Blurring Genres: A Personal Narrative About University Management

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Abstract

Blurring genres involves a shift from naturalist social science to the analogies of game, drama and text. This article combines ethnography, autobiography, literature, and political science to roam the realms of personal narratives or autoethnography. It explores genres of thought and of presentation not commonly found in political science in a story about university management. A personal narrative involves using self-reflection to explore anecdotal and personal experience, and connecting this story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. Commonly, autoethnographies are evocative; that is, they seek to persuade readers that they know these people and have been to these places. Here, I offer an analytic personal narrative; it is storytelling that seeks to marry idiographic particularity with an analysis that speaks to large issues. I present autobiographical material about my academic career as an 'artificial person'. I use this story to invite the reader to engage with the big issue of the role of the university in Britain today. Finally, I offer some topics for the readers' 'consideration', identifying several personal considerations as well as considerations for political science, and for universities. Although writing personal narratives challenges the conventional canons of social science research about transparency and reliability of data, it also offers an innovative way of understanding the self in the world.

Blurring genres involves analogies and metaphors from the humanities. Society is seen 'as a serious game, a sidewalk drama, or a behavioural text' (Geertz 1983:21). With this shift to the analogies of game, drama and text, the social sciences are free to roam. In this chapter, I combine ethnography, autobiography, literature, and political science while roaming the realms of autoethnography. I am trying to persuade my readers to 'avoid the essentially reductionist view that treats one type of data or one approach to analysis as being the prime source of social and cultural interpretation' (Atkinson et al. 2007: 34). Rather, I seek to add to the repertoire of political scientists by exploring novel genres of thought and genres of presentation.[1]

Genres of thought

As Bevir and Rhodes (2016: Part 2) show, several theories common to the humanities have a toehold in political science. These theories include gender studies, ethnic studies, Marxism, post-structuralism, cultural studies, and theories of personality (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Area studies traditionally eschew such overt theorising. Interpretive theory is also prominent, and it is the genre of thought used in this article. According to Turnbull (2016: 383-6), the advantages of interpretive theory include its 'whole analytical approach, from its philosophical basis through to methodologies'; its concern with the social construction of policy and problems; and the use of narrative analysis.

Genres of presentation

Political scientists do not pay enough attention to the way they present their work, and its intelligibility is at stake. Sword (2012: vi and 4) concludes that too many social science academic papers are 'badly written' and 'unreadable' and the phrase 'stylish

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[1] This introduction draws on Rhodes and Hodgett 2021.

academic writing' is an 'oxymoron'. We need to improve our prose and decrease our dullness (Anderson 2016: 162). We need to write better, and to do so we can seek to learn from novels and the fine arts (see King 2010).

Different traditions prize different styles of prose or modes of presentation. In Area Studies, there is appetite for rich descriptive detail and creative evocation of the context under examination. In political science, the format and formula are often tighter, more prescriptive and more linear. Autoethnography or a personal narrative offers a different genre of presentation because 'the mode of storytelling is akin to the novel or the biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 744). The goal is to wed storytelling with analysis in a way that is artful and creative (and see Boswell et al. 2019: chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion).

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an ugly neologism when the last thing the social sciences need is another neologism. I brooded over Van Maanen's (1988:73) 'confessional tales' but opted for the everyday language of 'personal narrative'.[2] It too refers to using self-reflection to explore anecdotal and personal experience, and connecting this story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings (adapted from Ellis 2004: xix). An autobiography is the story of one person's life, often in chronological form. It will focus on people and events but not the author's interpretation of his or her life in its wider socio-cultural and political context. Autobiographies rarely draw on the social sciences to explain and analyse events. However, when the author uses social and political theory to explore issues in both her or his life and in the broader society, then they write a personal narrative.[3]

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[2] This shift to everyday language was brought on by reading too many of the contributions to the *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Jones et al. 2013).
[3] On autoethnography generally, see Anderson 2006a; Ellis 2004; Ellis and Bochner 2000 and 2006; Jones et al. 2013; and the symposium in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (4) 2006.

Ellis espouses 'evocative autoethnography'. To evoke is to call forth images of people and places; to persuade readers that they know these people and have been to these places. The distinguishing feature of an analytical personal narrative is its 'commitment to theoretical analysis' (Anderson 2006a: 378). There is a major disagreement about this aspiration. Those writing evocative autoethnography reject it. Ellis and Bochner (2006: 436, 438 and 439) dismiss analytical ethnography as 'aloof ethnography' searching for a 'master narrative'. Their version focuses on 'how we should live and brings us into lived experience in a feeling and embodied way'. They call this lived experience the 'ethical domain' and they take people there 'through story, characters, emotion, and dramatic and narrative plot'.[4]

In the story that follows, I do not refuse to abstract and explain. I seek to have my 'small facts speak to large issues' (Geertz 1973: 23). My goal is to wed evocative storytelling with analysis. I share Anderson's commitment to 'an analytic research agenda focused on understandings of broader social phenomena' (Anderson 2006a: 375). I seek to marry idiographic particularity – a story that evokes my beliefs, emotions and practices – with an analytic research agenda that speaks to large issues. To do so, I use autobiographical material about my career as an academic manager. I use this story to invite the reader to engage with the big issue of the role of the university in Britain today.

