Abstract

**Purpose** – A reflection on at-home ethnographic (AHE) practice is employed to unpack the backstage messiness of an account to demonstrate how management students can craft fine-grained accounts of their practice and develop further our understanding of management practices in situ.

**Design, Methodology, Approach** – The paper reflects upon an example of AHE from an 18 month period at a chemical plant. Through exposure and exploration the paper outlines how this method was used, the emotion involved and the challenges to conduct “good” research.

**Findings** – The paper does not seek to define ‘best practice’, it highlights the epistemic and ethical practices used in an account to demonstrate how AHE could enhance management literature through a series of practice accounts. More insider accounts would demonstrate understandings that go beyond distant accounts that purport to show managerial work as rational and scientific. In addition, such accounts would inform teaching of the complexities and messiness of managerial practice.

**Originality/Value** –Ethnographic accounts (products) are often neat and tidy rather than messy, irrational, and complex. Reflection on ethnographer (person) and ethnographic methodology (process) is limited. However, ethnographic practices are mostly unreported. By reflecting on ethnographic epistemic and ethical practices the paper demonstrates how a largely untapped area has much to offer both management students and in making a fundamental contribution to understanding and teaching managerial practice.

**Key Words** – At-home ethnography, insider accounts, managerial practice.

**Paper type** – Research paper.

## Introduction

Several authors call for more organisational ethnographies (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Author, 2010; Stewart and Aldrich, 2015). Accounts of managerial work are “distant from... understandings and experiences of practice” (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, p1246) and described in abstract ways far removed from practice. Consequently, details of daily managerial practices are largely neglected although there are notable exceptions (e.g. Dalton, 1959; Stewart, 1967; Watson, 1994; Author, 2005). Such accounts would provide a useful series of “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of practice and much more “fine grained” (Clarke, 1998, p.63) than abstract accounts of managerial work. This proposal is consistent with the “practice turn” (Schatzki et al., 2001) and calls to encourage practice based accounts (Whittington, 2011). By applying a “practice lens” (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011) to management we enhance our teaching (e.g. Whittington, 2003) and it enables critical engagement between distant theoretical texts and practical application.

In taking a “practice turn” two key areas will be addressed. First, by reflexively exploring the research *practices* of an “at-home ethnography” (hereinafter AHE) (Alvesson, 2009) of managers at a chemical production site. This includes an examination of how this AHE research was conducted by the author who was also the Human Resources (HR) Manager in the story. The methodological learning from the study is explored. In particular - challenges in the field, writing of AHE accounts and how distance might be achieved. Then, consideration is given to the potential to advance our understanding of management practice and the teaching of it. Second, more fine-grained, in-situ accounts from managers to develop our understanding of managerial practices. This means overcoming the tendency to use positivist approaches by dealing with two negative perceptions managerial students have of participant observation (i) *the time taken to conduct such research* and (ii) *insider accounts* being “anecdotal” or “unscientific”.

## At-home ethnography

AHE is “a process of creating knowledge through ...interpret[ing] acts, words and materials used by oneself and one’s fellow organisational members from a certain distance.” (Alvesson, 2009, p.162). AHE utilizes the researcher’s position and setting for research purposes. An insider is, potentially better able than outsiders to investigate and interpret events (Alvesson,

2009). This is ideal for managers conducting research projects during their academic studies, as it makes a virtue out of their access and intimate knowledge.

AHE builds on ethnography through the investigation of everyday work practices (Samra-Fredericks, 2010). However, there are also distinct differences between ethnography and AHE. Most notably, differences relate to the insider-participation and outsider-observation at various stages of the research process. Suchman (1987) uses the metaphor of the researcher as a canoeist who views the scene differently to the observer standing on the riverbank.

Whilst access to the research setting is excellent, insiders need to be aware of the “problematic side of closeness and personal involvement”, which requires careful reflection and an ability to “break out...from socially shared frameworks” (Alvesson, 2009, p.167). This “immersion must be accompanied by a critical, analytical, self-conscious awareness” (Coffey, 1999, p.32).

Pack (2011, p. 62) offers a useful vehicle for ethnographic self-reflexivity which he argues needs to focus on “producer, process and product”. The author would also add *practices* to this list.

The *product* is the output (e.g. journal article, thesis). The product is often “sanitized in leading journals, heavily influenced by the quantitative research tradition” (Donnelly et al 2013, p.7) which either enables reflexivity to be “ducked” or at the other extreme the ethnographer becomes the “central figure” (Buroway, 2003, p.653). The product is important bringing research into the public domain. However, presentation of the ethnography is neat and tidy rather than “messy, irrational, complex...” (Samra-Fredericks 2005, p.833).

Ethnographic accounts give information on the *producer* of the research enabling dialogue with the reader. Issues such as role, work experience, credibility, location, gender, race and age are usually addressed. Whilst reflexivity is important in AHE, it should not overwhelm the account and be “self-indulgent” (Coffey, 1999, p.155). Instead, the reader needs to understand how the researcher was able to have an “acceptable presence in the field [and] ordinary interaction... [so that] language, gesture and silence [are understood]” (Litcherman, 2017, p. 39). Researchers need to declare “biases, goals and foibles” (Tracy, 2010, p.841) along with their “epistemological and political baggage” (Johnson et al 2006, p. 142).

However, as Brinkmann (2007) helpfully points out, many of the key capabilities we have, as qualitative researchers, are also moral virtues. This perhaps keeps our research and its practice in check.

