Experiences with auto-ethnography – how to write when emotions run high?

For some 15 years I have run my own construction business employing 40 members of staff. My company is located in the wider Berlin area and employs mainly bricklayers and carpenters. Out of personal and professional interest I started, in 2012, my doctoral journey as part-time PhD Student with the University of Gloucestershire.

This paper deals with the interplay of being a part-time researcher and business owner. In detail I seek to provide an account of how emotionally loaded situations impact on writing field-notes in auto-ethnography.

My professional position requires me to negotiate on a daily basis. In these negotiations I often seek to reconcile the interest of my negotiation partners and myself in an attempt to create mutual benefit. This win-win approach to negotiation is called integrative negotiation. However, I do encounter persons who prefer to follow a distributive or win-lose approach to negotiation. They only seek to enlarge their piece of ‘the pie” at my expense.

In order to reconcile their interests parties need to share information about their preferences, needs, constraints etc. in the first place. This, however, makes each party subject to possible exploitation of this knowledge by the other party. Hence parties need to trust each other in order to start this process. Therefore my research focuses on the relationship between negotiations style, trust, and cooperation and how they unfold in real world situation.

I think mutually beneficial solutions to conflicts are the basis for successful long term relationships. However, not everybody negotiates in an integrative style for various reasons. In a significant number of cases I negotiate with people that seek to exploit my attempts to cooperate. They exploit the given information or take the benefits from my cooperative action without taking cooperative actions themselves. In consequence I feel betrayed. Writing and reflecting on this encounters is often very difficult and sometimes even impossible since I am emotionally too involved in these situations.

In these writing constraints two of my roles interact. On the one hand I am researcher – the one who wants and needs to get his thoughts on paper - and on the other hand I am entrepreneur – the one who experiences the frustration. The entrepreneurial role is related to my responsibility for my employees and personal economic risk that I take running a business. The actual economic damage often does not make the difference, rather it is the feelings I have about these incidents. The more severe the break of trust is perceived - the more opportunistic a person acts, the more misleading the behaviour was, the more I perceive the other person as lying or suggesting false impressions - the more I feel betrayed and the more I am frustrated. I am trapped.

Writing when I am frustrated is very difficult and sometimes even impossible. In these situations I actually do not write down what I experience rather I think about the situation as a problem to be solved. In most cases I play with a number of options I have to cope with the situation. In more
severe cases I do daydream about taking revenge for the exploitation. When severely frustrated I often get just a couple of sentences finished, sometimes not even one at all.

In initial explorations about these constraints I realize their multiple aspects and different layers. Having trusting relationships and effectively cooperating contributes to my entrepreneurial success. Trusting the right persons is enormously beneficial. By contrast trusting the wrong persons not only costs money it also puts my ability to judge (here about whom to trust) in question. This very ability, however, is a requirement of a successful business leader. Hence, by exploiting my efforts to cooperate the other puts my own self as business leader in question.

In this paper I seek to explore the reasons for these writing constraints and how to overcome them. The technical device I will use is layered text (Rambo Ronai, 1995) which will allow me to adopt different perspectives on field-note writing. Through multiple reflections I will be able to elaborate on the roles I adopt and develop a deeper understanding of their impact on my field-note writing. In doing so I may reveal contradictions between my actions, values, self-image, and the very experiences I want to write about. Consequently, my auto-ethnographic project will benefit from coming to terms with my writing constraints.