As Ellis (2004: 13) points out, political scientists are 'still holding out' against autoethnography. She means that political scientists avoid the personal. Little has changed in the intervening years (see also Burnier 2006). This personal narrative is one small step for political science and a giant leap for this political scientist.

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[4] See the exchanges between Anderson 2006a; and 2006b with Ellis and Bochner 2006; and 2016: Part 1, Section II.

On becoming an artificial person

Artificial persons are those colleagues who:

> speak and act in the name of others, (who) can commit and obligate them. Thus, artificial persons are followers of orders. They toe-the-line. They speak on behalf of institutional procedures and organisational rules. They are not then 'responsible' for their effects on human lives (Wolgast 1992: 1. See also Smith 2013: 191).

I was an artificial person for several years during my career. Here I tell some stories about my managerial life. I have been Head of Department three times and Dean twice. I have no wish to give offence or to incur libel action, so I draw examples from my time in all these posts. I use the generic 'the University', 'the Faculty' and 'the Department' throughout. I do not identify specific individuals only positions.[5]

Even today, I am struck by the languor that afflicts too many of my academic colleagues. Professors hold privileged positions. They have permanent appointments and a significant degree of control over their work and its scheduling. Most can produce world-class research. Most colleagues take that opportunity, but a significant minority did not. When I inherited the Department, that minority was too large. I sighed. I could hear the conversations I was going to have in my head already.

The first opportunity to signal there was a new regime occurred when a junior research fellow on a three-year contract was up for renewal. I asked to see his CV and a statement of his future research plans. Then we had the interview. After the usual pleasantries, I turned to his CV.

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[5] For other people's autoethnographic accounts of working in a university see, Humphreys 2005; Smith 2013; and Sparkes 2007.

'You have not published any articles in the last few years', I observed. Are there any on the way?'

'No', he replied.

'Why not?' I asked

'I've been busy' he replied. I waited, thinking he might explain what he had been doing. He said nothing

'Why were you busy?' I asked. His reply made everything clear.

'I have been studying for a law degree'. I was not lost for words, but I was staggered that he thought it was a legitimate way of carrying out his research fellowship. I was careful.

'Were you studying at night and at the weekends?'

'No'

'So, have I got this right, when you were supposed to be doing research and writing articles, you were in fact studying for a law degree?'

He agreed, offering the explanation that no one told him he could not do that. The conversation staggered on as we discussed in desultory fashion his research plans. I had lost interest in his plans such as they were. I thanked him for coming to see me, and he left.

It was clear to me that I would not renew his contract. However, it was important to follow the university's procedures. Human Resources (HR) send a simple two-line letter that thanks the colleague for their contribution but states that the University will not be renewing their contract. HR do not give any reasons for the decision because the reasons could provide the grounds for an appeal. In the interview, I was careful about what I said. I did not say your contract will not be renewed because you

studied for a law degree instead of publishing. Indeed, I said nothing, so later I would not have to explain my reasons. I was under no obligation to renew the contract, so I did not. Of course, the research fellow was angry. Of course, some colleagues came to plead on his behalf. I contented myself by offering the view that he should concentrate on finishing his law degree.

I would have much preferred my first example to be a senior member of staff. The reverberations would have been greater. I did not have to wait long. The contract of a more senior colleague on 'soft' grant money came to the end. I declined to offer a permanent appointment. I was not legally obliged to do so. Nor was I obliged to give any reason and I did not, although the publication track record was poor. The colleague received a short two-line letter declining to offer a further appointment. The shit hit the fan. I declined to discuss the specific case. I left that discussion to HR and the lawyers. Amazingly, they held the line.

At the time, I could have felt bad about these decisions, which many saw as 'unusual'. I could have experienced significant stress. It is never easy when colleagues disapprove. My reaction was radically different. For many years, I had been infuriated by colleagues who did little or no research although they received 40 percent of their salary for it. I welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate that such freeriding was no longer acceptable. I made my expectations for all colleagues clear. I expected them to hold a research grant, to publish two to four articles a year, and a book every three to five years. My more able colleagues just smiled. My expectations were a no-brainer. Others could see they had a problem and moved elsewhere or retired. A few stuck around until the University made them an offer they could not refuse – no animals were hurt in encouraging them to retire.