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3 Reflection on *process* is important, however, the term *process* suggests constraints, which  
4 contradicts our research of managerial *practices*. Process provides an overarching framework  
5 in which practices exist. Whilst process provides structure, practice is about spontaneity and  
6 ideas. “Process has to find the least amount of constraint necessary to enact the necessary  
7 amount of structure, to produce rigour without rigidity” (Brown and Duguid, 2000, p.93). To  
8 produce “good” research accounts “to prepare and forewarn other aspiring researchers”  
9 (Punch, 1986, p.13), we need to find a balance between the messiness of practice and the  
10 rigidity of process. We do so through being “transparent, open and honest” (Punch, 1986)  
11 about our practices to facilitate methodological learning. However, we should not prescribe  
12 rigid methodological processes, undermine our epistemology and constrain our ethnographic  
13 practices. Hopefully, there is room to navigate the “intricate entanglement of ethical and  
14 epistemic issues in qualitative research” (Brinkmann, 2007, p.137). The author does not  
15 prescribe a rigid, step-by-step method to achieve “good judgement” (ibid) instead, technical  
16 (epistemic) and ethical considerations are surfaced. To do this reflexivity is employed to  
17 consider personal and professional dilemmas and tensions between the author’s roles as HR  
18 Manager and AHE researcher. Such openness leaves the author vulnerable as he is no longer  
19 anonymized (Czarniawska, 2000, p.29). However, to fully comprehend practice we must  
20 experiment more with method rather than attempt to imitate what has gone before  
21 (Czarniawska, 2008a, p.14).

22  
23 A “turn to practice” offers a departure for both teaching and researching management. We  
24 can continue to teach management in a sanitized way or we can explore what happens in  
25 practice as experienced by the managers we teach. To advance this practice turn two key  
26 areas need to be addressed. First, more insider accounts from managers would embellish the  
27 field and allow for more transferability of learning. Second, is overcoming two negative  
28 perceptions managerial students have of ethnography – (i) *the time taken to conduct AHE* and  
29 (ii) *insider accounts* as “anecdotal” or “unscientific”.

### 46 47 **Time taken to conduct AHE**

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49 Ethnography usually takes a year or more which can be problematic for students who have  
50 limited time to complete a thesis. Academics may achieve these timescales through  
51 sabbaticals or by multiple visits to the organisation (Pettigrew 1985; Samra-Fredericks,  
52 2004). However, three-month ethnographic periods could address this. Stewart and Aldrich  
53 (2015) suggest two approaches to reduce research timescales. First, a shorter period of  
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3 ethnographic data gathering and second, using shorter-field methods or “rapid assessment”.  
4 Rapid-assessment accounts use other methods in tandem with short bursts of ethnography.  
5 Others have suggested “quick and dirty” (Hughes et al., 1994) and “applied” (Maginn, 2007)  
6 ethnographies. Notable examples of this in organizations include: combining ethnography  
7 with conversation analysis (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2010), extensive interviewing  
8 (Pettigrew, 1985), and diaries (Stewart, 1965). Managers make observations and access  
9 practices as daily and AHE adds process structure to these natural observation practices. The  
10 author would discourage quick and bland “vanilla pudding” (Ashforth, 2005) accounts.  
11 However, unlike outsider-academics, insider-managers save time as they have access and  
12 understand the language, practices and nuances. This gives a different meaning to the word  
13 ‘rapid’. In addition, for practitioner-students the supervisory relationship allows some  
14 outsider questioning and distance. So rapid research periods combined with rigorous  
15 distancing could facilitate wider use of insider accounts by practitioners.  
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### 26 **Insider accounts as unscientific**

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28 AHE involves participants immersing themselves but simultaneously, they are observers with  
29 wide ranging access. They are “insiders” with a clearer understanding of the setting and  
30 practices. However, when writing up their findings, insiders *become* “outsiders” who were  
31 (or continue to be) participants in the events being recounted. Operating as an “outsider” in  
32 this writing process, their accounts become more focused on analysis of social and cultural  
33 phenomenon, creating a reflexive rather than introspective personalised account. It is a  
34 difficult balancing act “to be close to the practice of organising while keeping enough  
35 distance to problematize it” (Czarniawska, 2008b, p.133). AHE researchers are actively  
36 involved in their story but some themes only emerge part way through the data gathering  
37 process or during analysis. AHE requires “some additional efforts... to escape the specific  
38 traps facing the insider” (Alvesson, 2009, p.169). During analysis research setting is viewed  
39 as an “outsider”. A specific device used in this paper to create distance between “insider” and  
40 outsider” is “decentring” the author through a third person writing style. This means the  
41 author is a character in the story but not necessarily at the centre of events. A decentered third  
42 person style is also adopted to explore the author’s reflections as this paper is about AHE  
43 practices and not about the author. Throughout the paper all reflections are shown in *indented*  
44 *italics*. Where the word “author” is used it can also be taken to read researcher/observer and  
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3 when the account is about the HR Manager this also means participant. In both cases the  
4 Author and the HR Manager are one and the same person.  
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6 Insider accounts receive criticism from management students and quantitative academics.  
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8 Management students tend to rely on “standardized surveys... [and] questionnaires”  
9 (Kaczynski et al., 2014, p128). From the author’s experience of management students this is  
10 exacerbated because many see “good research [is] equated with quantitative research”  
11 (Morey and Luthans, 2013, p87). This is consistent with Cassell (2017) who found her MBA  
12 students felt qualitative methods were unscientific or subjective compared with quantitative  
13 methods and qualitative research is criticised for lack of scientific discipline (Komorowska,  
14 2016). However, such criticisms presuppose research data can be acquired independently and  
15 needs to be subjected to “scientific” protocols. In AHE “good” research (if such a thing  
16 exists) relies on finding meanings and understanding how they were constructed. Research  
17 quality hinges on *face validity*, *reflexivity* and *transferability* along with the debate the  
18 account creates amongst readers. *Face validity* comes from telling a credible account and  
19 putting the reader into the situation to construct their own meaning through dialogue and  
20 debate. *Reflexivity* exposes and explores the researcher’s “blind wanderings” (Van Maanen,  
21 2011, p.153) and so enables the reader to understand the processes and practices of data  
22 gathering and the person who gathered it. This may involve assumptions made, details of the  
23 author’s personal characteristics, and make up. Again, this helps the reader judge the veracity  
24 of claims made by an account. In addition, reflexivity can heighten the creation of distance  
25 between being an insider and an outsider by seeing events through “fresh eyes” (Alvesson,  
26 2003). Reflexivity is not a panacea but it is a vital part of ethnographic integrity. It enables  
27 the reader to engage with events described and to challenge interpretations and claims made  
28 by the researcher. AHE uncovers a multiplicity of meanings and an account is another social  
29 construction. Reflexivity enables the reader to judge the “credibility” (Lincoln and Guba,  
30 1985) and “trustworthiness” (Czarniawska, 2008b) of an account but it does not claim to  
31 discover *the* truth as no such thing exists. Hopefully though, an account adds to the reader’s  
32 own understanding and meaning making process. *Transferability* is preferred in favour of  
33 generalisability in AHE. Some have claimed transferability is pandering to a positivist agenda  
34 (Amis and Silk, 2008). However, here transferability is about taking learning and meanings  
35 from one setting to another. It is not about finding a quasi-standardised universal process for  
36 transferability as no situation is the same, but lessons learned from similar situations can be  
37 transferred. Managers adopt the same approach by taking past events and identifying their  
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3 resonance in a new context. The insider accounts of management in practice we generate, the  
4 better we can learn, understand and teach it. The author “rejected generalisability” (Johnson  
5 et al, 2007, p.142) as a condition from his doctoral viva. Instead, he demonstrated  
6 transferability from a chemical plant into different contexts (e.g. a university, the National  
7 Health Service. A personal example of an AHE study is used here to explore key issues with  
8 the AHE processes and practices.  
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### 12 13 **The story of Chemco and Burnsland**

