

# Becoming a Vehicle of Knowledge Creation: How Autopoiesis Changed My Practice

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## Abstract

Autoethnographic narratives are ways of normalising and giving meaning to the human experience, allowing the reader to resonate with what is relevant and important in the writer's experience, while generating new insights and knowledge we would not otherwise access. Using my doctoral journey of striking moments and the shifts created in me, in this paper, I argue that human experiences must be valued as equal to diagnostic and objectivist approaches in the pursuit of knowledge. By juxtaposing my autoethnographic narrative with the Theory of Autopoiesis, acting as both a framework of analysis and metaphor, I offer my emotional process as a political representation, a questioning of power paradigms and a source of knowledge and support to other researchers. The rendering of my journey, from working in and believing in organisations governed by a business logic and rational economic theory, to daring to challenge such discursive powers, shows what is possible through conscious noticing, embracing, and transformation. I argue that by combining scientific theories with analytical autoethnography, we can bridge sciences and communities of practice, and open doors for the application of autoethnography in new professional domains, thereby significantly contributing to an adjustment of research practices and to what counts as knowledge.

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*"When I let go of who I am, I become who I might be"*

Lao Tzu

## Introduction

While autoethnography has found its place in parts of academia (Lofthus, 2020) and qualitative methodologies placing the human experience at the centre (Adams, 2021), my professional experience shows that organisations continue to lean on deterministic and interpretative types of research to produce what is deemed as valid knowledge. The predominant "*object – subject*" approach to research carries implications in terms of

power to define and influence the discourses in organisations and academia, including a locus of command to determine what counts as knowledge and reliable research methods (Rød, 2020). Autoethnography, situating the self-narrative in a social context (Spry, 2001), is an opportunity to impact social justice, organisations, and practice, appreciating our human experiences while elevating ourselves to be valuable parts in the puzzle of knowledge creation. By doing autoethnography, we are influencing current norms, practices, and paradigms. Mark Neumann sums up autoethnography as, “*texts (that) democratize the representational sphere of culture, by locating the particular experiences of individuals in a tension with dominant expressions of discursive power*” (Neumann, 1996 p. 189). During this process, the personal becomes political (Holman Jones, 2008).

For autoethnography to be fully recognised as a method of knowledge creation in other communities, sciences, and domains that are biased towards more traditional research paradigms, the subjective experiences need to be explored and expressed in commercial and public organisations alike and accepted as equally relevant. This includes challenging the systemic and political factors determining and defining what counts as knowledge, exploring how knowledge creation take place, and shaping increased awareness through courageous conversations where emotions and experiences are openly expressed.

In this paper, I bridge the worlds of organisations, academia, and biology to ask how a changing sense of self can be a vehicle for knowledge creation. I argue that rational economic thinking and traditional research approaches do not sufficiently recognise the individual experience as a source of knowledge creation. Through autoethnographic accounts, I describe my emergent sense of self during a four-year period as I moved from international organisational consultant to becoming a reluctant academic, with an acceptance and recognition that we are all knowledge creators. Relying on a combination of evocative and analytical autoethnography, I use the Theory of Autopoiesis, rooted in biology, as a metamodel to illustrate how the human experience itself is knowledge creation. Through this juxtaposition, and framework of analysis, I hope to invite different communities of knowledge, research, and practice, to challenge what counts as knowledge and in the process notice what is emerging within themselves and their surroundings.

### ***Experiencing Autopoiesis for the First Time***

Having worked as an international consultant for more than two decades, I was well versed in the art of delivering effective workshops before quickly moving on to the next assignment. Preoccupied with creating the change the organisation had requested by using the collective power present in the employees, not once did I stop to harness the knowledge created in the process and consider how it affected those present. Mostly concerned with client satisfaction, little time was spent on reflecting how the sessions impacted me as a person or my identity. It was only when I entered the doctoral programme that I came to view my lived experiences as knowledge creation, and this challenged my sense of self in a physical way.

As I worked my way through different literature in the doctoral programme, I became familiar with the concept of Autopoiesis, as elaborated by the biologists Maturana and Varela. But I was unprepared for my personal journey of change, and how this would affect me emotionally and physically. Let me share what I consider to be my first inner experience of Autopoiesis:

*“Two months into my second year in the doctoral programme, I started to experience an inner feeling of discombobulation. It was as if parts of my body detached themselves from their moorings and started to float around in the oceans of my inside. My skin and the contours of my body were the only perimeters preventing the parts from sliding off the edge of my being, and into an eternal universe, almost like humans once believed that ships fell off the edge of the earth. I was having a first-hand physical and emotional experience of the Theory of Autopoiesis in action, a journey of regenerating myself, with intense alertness and presence. It explained that I could continue to learn by revisiting my life, simultaneously embracing new perspectives while responding differently, because I was in the process of becoming someone else” (Rød, 2020 p. 145-146).*

I was struck by the visceral experience of becoming someone else. This was a different type of knowledge, scary and expansive at the same time, and not one that could have been captured adequately by an outside observer. I found resonance in the Theory of Autopoiesis, which describes life and cognitive processes and how we constantly recreate ourselves. According to this theory, we humans, are living, autopoietic systems engaged in processes of cognition (Maturana and Varela, 1980) that enables us to learn, develop and mature continuously.