The positive side of my job was to find and hire good colleagues and over the next few years I recruited some exceptional ones. Within four years, the Department was a top department and ranked in the 'World Top 20'. All the senior appointments were

of white middle-class men. I had to turn the Department around rapidly, so I headhunted full professors, which, at this point in time, skewed the recruitment pool in favour of such men.

The new regulatory regime imposed on universities by the government helped with the Department's resurrection. Marketisation in higher education is a story that ran through my career since the mid-1980s. The politics that most influenced my life are not specific politics of people, places and events but the shift of ideas from the welfare state to the neoliberal state. These ideas may seem grand, but they had concrete implications for me and my career.

Before 2000, neither me, nor the departments where I worked, paid any attention to bibliometric analysis; that is, to counting the number of times an article or book is cited in other articles or books. At the University, the VC set up a special unit to produce such metrics. He believed the Faculty would invariably top the list. He funded a research evaluation unit and its analysis of political science showed clearly that my Department was a world leader. It was a wonderful bargaining counter as it was clear beyond all reasonable doubt that I had turned the Department around. Even better, it emerged that I was a top cited political scientist. I was going to write that no one was more surprised than me, but that would not be true. Other colleagues were flabbergasted! Being the top professor in a top department meant I became a Distinguished Professor. I had instant access to the VC, and he listened.

I had all the trappings of senior management. I had the mandatory Filofax and a 'Palm Pilot' personal digital assistant. I wore Paul Smith designer suits and Patrick Cox Wannabe Loafers. I had a large wood-panelled room with a PA and a research assistant. I drove an expensive 'company car', with its own parking space. My expense account included a mobile phone. I was the very model of a modern 'can do' university manager. The university's equivalent of the dynamic business executive. I laugh at myself now. An artificial person acting at the bidding of others who thought he was

important and successful. Yet it met a need in me. It provided me with the sense that I had arrived. I was a mover and shaker, and the role fascinated me. I see many Mr and Mrs See Me's in the marketized university with their power dressing, smart phones and university cars. I recognise this need for public recognition in my own personality. Indeed, individualism and competition are long-standing features of the academic environment - the neoliberal reforms win because they feed these strands already in our DNA.

The University was baronial, and managing the Faculty was like herding cats because wilful professors went their own way, thinking only of their own departments and research centres. I was no exception. In fact, my first Dean at the University was supportive. I can recollect only one disagreement between us, when he supported the promotion of someone I considered an irredeemably second-rate colleague in my Department. Otherwise, he was rock solid in supporting my efforts to improve the Department. Other heads of departments were less impressed and complained endlessly. He was glad to go, and I was glad he stood down because I could reclaim him for the Department, where he was a fine example to all colleagues in his commitment and productivity. Another star member of a top department. I lost no time in reminding the VC. He knew. I knew he knew. But I was not going to let the moment pass without comment. Unfortunately, all was not sweet reasonableness with the new Dean.

His successor by acclamation was a distinguished philosopher and a pleasant, well-liked colleague. I note when colleagues are pleasant because social skills can be at a premium in universities. One of my PhDs, a mature student with a teaching background, remarked that universities were rest homes for some odd people. She isn't wrong. In Yorkshire, where I was born, we would call them 'a rum lot'. Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* is the obvious role model for some colleagues. Problems arise, however, when a pleasant man must live among the Sheldon Coopers of this world.

The common lot of all Deans is to manage the budget. With all the comings and goings in my Department, I was two posts down on my agreed establishment. Under budgetary pressure, the Dean cut the funding for the two posts. I was incandescent with rage inside but on the outside, I was calm and sweet reasonableness. The Dean would not budge. So, I did something I probably should not have done. I appealed the decision to the VC. When I was either Head of Department or Dean, I objected strongly to colleagues going behind my back. It had happened to me when the oligarchy – senior professors – appealed my decisions as Head of Department to the VC, who would not listen to their complainants. On this occasion, the VC listened to me. He did something he probably should not have done – he gave me my posts. However, I am not 100 per cent self-interested or politically inept. I calculated that if I appealed the cuts in general rather than just my two posts, I could command some support from other Heads of Department. I got the VC to give me four posts. So, I returned not as the back-stabbing villain but as the saviour of at least part of the budget.

The knock-on effects of this intervention were notable. I had undermined the Dean's authority and now every Head of Department behaved as badly as me. Self-interest ruled. The Barons were on the rampage. After yet another round of spats, the VC grew tired of our shenanigans and commissioned an external review. The Report was unflattering concluding that we were in serious disarray and had lost our way. Many of its specific recommendations, such as increasing the number of PhDs, were sensible. But its proposal to replace disciplines with unspecified themes was just hot air, and merging units into a larger Faculty courted the danger of endless turf wars. My reaction was that we had brought this report down on ourselves and, if we were to minimise the damage, we had to own the report and implement it selectively. I threw my hat in the ring to become Dean.