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15 The full AHE account is reported elsewhere (Author, 2005; Author, 2010) here the focus is  
16 on methodological issues. However, before moving to methodology there follows a brief  
17 overview of the ethnographic context. This AHE study focuses on a chemical plant,  
18 “Burnsland”, located in a rural location in Scotland. The Burnsland site had nine production  
19 lines and was acquired for \$1 billion from a UK multinational (HCI) by an American  
20 multinational (Chemco). As well as acquiring this site, Chemco acquired other production  
21 sites in Holland and America and a large UK research and commercial centre.  
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27 *The Author was HR Manager at Burnsland having just joined the site before*  
28 *Chemco acquired it. He had been working in other HCI locations for ten years,*  
29 *but was new to Burnsland. He was also studying as a part-time Doctoral student*  
30 *and decided to drop his “postmodern dabbling” (“taking him nowhere fast”) and*  
31 *instead started documenting events at Burnsland to see what transpired.*  
32 *Immediately, he started to take notes, write down quotes and gather*  
33 *documentation. Initially, it was thought the story would be about mergers and*  
34 *acquisitions or Human Resources, ultimately this was a by-product to the main*  
35 *stories uncovered. The research period lasted 18 months but at the outset, this*  
36 *was an unknown and the researcher was a full time Chemco employee. The end to*  
37 *the research period came at a natural break between key events at Burnsland. At*  
38 *the same time, the Author began reading a mix of literature on post-*  
39 *structuralism, communities of practice theory and actor-network theory. Rather*  
40 *than choose an AHE approach, AHE chose the Author. The method appealed to*  
41 *the Author’s view that the world is socially constructed from a collection of*  
42 *meanings and sensemaking processes. By collecting these meanings and*  
43 *observing sensemaking in situ, the later applying additional layers of analytical*  
44 *sensemaking the AHE process appeared to be a perfect fit.*  
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3 At Burnsland, managers were initially excited by the possibilities the acquisition afforded  
4 them. They talked of “symbiotic technologies and processes” and “opportunities to share  
5 creative possibilities and product secrets”.

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8 *The Author had a choice to remain with HCI but he volunteered to transfer to*  
9 *Chemco for the same reasons as the Burnsland managers and for the chance of*  
10 *promotion, a company car and to lead the HR function across two sites.*

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13 There was little resistance to the acquisition locally as Burnsland had both specialist  
14 capacities not available elsewhere and more mass production potential than any other site.  
15 However, this changed dramatically when Chemco’s strategy became clear and most of the  
16 account focuses on how managers attempted to delay and divert the strategic intent of the  
17 organisation.  
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22 *The Author, in his role as HR Manager, was involved as an active participant in*  
23 *this delaying and diverting.*

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26 In brief, Chemco senior management decided to rationalise production in both America and  
27 Europe – identifying what production lines to close, what to keep, invest in and develop.  
28 They asked for output figures from all production plants. The site in Holland supplied *future*  
29 *projections*, whilst Burnsland supplied *actual* figures. Accordingly, the Burnsland site was  
30 compared unfavourably to the one in Holland by the post-acquisition process; unfairly in the  
31 view of Burnsland managers because the site in Holland had no history of achieving such  
32 projections. However, as these future projections were higher than Burnsland’s actual figures,  
33 Chemco decided and announced it would close three production lines at Burnsland out of a  
34 possible nine, and to make 200 compulsory redundancies (80 of which within 90 days), and  
35 also made plans for two more production line closures to follow, which it left unannounced.  
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37 The new Site Manager, a Chemco employee of 30 years, sought to manage this change as a  
38 planned process of closure and redundancy, but the local Burnsland managers privately  
39 resisted. One of these managers was then side lined by the Site Manager and told he would be  
40 transferred, which shocked the others whose resistance to production line closures then went  
41 underground. Several of these managers were then given the task of delivering the closure  
42 and redundancy programme, through a regular meeting everyone called “the engine room”.  
43 Publicly the engine room appeared to side with the Site Manager, while backstage it  
44 simultaneously set about slowing down the change programme and seeking ways to derail it  
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altogether. The engine room managers used policies and procedures in intricate ways to slow the change down.

At the end of the research period the outcomes were (i) Only two out of three production lines announced for closure as part of the plan were closed on time; (ii). The third production line targeted for closure was kept open; (iii) The 200 compulsory redundancies did not happen, instead 100 volunteers signed up for redundancy but these redundancies happened over eighteen months not immediately; (iv) delays which kept the third line open allowed engine room managers to demonstrate the site in Holland had difficulties masked by its projected production figures and, in consequence, Burnsland secured £9m investment into its remaining lines; (v). The two “unannounced” production lines privately earmarked for closure were reprieved indefinitely; (vi). The Site Manager returned to America to take early retirement just after the research period.

The focus now moves on to methodological issues faced in conducting this AHE account.

### **What can we learn from how the research was conducted?**

The key areas of the AHE process: *gaining entry; conducting in the field; recording the data; analysis; and exiting the field*. Each of these are explored in turn.

#### *Gaining entry to Burnsland*

Ethnography involves outsiders “breaking into” a setting (Alvesson, 2009, p.162). For example, Samra-Fredericks (2003, p.148) talks of “protracted negotiations” to gain access. However, in AHE ethnographers are already insiders who may have “a better feeling for what goes on...deeper and more profound knowledge of a setting.” (Alvesson, 2009, p.163). As Czarniawska (2012, p.132) points out participant observation where the researcher is a full participant like Dalton (1959) and Watson (1994) is an “undoubtedly superior” form of organisational research achieved

*In the AHE case recounted here, the HR Manager had worked in HR for 15 years, 10 of these for HCI prior to conducting this research. During the acquisition phase, he managed the processes related to transferring all European employees to Chemco. He then elected to transfer and relocated to Burnsland as HR Manager. He had met several of his new managerial colleagues in his previous roles.*

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3 Alvesson (2009, p.169) suggests that “being a newcomer and thus having to learn the local  
4 culture makes the job [of AHE] in some ways intellectually easier, but politically riskier and,  
5 possibly, emotionally more stressful”.

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8 *In this case the HR manager was a newcomer to Burnsland and Chemco but, like*  
9 *fellow managers being acquired, he was an old-hand from HCI. As Author, this*  
10 *meant he had some level of detachment and could “break out” much easier as a*  
11 *newcomer but at the same time he had to prove his credibility as an HR manager*  
12 *“breaking in”.*

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17 Gold (1969, p.35) argues that in the early stages of entering the field “...informants may be  
18 somewhat uneasy about him [or her] but their uneasiness is likely to disappear when they  
19 learn to trust him [or her]”. However, the process of gaining trust could also influence the  
20 responses or vary the access availability.

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24 *In this case the Author did not face this problem so much as an ethnographer*  
25 *but more so as a practitioner. Entering Burnsland as the new HR Manager,*  
26 *transferring from elsewhere in the UK, meant some employees mistook him for*  
27 *a Chemco employee, and some saw him as being an outsider to Burnsland.*  
28 *Some managers at Burnsland knew the HR Manager’s career history, and he*  
29 *had met several of them in his prior roles, or in the handling of the sale to*  
30 *Chemco. However, he gained most credibility as a practitioner by producing*  
31 *what one manager described as “the best communication pack we have*  
32 *received from HR”. One of the Operations Managers said “It was [HR*  
33 *Manager] who wrote this”. This made the HR Manager feel pleased that his*  
34 *work had been recognised and he saw that it led to his acceptance as a full*  
35 *insider. However, his credibility as HR Manager was quickly tested when the*  
36 *Site Manager announced the Operations Manager would be removed from his*  
37 *job. As the HR Manager was away on business at the time this happened, on his*  
38 *return, he was quizzed separately by three managers to find out if he had known*  
39 *this was going to be announced and if he had planned his absence to avoid the*  
40 *issue. However, he did not know about the Site Manager’s intentions. This*  
41 *became apparent when he told managers the Site Manager’s behaviour was*  
42 *unacceptable and if he had known he would have insisted that the Operations*  
43 *Manager was notified in private before telling the team. This was a challenging*  
44 *time for the Author both as Author and HR Manager as he was put under*  
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3 *pressure and his words and his facial reactions were clearly being scrutinised*  
4 *by the three managers. Any concerns for the Author and his research were a*  
5 *long way behind what it might have meant for his future as an effective and*  
6 *trusted HR Manager.*  
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10 In AHE terms however, the Author had an “acceptable presence” as an HR Manager  
11 and a clear understanding of the scene being observed as both an author and an HR  
12 Manager.  
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### 15 16 17 *Conduct in the field*

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19 McCall and Simmons (1969, p.5) argue that the researcher may become actively involved  
20 in the activities of the field and “can thus acquire directly some sense of the subjective  
21 states of the participants, [however] this sense remains his own and cannot merely be  
22 assumed to correspond to that of others”.  
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26 *Here, the HR Manager as an insider was involved in managing the redundancy*  
27 *process and deciding which production lines to close. It is not assumed that the*  
28 *Author’s own experience is the same as that of others nor is it assumed that his*  
29 *motives as an HR Manager are reflected in the behaviour of others.*  
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33 However, AHE accounts cannot ignore emotional engagement and such research cannot be  
34 done effectively without the researcher becoming emotionally engaged.  
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37 *Many of the Author’s actions as HR Manager were based on his HR*  
38 *professional need to treat people in ways they were accustomed to and legally*  
39 *entitled to under their contracts, which had transferred with them. He also*  
40 *gained a strong feel for the impact that redundancies were likely to have on the*  
41 *small rural community, given Chemco was the largest and best paying employer*  
42 *in the area. The Author did feel a personal need to respect the needs and*  
43 *concerns of others and believed they should be treated fairly. This is a strong*  
44 *part of the Author’s make up and upbringing. This was one of the reasons he*  
45 *chose HR as a career, and later course leadership. As the HR Manager was*  
46 *involved in making 200 people redundant, he was aware of the need for social*  
47 *responsibility. The engine room managers (including the HR Manager/Author)*  
48 *were concerned to treat people with the same level of dignity and fairness, as they*  
49 *would have done in HCI. As the Author, the only issue where the Author*  
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3 *struggled with fairness and dignity was in relation to the duplicity towards the*  
4 *Site Manager. However, the power relationship was skewed in the Site*  
5 *Manager's favour. The HR manager had faced intimidation to comply from the*  
6 *Site Manager and the Directors above him. For example, several senior*  
7 *Chemco managers were at pains to remind him he "could have a promising*  
8 *future" [with the aim of getting the HR Manager to conform to their plan] and he*  
9 *"should align himself to the organisation".*  
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14 This is consistent with Brinkmann's (2007) suggestion of the interplay between  
15 qualitative researchers' skills and their moral virtues.  
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18 *Today, the economic decline caused by these redundancies is now apparent in*  
19 *shop closures and dilapidated buildings in Burnsland town centre coupled with*  
20 *the rise in the number of cheap goods and charity shops. As both an HR*  
21 *Manager and Author, there was a strong personal and professional need to be*  
22 *comfortable with his own behaviour as both an insider and an outsider. Visiting*  
23 *the town nowadays the Author still feels guilt and some responsibility for its*  
24 *demise – even if he was instrumental as HR Manager in saving some jobs.*  
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3 During AHE observation, events and situations emerge and dilemmas arise which the  
4 researcher must work through as they arise, making decisions that appear to be right at the  
5 time. This view is echoed by Van Maanen (1982, p.138) who claims, there are no simple,  
6 pre-formulated answers to dilemmas since we have no a priori knowledge of the situations  
7 we are likely to get into. Rather than sanitizing or airbrushing out our dilemmas, surfacing  
8 and addressing them through reflexivity in our writing makes the vulnerabilities of our  
9 research visible even if it is not possible to resolve the dilemmas. This is where the idea of  
10 AHE practices (rather than prescribed processes) comes into play. There may be creative  
11 and/or spontaneous solutions to practice issues arising in the field that cannot be pre-  
12 scribed for every context and circumstance. Here contextual practice may need to override  
13 process rigidity. The researcher is usually better placed at the specific moment to make a  
14 'live' judgement of the beneficence (doing-good) and non-maleficence (avoiding doing  
15 harm) to participants in a rapidly changing and dynamic setting (Iphofen, 2013, p. 16). In  
16 hindsight the judgements may be challenged and societal views may change the  
17 acceptability of such decisions but reflexivity enables the surfacing of how decisions were  
18 arrived at.