I had applied for a Deanship once before, but I was on the short list only as a stalking-horse. I told my prospective colleagues about the inevitability of greater government

regulation and they hated the idea and, by association, me. I made the favoured internal candidate look so much safer and, therefore, better. This time I was the favoured candidate, and I was no longer the threat.

In the lead up to my appointment, I refrained from public criticism of the report. I had to be Janus-faced. The VC had to accept that I was serious about reform – and I was, just not the reforms in the report. My colleagues had to believe that I was on their side and that I would protect them against the VC and his minions. I had to give a series of finely judged speeches that balanced reform against reassurance. If anything, I erred on the side of reassurance and that brought some critical comments from the VC. My defence was that I had to keep colleagues onside if the reforms were to be effective. I got the job. I was now responsible for 162 people, a budget of £7 million, and a major reorganisation. The VC wrote reassuringly:

> Welcome; good luck. And remember that by the end of this month I will be the only real friend you have left!

He was wrong, but I took his point and I tried to keep him onside.

My personal circumstances were also difficult. My wife had been promoted to a research chair at another university. There was no direct flight between the two cities, and it was an expensive commute. I had a teenage son living at home. I was struggling to implement the Report. My coping mechanism was not alcohol or a mentor but initially horse riding, then running. I was conspicuously incompetent as a rider. I did not turn falling off into an art form, but I practiced doing so. As well as basic training, we did elementary jumping where falling off was both easier and more painful. I had to concentrate on the horse and on staying on its back. Such concentration drove out all thought of work. Running had additional advantages. It was nowhere near as bruising or expensive as horse riding, and it kept me fit. But, above all it was an excellent way of managing the stress from being a manager. I am resilient. I do not suffer greatly from stress. Yet I found the cumulative impact of face-to-face encounters

with colleagues wearying. When running, I got 'in the zone'. I was focused in the moment and stopped thinking about all of life's petty irritations. The endorphins also lifted my morale. I did not start running until my mid-40s. I still run three times a week thirty years later. It is a subject on which I can bore for England, especially on the merits of different brands of running shoes.

I adapted the report's recommendations to our ways. I led from behind, convinced that without agreement no reforms would stick. So, I 'translated' the report's 'themes' into interdisciplinary research centres and each major disciplinary department had to 'own' one of these centres. That was easier than it sounds because we had centres 'floating around'. We needed a clear link to a department and a strategy for each one. Just as important, I needed to sort out the budget. The Report recommended budgetary reform to which I responded quickly. I knew the VC would like that – and he did. I was interested in permanent savings that would free up money I could use elsewhere rather than the report's budget reforms. I was convinced budget cuts fuelled the silo outlook and self-interested behaviour of departments. I sought also to improve morale.

I was helped in my efforts by the simple fact that everyone believed we had external enemies. There is nothing like an external enemy to bring people together. I smoothed the process by strongly defending the disciplines, provided they were internationally excellent. To encourage such excellence, I got every department to set their own targets for grants and publications. But I checked their proposals. I had contacts in every discipline at home and abroad. If I thought any set of targets were too low, it needed only a quick email to a colleague elsewhere to find out what targets were realistic as well as challenging. To be fair, the departments did not try to con me. They too wanted to be internationally excellent. I still checked though. Rapidly, we agreed on a new set of priorities:

Develop multi-disciplinary research centres

Expand postgraduate numbers

Raise external funds

Maintain international disciplinary excellence

Create a visible presence in national debates

Budgetary reform

Not only my colleagues bought into these reforms, but also the VC. I had to persuade him that I had not watered down the report too much, but he could see it was all in the right direction and he did not press too hard. We indulged in relaxed badinage. He asked me if anyone called me Roderick. 'Rarely' I said, 'although my mum uses the diminutive "Roddy". I became Rod only when I got married.' That was a serious error of judgement. The VC decided that, like my mum, he would call me Roddy. The thought of the VC as mum was intimidating, but it amused him. I knew I was winning when one Pro-VC wrote to me:

> Just wanted to say how happy we are that you have thrown yourself into the Faculty with such gusto and panache. I have noticed already that there is a significant improvement in morale. Thanks for the great work.

I am making it sound both too grand and too easy. Much of my work was routine administration. Our building had wooden shutters and over the years, they had rotted, eaten away by the weather and insects. The buildings' manager had to decide whether to replace the wooden shutters and, if so with what, wood or aluminium. After deciding on suitable replacements, we then invited tenders for the contract, and so on. Whatever else this work might be, it was not grand. Nor were the seemingly endless work socials at which I would give a short speech congratulating a colleague

on their recent prize, research grant or whatever. I was expected to be there. It was essential that I give a short speech. I was then surplus to requirements.