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29 *The HR Manager was faced with dilemmas over his values and the need to treat*  
30 *people fairly, within the law and with an eye to the longer term for the business*  
31 *and the community. Simultaneously he had to cope with intimidation and threats*  
32 *to his role and future career. As an Author this issue was not explored until*  
33 *much later on when the Author had left Chemco and was between jobs.*  
34 *Although the consequences for him as an HR Manager and the possibility of*  
35 *losing his job as a result of his actions was a constant subconscious thought.*  
36 *Since these events the Author recounted his story to an HR practitioner who*  
37 *immediately felt the Author's loyalties should have been to the organisation. On*  
38 *further reading of the account the HR practitioner changed her mind as she*  
39 *could clearly see that the Author had stood up for his values as an HR*  
40 *professional. Personally, the Author (and HR Manager) never had such doubts*  
41 *as he would have rather worked elsewhere than compromise on his principles*  
42 *and "moral virtues". For the HR Manager it was always about the day job and*  
43 *the Author was often relegated to a note taker who worked harder in the*  
44 *evenings. As the Author this was never about achieving his doctorate as there*  
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3 *were much easier routes and until 6 months into this process it was not clear*  
4 *how this would pan out.*  
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8 *Recording the data*  
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10 Lofland (1971, p.112) suggests that researchers should record detailed notes as soon after  
11 observation as possible to avoid memory lapses. This enables vivid pictures to be  
12 summoned up months later from field notes and not from vague or tainted memory. The  
13 field notes may take as long to write up as the time spent in observation.  
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17 *In writing field notes the Author could use the common practice of Burnsland*  
18 *managers of writing notes in their note books – even if his notes were more*  
19 *copious than normal. The Author’s notes were written on one side of his notebook*  
20 *and the blank facing page was left for any personal reflections and the*  
21 *downloading of feelings.*  
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26 *Where it was not possible to make notes at the time he could write quick notes*  
27 *immediately after various meetings, during toilet breaks, or by writing notes up*  
28 *and any reflections on events every evening. During the research, he could access*  
29 *extensive managerial practices far beyond his HR role. The Author was rarely*  
30 *marginalised and when he was, he managed persuade others to give him access*  
31 *or to give him information or documentation about an event he missed. As well*  
32 *as extensive field notes a wide range of written documents were gathered. These*  
33 *ranged from e-mails, letters, procedures, presentations, agreements, media*  
34 *reportage and internal records.*  
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41 This additional research data gathering is akin to the “rapid assessment” approach suggested  
42 by Stewart and Aldrich (2015).  
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3 *The Author decided to write down as much as possible as he felt it was better to*  
4 *capture everything as it happens and decide later the relevance and importance*  
5 *of specific events. He also took copies of all documentation that came his way*  
6 *as HR Manager.*  
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10 Gathering as much information and ethnographic evidence at this stage cannot be  
11 underestimated as the importance or “remarkability” of events is not always obvious  
12 until sometime later.  
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15 *The Author was grateful for the prior knowledge of Orr’s (1996) honest*  
16 *reflection that his own field notes omitted certain information that was taken-*  
17 *for-granted and obvious to participants but perhaps less obvious and more*  
18 *remarkable at the analysis stage. Where data was known, but not in the field*  
19 *notes, the Author at the analysis stage had to either find the data in other*  
20 *documentation or it was not used as he felt that was sound rigorous AHE*  
21 *practice. However, given the wide range of topic areas the Author omitted from*  
22 *his doctorate this did not prove to be a substantial issue!*  
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28 The physical and mental fatigue associated with AHE should not be underestimated.  
29 Working full time as a management practitioner is difficult but AHE adds an observational  
30 and note taking role to this.  
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34 *The HR manager worked 10 hours a day on average, was quite often involved in*  
35 *working against the direction his senior manager intended and had to retain*  
36 *competing agendas in his head and think on his feet. All these activities were as*  
37 *an insider only and form part of the everyday role of a manager trying to make*  
38 *sense of the work situation and to use micro politics and economies of the truth*  
39 *in pursuit of local interests over those of the macro organisation (Chemco).*  
40 *Then as an Author/outsider, he went home and wrote his notes up each night. It*  
41 *was hard some evenings to summon up the energy or see the point of the note*  
42 *taking but he persevered.*  
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49 Other ethnographers have made similar comments. For example, Law (2004, p.108)  
50 describes how he “escaped” to his car to eat lunch and get some peace from the  
51 overwhelming amount of research data and Samra-Fredericks (2005, p.807) goes so  
52 far as to say it is a “debilitating” research method.  
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3 *The Author was new to the Burnsland region so he had just bought a new house*  
4 *that needed renovation. In addition, he had started a new relationship with a*  
5 *local woman who he could not disclose any of this story to due to the tight knit*  
6 *nature of the community. Thankfully, she got to read the full story when he left*  
7 *Chemco and they were married. As an Author his only sounding board during*  
8 *research was a very good PhD supervisor and ethnographic stories from others*  
9 *for company. So often a lonely, exhausting and, at times, tedious experience.*  
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### 17 *Analysis*