It did not matter whether it was a work social, a social gathering, even my own wedding reception, I am ill at ease at these occasions. The middle-class at play delivers a grating of Received Pronunciation and if class is less intrusive than it used to be when I was child, it remains ever present. Often, I feel out of place. I suspect it is a hangover of the 'know your place' indoctrination I received as a child and a young adult when I listened to, but did not deliver, such perorations. My elders and betters delivered them. Socialisation lingers deep and long.

The 'challenges' of aluminium shutters and work socials, or their equivalent, confront all university managers and they are the easy part of the job. However, in the first years, I had some greater challenges. Two interdisciplinary research centres wanted to be free-standing, independent of any Department or the Faculty. Their God professors, or Barons, were among the biggest professors at the Faculty. [6] The VC refused to stand up to them. I was furious. How was I expected to make my Faculty interdisciplinary when such centres could walk away? The exchanges were vigorous and one of the professors sent his wife along in his stead. I do not know whether he thought I would be less forceful with a woman. Wrong. However, she was the more pugnacious of the two. Impasse. They walked because I could not make them stay. They would have poisoned the atmosphere. I used to respect these God-professors. Now I regarded them with great distaste for their selfishness, their hollow feet.

The second major battle was about staff rationalisation. If the reforms were to stick, I need resources to fund them. So, I queried all requests for replacement staff and unless a Head of Department could persuade me the replacement was essential, I would not agree. I was poacher turned gamekeeper, and I was not flavour of the

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[6] God professors were the only professor in a department. They were head of department, exercising much influence over the distribution of resources, appointments and promotions. It was a 'monotheistic' world (Murray Groot cited in Rhodes 2009: 11-12).

month. Even when I agreed to a replacement there were grumbles over the selection process. I was not keen on internal appointments. I wanted new blood to reinvigorate the Faculty. However, the staff had a favoured internal candidate. Unfortunately, my favoured candidate gave a disastrous seminar – the PowerPoint failed, and nerves triumphed over presentation. However, the Selection Committee offered her the job, and there was a revolt. I fronted up to the assembled staff reminding them the Selection Committee based its choice on the CV, referees' reports and the interview as well as the presentation. The information did not mollify them. I was implacable, insisting the committee had chosen the best candidate. Of course, the real complaint was their perception that I did not support their department - which I did - that I wanted to cut the unit - which I did – and that the new Head of Department supported me – which she did. Like all these storms, it blew over. I got the usual angry emails and wounded pleas.

The third major battle was over the merger. Why anybody ever thinks it is a good idea to create more university administration escapes me. Over my dead body was I going to handover decisions about my staffing and research strategy to this new body of administrators. I believed then and I believe now that administrators should be on tap but not on top. Their job is to support those who teach, win grants, advise government and business, and publish. Unfortunately, some suffer from delusions of grandeur and become opinionated beyond their remit. I sat through interminable committee meetings punctuated by sharp exchanges to rebuff administrative interventions. Both sides complained to the VC, who tried to be even-handed. That does not work when it is a power bid by one side to establish authority over another. I like to think that I lost no ground. I am convinced the time wasted over these turf disputes could have been better spent on teaching and research. If you create a larger layer of administrators, then the Devil finds mischief for idle hands. There was much vexatious mischief. I found the diplomatic skills needed for managing-up a trial.

The VC's fiefdom, his court, was also a source of vexation. As Carlo Cipolla observes 'always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid people in circulation'. Friedrich Schiller opined that 'Against stupidity the very gods themselves contend in vain'. That is a counsel of pessimism. We must contend. I knew already that the VC was surrounded by many yes men and yes women. I knew they were more concerned to appease the VC than do right. But I underestimated their numbers. While the VC negotiated sensibly with his senior professors and Deans, he gave orders to his staff. Several seemed afraid of him. He could be both brusque and loud, although he never shouted at me. Difficulties arose when, having agreed a decision with him, he passed it on to one of his minions for further action. He could be brusque to the point of rude if the minion pointed out to him the devil was in the detail. He was a big picture, not a detail, man. But the detail could undermine him because his staff knew he would not follow through. They felt free to 'adjust' the decision to suit themselves. Their actions were stupid because they caused 'losses to another person or to a group of persons while … deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses' for themselves. [7]

I had mixed feelings about being a senior manager. I knew I could do the job. I thought it was worthwhile trying to reform my Faculty. I commanded the respect of my colleagues in the departments. I had street-level credibility. But senior management jobs turn you into an artificial person. I resented some of the demands made on me. VCs distance themselves from the emotionally messy, face-to-face encounters with people. When the VC insisted on a 'rationalisation', it was code for me transferring, retiring and, if all else failed, sacking staff. When the VCs called for budget cuts, it involved me sacking staff by natural attrition if possible and compulsory redundancy if necessary. Rationalisation and budget cuts boiled down to my damaging other people's lives because I was told to do it. I did not sign up to be a head kicker – a

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[7] Cipolla 2011 [1976]. The first quote is Cipolla's first law. The second quote is his third law. There are five in total. My thanks to Philip Palmer for drawing my attention to this book.

macho-manager. I preferred to lead from behind and bring my colleagues with me. One short story will exemplify my dilemma.