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19 In the field at-home ethnographers are primarily participants so tend to be close to people and  
20 events being studied. When they leave the field or undertake analysis they need to create  
21 distance. Ethnographers have a similar issue but it is not as stark because they start as  
22 outsiders and usually they return to being outsiders. At-home ethnographers are likely to  
23 remain as participants beyond the research period. To overcome this issue AHE accounts  
24 need to make the taken-for-granted, cryptic and the familiar sufficiently strange as to become  
25 critically analysable, storyable and remarkable. In the study reported above, frequent use of  
26 quotes or indications of some cryptic utterances or action made by a manager *in situ* are  
27 employed. Then some context is added and care is taken explaining the background  
28 knowledge assumed. For example (Author, 2010, p. 907)  
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35 *[HR Manager] suggested that “HCI severance procedures could be used to*  
36 *manage things”. (A cryptic utterance) These procedures had evolved to resolve*  
37 *a specific dispute elsewhere in HCI and were common practice across sites*  
38 **(explanation of background knowledge assumed)**...*Thus, HCI old-timers could*  
39 *infer from [HR Manager’s] cryptic comments that the Engine Room process*  
40 *using “HCI severance procedures” would be voluntary and could be used to*  
41 *delay redundancies and production line closures. Picking up on this cryptic*  
42 *inference, in reply, one middle manager said: “I’m glad that [Site Manager] is*  
43 *away in the States”, a remark, which made transparent to everyone that what was*  
44 *being agreed here, behind [Site Manager’s] back was a way of slowing down the*  
45 *redundancy strategy whilst appearing to progress it by due procedure*  
46 **(explanation of background knowledge assumed).** *This view was echoed by*  
47 *negative comments made throughout the meeting as participants: (a) distanced*  
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3 *themselves from the Chemco way of managing redundancy and (b) began to see*  
4 *the alternative was the old HCI way... No manager had publicly stated a*  
5 *collective desire to conspire against Chemco's post-acquisition closure and*  
6 *redundancy strategy but they had all begun to see and pursue an alternative*  
7 *strategy, of voluntary redundancies, warranted by their collective recollection of*  
8 *an old HCI way of conducting redundancies.*

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13 Alvesson (2003, p.185-87) suggests several ways in which the researcher may be able to look  
14 at their familiar home-base with fresh eyes, three of which were employed in this AHE  
15 account: (i) Taking naturally occurring breakdowns of participants' understandings within the  
16 site as opportunities to inspect their assumptions and expectations; (ii) Considering "irony  
17 and self-irony... to create a certain distance to more serious arguments put forward" (p.185-  
18 6); and (iii) challenging common sense and "shaking around fixed pre-understandings"  
19 (p.186).

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25 *The Author found (i) The acquisition and post-acquisition process pitted the*  
26 *incoming Chemco management's view of Burnsland against the local (newly*  
27 *acquired) management's view creating a natural breakdown of assumption and*  
28 *expectations; (ii) The newly acquired managers readily ironized the viewpoints*  
29 *and manoeuvres of the incoming Site Manager, making visible amongst insiders,*  
30 *emerging differences of opinion about the nature of proper or improper HR*  
31 *management practices and; (iii) The Author, whilst still an insider, then analysed*  
32 *daily activities within conceptual frameworks. In these ways, the Author carried*  
33 *out careful reflection of his field notes to "break out" and "liberate" himself*  
34 *from the frameworks of Burnsland and Chemco.*

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41 This is achieved by making the home-base as an insider strange to himself and reportable in  
42 terms which described and explained management work practices to his own satisfaction but  
43 viewed them through a filter of outsider analysis

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47 Two devices were employed to create further distance between insider and outside - a  
48 third person style in the writing of the account and using pseudonyms throughout the  
49 accounts.

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52 *Using this approach the Author adopts two identities as inside participant and*  
53 *outside observer, which, helps him distance himself from his own setting and*  
54 *research and creates distance so that things can be seen differently. The Author*

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3 *prefers to write in this way as he has no intention to write an auto-ethnographic*  
4 *account and prefers not to adopt poetic or performative literary practices.*  
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6 This is consistent with Gannon (2006, p.480) who draws upon Foucault to suggest that  
7 adopting “writing practices that aim to displace or “disassemble” the self” (Rabinow, 1997, p.  
8 xxxviii). This is also the style that has been adopted in this paper as it is about one attempt at  
9 AHE not about the author. For example:  
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12  
13 *When recently analysing the field notes as an outside observer the Author thought*  
14 *“wow did I actually say that – I cannot believe it.”*  
15  
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17 The downside of using pseudonyms and writing in the third person is that the reader may get  
18 a feeling that AHE has a flavour of something covert; even though in this case the study was  
19 overt and, in the interest of ethics, managers were aware of the research.  
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22  
23 *When the Author became Burnsland HR Manager and decided as the Author to*  
24 *take notes of events, he had no idea at that point redundancies would become the*  
25 *key focus of events. There was no sense of how events would unfold or what*  
26 *research outcomes were likely to be, he just thought events surrounding an*  
27 *acquisition might lend themselves to such inquiry. As an at-home ethnographer*  
28 *actively engaged in the story some themes that usually emerge in the analysis*  
29 *phase become clear part way through the data gathering process when several*  
30 *stories begin to emerge within the field notes. Stories about the engine room*  
31 *became clear after 6 months. But the full analysis took place after the Author left*  
32 *Chemco and subsequent analysis of the field notes has identified topics such as*  
33 *management behaviour (Author, 2005; Author, 2008), HR practices (Author,*  
34 *2010), safety and so on.*  
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42 A gap between data gathering and analysis may not be immediately clear and this can make  
43 distance harder to achieve. However, moving from data gathering to analysis is a significant  
44 break in the process for distance to occur.  
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47 In this case the analysis was in three phases: - familiarisation; categorising and creating a  
48 conceptual framework.  
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51 *Familiarisation* involved reading all the data line by line looking for patterns. The aim was to  
52 look for: (i) Data that did not fit with previous knowledge, theory or official accounts; (ii)  
53 Apparent contradictions and inconsistencies between expressed beliefs and attitudes and what  
54 was said and done at other times; (iii) Actions, words or behaviours that appeared repeatedly;  
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(iv) Things commonly done or said in one context but not in others; (v) Unremarkable and taken-for-granted common occurrences may be viewed differently and made remarkable.