While reviewing our historic budget, I found a small research centre we had been subsidising for at least three years. One of my predecessors had buried the expenditure under an unrelated budget line. The accumulated deficit was well over a quarter of a million pounds. I made an appointment with the centre director to discuss the centre's plans to reduce the deficit. There were no plans. I requested a plan and set a date for a second meeting. At that meeting, there was still no plan. The centre director was like a rabbit confronted by a stoat – frozen. We did not engage. No matter what I said, I could not get a plan of action for removing the deficit. I was expected to cross-subsidise the centre to cover the deficit. I felt I had no choice but to close the centre. Under the rules of the university, if I closed an organisational unit then I could also dismiss all its staff because the unit was not financially viable. I did. Again, it was an unpleasant interview with the centre director. I was Professor Steely. The centre director went into shock. Clearly, the centre director had never believed I would close the unit because it had been protected for so long.

You can't do that

Yes, I can

[Long silence]

I will appeal to the VC

Go ahead. I have cleared the decision with him and HR

[Long silence]

What can we do?

Nothing. You refuse to apply for grants.

I could change my mind

And I won't believe you

[Long silence]

If there is nothing else, I suggest you contact HR.

This story should not mislead. I worked with world-class professors. Their productivity was exceptional. Any university would be proud to employ such stellar individuals. But because they just got on with their research and teaching, I rarely saw them. Instead, I saw my 'problem children' as I came to see them. They were a minority who absorbed disproportionate amounts of my time. My attempts to persuade them to become research active proved futile. They played me, drawing up plans for future publications that never materialised. Clever people misusing their talents to freeride on conscientious colleagues.

The Faculty was also afflicted with worst case of God-professors and their baronial politics I have come across in my career. Such politics were all pervasive and it is difficult to see what was gained beyond satisfying the short-term interests of individual professors. I am not a sore loser. My personal interests, my Department's interests and my Faculty's interests, all prospered while I was at the Faculty. I realised all too slowly that the work involved in managing the Faculty counted for little unless I wanted to switch career paths and become a VC. I did not. I had books to write. Also, I did not welcome either the personal costs of the job – the continuous emotional wear and tear – or the domestic costs of living apart from my wife. When I stood down there was the usual farewell do. The former Dean gave an impromptu speech in which he singled out the rise in the standing of the political science Department. He pointed out correctly, there were a great many good political science departments in the world, especially in the US. He praised me for guiding the Department to a world Top-20 ranking given the competition. He displayed much generosity of spirit in both making

these remarks and overlooking the part I played in his demise as Dean. I left feeling both sad and guilty.

I am defensive about my involvement with university management. I tell my academic critics – 'do it before you criticise', or 'better me than some of the other dickheads around'. It doesn't get me off the hook but it makes me feel better. I must stress that I do not believe we have lost a golden era. They were the complacent old days and we brought neoliberalism on our heads by refusing to set our own house in order. Professional rather than state regulation would have been preferable, but complacency ruled. Nonetheless, I had made a mistake by moving into management.

The issue had been dramatized for me by a former VC. We discussed my elevation to Pro-VC. He had two reservations. He thought the job entailed me clearing up after him, not him clearing up after me. In other words, I might take the initiative too often. Also, did I have fieldwork to do and books to write? The VC knew he would be a full-time university manager when he realised that he had exhausted his research agenda. We decided, on both grounds, that it was too soon. I should have remembered this conversation before becoming Dean.

Considerations: what can we learn from autoethnographies?

As Sparkes (2007: 522) would have it, I offer a personal narrative 'for your consideration'. To help you reflect on my story, I suggest some considerations not only for the individual but also for political science, and for universities.

Personal considerations

How did my experience as an artificial person shape me? The simple yet important lesson I learnt from writing this story was that, even at work, I am a living, breathing human being bringing my beliefs and lived experience to bear in human settings. Try

as Professor Steely might, he could not compartmentalise research, managing and personal life into separate boxes. They leaked into one other, and the leakages were a source of stress.

One dilemma was acute – between scholar and manager. My dream was to become a scholar but changes in university management, and my role as a manager in the corporate university, shaped my journey. I found managerialism seductive. As a graduate of a business school and a specialist in public administration, I had a longstanding theoretical familiarity with managing public organisations. I was confident I could also practice it. Also, the money and status symbols of management are attractive. So, in the beginning, I relished being a manager.