*The hegemonic or official account on redundancies was to progress redundancies quickly and compulsorily with product transfers made to other product lines around Europe and America. However, an antenarrative was evident on the redundancy process [as the example above demonstrates]. The data, actions, behaviours and words did not fit the official account and were recurring. Similar behaviours and actions were also evident in other areas (e.g. safety practices and product transfers to other production lines). The story was rife with contradictions. If the Author had started out to study redundancy procedure it would hardly be regarded as remarkable or interesting. However, the managerial practices were much more complex and definitely remarkable.*

Categorising then involved going through field notes line by line and event by event looking for quotes and behaviours that fitted the patterns identified in the familiarisation phase.

*A conceptual framework was developed. In the original AHE study (Author, 2005) this process was followed and two key events were identified – Asset Rationalisation processes (production line closures, product transfers) and Engine Room processes (redundancy handling) and there were distinct behaviours in each of these two processes with contradictions and inconsistencies between them. In later research work specific issues have been considered such as HR practice (Author, 2010) or management sensemaking (Author, 2008) and looked for all data relating to HR or management sensemaking practices.*

By applying an additional analytical lens it is possible to create a conceptual framework to provide a deeper form of analysis and critique of the account. The creation of a conceptual framework provides another way to create distance.

*When parts of this account have been told elsewhere other lenses have been used - Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Author, 2005); Narrative Analysis (Author, 2008) and Communities of Practice Theory combined with ANT (Author, 2005; Author, 2010).*

Through this *reflexive* (Alvesson et al., 2008) application of a critical lens we are able to use fresh eyes and “help shake around fixed pre-understandings” (Alvesson, 2003, p.185-87).



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3 *In this account, decentring the Author is achieved by creating distance during*  
4 *analysis and writing in a third person style. This enables a full telling of a realist*  
5 *tale with the Author as a character in the story but not necessarily as the centre*  
6 *of events. Much of the analysis took place after the other left Chemco, although it*  
7 *had not been his original intention to leave.*

### 13 *Exiting the field*

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15 The ethnographer, as an outsider, knows at some stage they will leave the field. In the case  
16 of AHE it is about ceasing research to return to complete participation or may involve  
17 leaving the organisation for another job.  
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21 *The Author remained as HR Manager for another few months and then left to*  
22 *work in a University. The Author and HR Manager did not compromise his*  
23 *principles and moral virtues. The research period was a tumultuous time in the*  
24 *Author's life but one in which he learned a lot about himself, his*  
25 *professionalism and his capabilities as a researcher. Anyone who has*  
26 *completed a doctorate knows, it requires incredible tenacity to stick with it to*  
27 *the end. With AHE this was also true of keeping field notes, writing up nightly*  
28 *and remembering to collect documents. The Author was always an HR manager*  
29 *and never intended to become an academic, so maintaining professional*  
30 *credibility as well as personal values was important and incredibly challenging.*  
31 *Whilst leaving Chemco was the right thing to do it was a worrying time as*  
32 *needed to find another job. When the Author moved into academia, it was his*  
33 *HR professionalism that got him the job as he had credibility to teach HR*  
34 *practitioners. With a few years in a university writing up his thesis also enabled*  
35 *a 'break out' and the use of 'fresh eyes'. Writing about events at Burnsland in*  
36 *various ways subsequently can feel like the Author is trapped in a video that we*  
37 *watch every Christmas and yet see different things each time we watch it.*  
38  
39 *Thankfully, there have been other research projects!*

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41 Leaving the field may be determined by circumstances as in the case of Punch (1993) when  
42 his 6 months of sabbatical and holiday ended. Such a time period fits with Stewart and  
43 Aldrich's (2015) suggestions for shorter ethnographies through "rapid assessment".  
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Evidence exists of anthropologists in non-business settings undertaking shorter periods of fieldwork (see Stewart and Aldrich, 2015) so why not in business settings?

By engaging reflexively with this AHE account and taking a “practice turn” as both Author and HR Manager the paper takes a definite departure from rigid prescriptions of what constitutes ‘good research’. Through this approach the dilemmas and messiness of AHE practice has been explored in order to help promote a new wave of such reflections.

By drawing on Pack’s (2011) product, person and process approach a clear view of AHE can be developed from the Burnsland account. The product in this case is relatively clear cut. For the Author it is a thesis and publications whereas product for the HR Manager means doing the day job in an attempt to achieve specific work goals. The person in AHE is less clear and the two roles become conflated. The Author describes himself, his own foibles, characteristics and role credibility but this is intertwined with his HR Manager persona. However, there are clear differences between the Author and the HR Manager in relation to role experience and credibility. Process is also clear in this account and on the face of it quite simple to explain. For the Author it is the AHE process framework and for the HR Manager it is the Redundancy process. However, by focusing on practice, the dilemmas, choices and messiness of AHE become more apparent and through this particular reflexive account the messiness and complexities of the HR Manager’s work are clearly identified.

Finally, to add an additional layer of reflexivity and also in the spirit of this special issue, the Author will reflect upon the journal peer review process. For this idea the Author is most grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers.