However, the dilemma between managing and scholarship became more and more acute. As an 'artificial person' who acted in the name of others in theory I was not 'responsible' for my effects on human lives (Smith 2013: 191). But I was responsible. I was present in the everyday lives of other people. I became part of their lives. I had to manage my emotions and relationships with others. To cope, I made myself into Professor Steely. I was wrapped up in the managerial world with little time left for scholarly work. Writing a personal narrative pushes such issues to the forefront. I became more aware of how much I disliked being an artificial person. Not for the first time, I was torn between the serious work of research and publications and helping to run my discipline and my university. Always, I thought I could make a better fist of managing the profession or the department than the current incumbents. I believe that I did do a better job, but it was a distraction from my scholarship. Above all, I had not joined the University to wreck other people's lives, yet I was, in effect, firing people and ruining their careers. When I went home, I brooded about what I had done. I did not shrug it off and 'get on' straight away. I was struggling with my identity as an artificial person. I realised all too slowly that the work involved in managing counted for little to me:

Alan Clark, a former junior minister in the UK's Department of Defence, encapsulated my dilemma when, writing about his father, he observed:

> In a desk I had come across some of my father's old engagement diaries of the Forties and the Fifties. Endless 'meetings' fill the day. Civil servants drift in and out. Lunches. Virtually indistinguishable from my own. What's the point? Nothing to show for it at all. *He will be remembered only for his writings and his contribution to scholarship* (Alan Clark 1993: 37, emphasis added).

I needed to turn out the best research of which I was capable. That was the way to garner academic respect and, I have come to believe, standing with practitioners. My attempts at writing a personal narrative crystallised my years as an artificial person and my ill-advised support for the neoliberal reform of universities. Reflecting on the self encourages a breaking down the boundaries between the personal and research. It also injects the self into administration and teaching. It acts against compartmentalising one's lived experience in a university.

After 2008, I became, and remained, a researcher and a writer.

Considerations for political science

The first and most important lesson to be learnt from a personal narrative is that the goal of the detached, impersonal, objective social scientist is illusory. We are not scientists in white coats in laboratories studying inanimate objects. We are living, breathing human beings bringing our beliefs and lived experience to bear in human research settings. Writing a personal narrative keeps the self and lived experience up-front and centre in research. The search for knowledge is a personal search inextricably intertwined with how we understand who we are and our purposes in life. The investigative procedures of the natural sciences are an aid to logic and

collecting evidence, but no more. They are no substitute for self-awareness, creativity and authenticity. Detachment is not objectivity but loss of information.

The second lesson concerns reflexivity. I had paid lip service to the notion in the past but it was never a central theme in my work. I dabbled. That is not enough. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 14-15) point out 'the reflexive character of social research … is not a matter of methodological commitment, it is an existential fact'. Critical self-awareness is essential and autoethnographies place the author at the centre of the analysis. Balancing engagement, detachment and critical self-awareness is never-ending. Yet, there is no alternative to trying – it is life as we know it - and autoethnographies discipline the author to become critically self-aware.

Finally, at best, academics adopt 'a style-of-no-style' (Van Maanen 2010: 241). However, writing a personal narrative blurs the boundaries between biography and literature, opening opportunities to experiment with genres of presentation. The craft of writing is at the heart of a personal narrative:

> All ethnography is interpretive and thus is fiction, 'something made', 'something fashioned' … the distinction between novelists and ethnographers is blurry rather than sharp' (Ellis 2004: 332).

So, I follow such conventions of storytelling as creating characters, describing places, and spinning plots. This paper is the beginning of my response to that challenge.

Considerations for universities

I said this paper would be an exercise in writing analytical personal narrative that addressed larger questions. So, which large issues do the small facts of my story address? I suggest that the neoliberal reforms of universities provide the context for my complex specificities. The tensions between scholarship and neoliberalism became more acute over the years. The ways in which I responded to this dilemma changed but the dilemma persisted.

The question I asked myself afterwards was, 'Why did I do this job?' Did I make a mistake in supporting the neoliberal reforms of university through, for example, my participation in the national research evaluation? Do the neoliberal reforms of both Australian and British universities threaten my beloved tradition of scholarship? Did the universities lose comprehensively the battle with neoliberalism? The answer to all three questions is a resounding 'yes'.

Marketisation fostered competition between universities for students and treated degrees as commodities. The competition for grants and positional goods such as promotion fuelled competition between colleagues. Managerialism fostered measuring and regulating staff performance. I did not see that we were snowballing down a hill to evermore harmful competition and regulation. There was nothing I could do to stop it. Such regulation was the spirit of the times. Neoliberal ideas were here to stay. However, I did not need to embrace it as enthusiastically as I did.

Marketization had several unwelcome effects: much wasted effort on endless reforming initiatives, over-regulation of the sector, the death of collegiality, mainstreaming research, demoralising the profession, and devaluing the product. I do not have the space to cover all but I must reflect on 'The Weasel'.

On a bad day, I am reminded of Whyte's analysis of *The Organization Man* (1957) who believes that 'The Organisation' makes better decisions than individuals, so they serve 'The Organisation'. The university version is Andrew Sparkes' (2007: 531-2) character 'The Weasel'- who wanders the departmental corridor telling everyone about the high impact factor of the journal in which he has just published, and the competitive research grant he has just won:

> The Weasel was only interested in himself and getting promotion as fast as he could. He had no interest in teaching … He had no interest in supervising postgraduate students other than using them as extra hands to collect data for him and swell his research output … Finally, the

> Weasel had no interest in his colleagues in the School. They were either obstacles to his progress or simply stepping-stones along the way to higher things … The Weasel did believe that you are your CV and nothing more.

The portrait is overblown but everyone knows someone who resembles the Weasel. If we are honest, we recognise some of the Weasel's traits in ourselves. Individual ambition undermined collegiality throughout my career. The neoliberal reforms of universities fertilised these seeds of individualism and we reaped the Weasel. Neither universities nor their Weasels sees this development as a problem. The University moves up the several league tables. Weasels publish, win research grants, and get promoted. The Weasel is an example of the '#newbreed political scientist' who conforms to the wishes of senior management.

The question is whether, as I initially believed, we acquiesce or resort, as I now believe, to 'invisible power' - to small acts of resistance such as 'foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, and sabotage and so forth' (Scott 1985: 30). Ideally, academics should not engage in arson and sabotage but there are many small acts of resistance. We can neglect administrative chores, submit paperwork late, and forget to complete internal surveys. Such actions could help preserve self-respect and, cumulatively, could begin to change the organisation. But the big issue in my story is that neoliberalism has reduced academics to the exercise of invisible power.

Conclusions: Limits and Strengths

Personal narratives are not without their limits (see Campbell 2017; Delamont 2007; Wall 2008). First, they can be self-indulgent, encouraging the diary disease of way too much self-centred detail. This danger is especially acute with evocative autoethnography but mitigated by the aim of analytical personal narratives to engage with broader issues, to consider issues beyond the self. I may be uninteresting but reconciling a scholarly career with university management is not a dilemma unique to me. Also, the role of the universities in neoliberal Britain is an important question. The perceptions of this elite actor in the changing role of universities is relevant data. The study of elites is just as valid an area of inquiry as the study of the powerless. And we can confront the diary disease by interrogating the text with other people - family, friends, and colleagues. They provide the counterweight to any excess of self-absorption. I agree with Burnier (2006: 414) that 'autoethnographic writing is both personal *and scholarly,* both evocative *and analytical,* and it is both descriptive *and theoretical*' (emphasis added). My choice of the phrase 'an analytical personal narrative' invokes my commitment to a scholarly, analytical and theoretical narrative.

Second, personal narratives are criticised for not being scientific, a point that is only valid for those who practice naturalist social science. For an interpretivist, it is incumbent to meet the 'canons of accuracy and precision, of rigour in argument and clarity in presentation, of respect for the evidence and openness to criticism' that apply to all the humanities (Collini 2012: 62). Personal narratives are not exempt. Games, dramas and narratives are valid forms of science. Above all, I resist the claim there is one type of data or one approach to analysis that is the prime source of social and cultural interpretation.

However, and third, personal narratives do pose a challenge to the conventional canons about transparency and reliability of data. The Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT) protocol wants researchers to make their data publicly

available so other researchers can determine whether the evidence supports the analysis[8]. It is a problem for me with my elite research because access hinges on my guaranteeing the anonymity of my respondents. It is a problem for this personal narrative because I am the evidence. However, I did not rely on memory and self-reflection alone. There are personal and work diaries and the archive material in the personal and work folders that replaced the filing cabinet.

Finally, there are limits to anyone's capacity for reflexivity. I have much sympathy with Watson's (1987) prayer, 'make me reflexive - but not yet'. Like everyone, I struggle to balance engagement, detachment, and critical self-awareness. It is equivalent to the search for the Holy Grail – always out of reach. However, no one, whether naturalist or interpretivist, can avoid the persistent and subtle influence of a subjectivity. The key point is that, like me, everyone doing social research confronts the trilemma of balancing engagement, detachment, and critical self-awareness (see also Wall 2008).

Noting the limits to personal narratives should not obscure its virtues. Personal narratives encourage political scientists to be wary of detachment. The goal of an impersonal, objective social scientist is illusory - every research project is personal. The focus on the personal confronts the emotions, stress, and relationships in fieldwork. We become more critically self-aware. We also become wary of living our lives in compartments. Managing the neoliberal university, research and teaching intersect not only in our work schedules but also in how we construct our identities and live out our several roles. Finally, writing a personal narrative is a challenge us to become a better writer. Perhaps the biggest gain is that this focus on the personal forces us to think outside the box of professional political scientists. It challenges the conventional canons of social science research about detachment, transparency and

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[8] See https://www.dartstatement.org/.

reliability of data, but it also offers an innovative way of understanding the self in the university world.

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