*The Author has experienced reviews with previous submissions and as Ashforth (2005, p.401) argues reviews do “separate the wheat from the chaff and thus enhance the quality of the wheat”. However, he continues by arguing that the process of review can result in writing the paper the reviewers want rather than the one the author originally intended just to ensure publication.*

*For the current review process, the reflexivity has been improved considerably by the reviewers’ comments. The Author has finally resolved a long-standing dilemma he had always grappled with on his ethical position. Technically (epistemic) the Author has always been able to robustly defend his AHE choices. Largely because in the pseudo-scientific world in which we live the choice is defence or write ‘scientific’ research. However, ethically the 2 burning questions*

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3 *for the Author have been – was I an ethical HR practitioner? And was I an*  
4 *ethical AHE researcher. The review process has made that visible to me and the*  
5 *answer now is very clearly – yes. Whilst having such a dilemma was very good*  
6 *for the soul and made me question my practice in both roles I can now lay it to*  
7 *rest.*

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11 *As HR Manager the Author challenged the organisations' unethical behaviour*  
12 *over its process for production line closures and subsequent redundancies. This*  
13 *unethical behaviour could not be raised openly as the organisations' treatment of*  
14 *the first person to do so demonstrated. As AHE Researcher the Author was overt*  
15 *and managers were aware of the research. By writing with pseudonym, apart*  
16 *from the Author, nobody is adversely affected by the publication. In addition by*  
17 *bringing the research to light managers and scholars may benefit in some ways*  
18 *from the accounts.*

## 26 27 **Discussion**

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29 “Science is only one form of research and other forms are largely squeezed out” (Harley,  
30 2015, p. 403) or “sanitized” (Donnelly et al 2013, p.7). When accounts are published they  
31 focus, primarily, on product with limited description of person and process. Whilst this may  
32 well get us published, it presents research as clean and tidy and reduces our ability to defend  
33 the “anecdotal” and “unscientific” criticisms. The person and process descriptions tend to be  
34 used in a methodologically defensive way to counter this positivistic critique. Even the  
35 “distancing” practices we employ are partly pandering to the dominant quantitative  
36 methodology. Distancing in some ways reaffirms the positivistic view that research can be  
37 value free. Reflexivity in such polished journal accounts also fits this pattern and is either  
38 “ducked” completely (Buroway, 2003) or minimalistic in order to comply. We need a better  
39 balance by simultaneously articulating and reflecting and this paper employs reflexivity on  
40 AHE methodology to unpack its messiness. It also attempts to give an account of what it is  
41 like to undertake AHE methodology with a focus on processes and practices.

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51 More of these fine-grained, insider accounts from managers (Samra-Fredericks, 2003;  
52 Author, 2010; Stewart and Aldrich, 2015) and a turn to practice would surely develop our  
53 understanding and teaching of management. To this end we need more reflexive accounts on  
54 ethnographic process and practices that demonstrate awareness of...dilemmas and  
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3 encouraging us to admit them publicly” (Johnson et al, 2006, p.148). This openness and  
4 honesty (Punch, 1986) gives the reader the opportunity to judge the quality of the account and  
5 compare and contrast it with their own experiences. This use of methodological rigour, face  
6 validity and transferability is how our accounts should be measured. Through explaining the  
7 complexity of AHE we can “*show*, meaning [and] provide enough detail that readers may  
8 come to their own conclusions about the scene. This is contrasted from the author *telling* the  
9 reader what to think” (Tracy (2010, p. 843). The debate this generates between managers in  
10 the classroom is an additional strength of AHE accounts and allows personal transferability  
11 of learning.

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14 Pässilä et al (2015, 71) describe practical reflexivity as deeper questioning of the taken-for-  
15 granted, and gaining emerging knowledge from its reconstruction or maintenance in  
16 challenging situations. Whilst most management programmes encourage reflexive practice  
17 and continuous professional development it can be hard for educators to get students to move  
18 beyond accepting at face value towards critical reflexivity (see Samra-Fredricks, 2003). This  
19 is partly because we are asking them to destabilise taken-for-granted “truths” (Cunliffe 2009;  
20 Nicolini et al., 2004) and challenge the fabric of the system that offers them career prospects  
21 and rewards (Cunliffe, 2009).

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24 Samra-Fredericks (2003) argues for a critical pedagogy based on ethnographic research that  
25 begins with managerial practices. She argues that the mundane and “taken for granted” that  
26 pervade management practice” can then be unpacked and challenged. This approach allows  
27 us to move beyond cognitive acquisition of knowledge, techniques and “best practice”  
28 methods towards a deeper insights about processes and practices of everyday management  
29 interactions. By using reflexive practice in educating managers we are attempting to “break  
30 the habits of routine thought [and thus] see the world as though for the first time” (Cooper  
31 and Burrell, 1988, p.101). By destabilizing and deconstructing practice reflexively we may  
32 “develop... something new or different” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p.495).

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35 Using AHE accounts in teaching is one way to encourage the need for critical reflection but  
36 managers using the AHE method for themselves takes us a step further. Vince (2011) has  
37 suggested reflexivity in managerial programmes would expose students to critical issues such  
38 as power relations, conflict and gender issues. For AHE this is especially so, as researchers  
39 must “break out... from socially shared frameworks” (Alvesson, 2009, p.167). This enables  
40 managers also question their organisation and their own practices. This could provide fresh  
41 insights and learning and renewed impetus to critical reflexivity on managerial practice.

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3 However, as Alvesson (2003, p.188) points out, this method is not for the loyal, conformist  
4 organisational person.  
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### 8 **Conclusion** 9

10 By taking a “turn to practice” approach to AHE through reflexivity it is clear that fine  
11 grained, in-situ accounts from managers embellish the field and allow for greater  
12 understanding of managerial practice. “Rapid assessment” approaches mean the amount of  
13 time to conduct AHE accounts does not need to be a barrier for students who are also  
14 practicing managers. A much harder obstacle to overcome is the negativity surrounding  
15 insider accounts perceived as “anecdotal” or “unscientific”. To some extent, being reflexive  
16 in exploring the messiness of our AHE (and professional) practices is how we achieve this.  
17 However, those using this methodology have a duty to surface the ethical as well as the  
18 epistemic considerations. By publishing such accounts we are able to push back against the  
19 hegemonic institutionalised pressures that blanket and silence academia as well as managerial  
20 practices. We can do this by providing more “alternatives to the dominant approach.”  
21 (Harley, 2015, p. 405). The Author has used several Burnsland stories to great effect in  
22 teaching managers and this helps managers to realise the benefits of AHE over pseudo-  
23 scientific accounts far removed from actual practice. AHE is criticised for the self-permeating  
24 the story. However, we must persevere, as “good” accounts offer deep insights to inform  
25 management practice and learning. In addition, we must not underestimate personal  
26 development from employing reflexivity in everyday practice.  
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