The experience shook my foundations and identity, and I became intrigued by how we can use different interpretations of Autopoiesis, be it biological, cognitive, systemic, or social, to explore the knowledge created through our lived experiences. By combining the argument that disruption creates shifts (Alvesson and Karreman, 2011; Cunliffe, 2018) and shifts produce new awareness (Shotter, 2011), with the scientific understanding of molecular change in autopoiesis as a metaphor and an analogy, we can better understand how our sense of self is structured and restructured through our interactions with the environment. Gregory Bateson (1979) argued that epistemology always is personal (Karlsson et al., 2019) and that this makes us all explorers and creators of knowledge. Olson (2015) added that autoethnography engages an exploration of changes within ourselves that can be related to larger social, political, and cultural events (Olson, 2015).

### ***What counts as knowledge?***

The contextualisation of our personal experiences and processes, implies that our sense of self, and perception of identity, are constructed and negotiated between self and the domains of which we are a part. We start to ask ourselves if our voices count and what knowledge is correct (Karlsson et al., 2019) and for whom, even questioning who we are and if it matters. This transports us to the hegemony of power, where according to Foucault (1999) the dominant voices determine the direction and content of the discourses, establishing a basis for their power and positionality on knowledge. As we move between different levels, from macro to micro, from socio-cultural to ourselves (Allen-Collinson, 2013), we become ontological and epistemological vehicles for knowledge creation. The term onto-epistemology (Klevan and Grant, 2020) describes that as we are knowing, we are also becoming.

We can think of knowledge as a puzzle. The more individual experiences we bring in, the greater grasp we gain of our perceived and co-constructed realities. In this context the traditional “*object – subject*” approach is constraining in several ways; it only illuminates parts of a situation or experienced phenomenon; the observations are filtered, and the inner human experience is not captured

sufficiently. Research methods situated in systemic practice, such as reflexivity and autoethnography, share the personal and lived experiences of humans, revealing knowledge otherwise. By re-examining what counts as knowledge, we have an opportunity to explore the human experiences from the inside and construct new understandings and awareness (McNamee, 2014).

## **Personal Context and Methods**

I was first introduced to autoethnography as a method during my doctoral research in systemic practice. As a long-standing practitioner in the field of organisational change, I wanted to explore new ways of approaching and understanding different types of organisational change (Rød, 2020). My research examined how teams could constructively lead, be in and with, emergence and change, given the challenges they are facing in today's complex environment. During Participatory Action Research workshops with three teams in the research, I looked for striking moments that created shifts in the teams, leading them to new awareness around change. At the same time, several unexpected shifts happened within me, and my journal records of these formed an autoethnographical account running through my thesis, ultimately resulting in a different sense of self. As wheels were set in motion and events unfolded, I became both a participant and observer to my process. I draw upon excerpts from my thesis capturing significant moments that created shifts in me.

### ***Autoethnography as Method***

Autoethnography as method is especially valuable in times of disturbances and struggles. It becomes an ethical practice as we try to find the best path forward in life (Ellis and Bochner, 2006a). The researchers engage in an honest rendering of their own experiences and emotions, and autoethnography becomes a communicative way of making sense of lives and experiences. The learnings gained from inquiring into, and sharing assumptions, perceptions, and experiences create new forms of knowledge (McNamee, 2014). Autoethnographic narratives become a way of normalising a variety of human experiences, while also giving them meaning. This allows the reader to resonate with what is relevant, generating new insights and knowledge, we would never otherwise have. The term auto-ethno-graphy provides us with three contexts for sense-making: auto, meaning self; ethno meaning culture(s) or people(s); and graphy meaning a form of expression (Ellis and Bochner, 2006a). Through autoethnography, I was able to have deeper conversations with myself, observing and experiencing a painful catharsis of inner contradictions and transformation. It became a process of questioning not only my truth, but also those of the society, and the organisational and academic cultures I had been conditioned into.

I eventually experienced relief and a growing courage to own my new sense of self. My journal and autoethnographical account became the hand I held onto, helping me make sense of my process through the three elements: auto, ethno, and graphy. The first was my own subjective experience, learning, and reflections (auto). The second was the use of the organisational cultures as context to grasp the practices of people(s) (*ethno*) within or outside ourselves (Ellis and Bochner, 2006a). The third involved expressing my inner culture through a rich and thick description of inner and outer dialogues and contexts (*graphy*) (Herrman and Adams, 2020).

Analytic autoethnography can be described as a data interpretation procedure (sm-Rahma and Jahan, 2020) where the researcher is fully present in the research setting and visible in the text while contributing to a theoretical understanding of a social phenomenon (Anderson, 2006). The process invites the researcher to combine the personal narrative with a theoretical understanding (Tedlock, 2016), also known as realist ethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2006b). By combining the evocative and analytical, we develop “*stories to do the work of analysis and theorizing*” (Ellis and Bochner, 2006a, p. 8).

### ***Striking Moments and Shifts***

In my practice as an organisational consultant, I had often noticed how a phrase uttered, or an action taken by one team member, could create a response in someone else, which again could lead to a big shift in the team interaction. Such interactions can lead to a “struckness” as an integral part of a conversation. Wanda Pillow describes being “struck” as “*a spontaneous sensation, which occurs in a sticky or striking moment, which triggers an individual to make sense of an experience*” (Pillow, 2010, p. 4). What we are struck by, especially during difficult times, engages us and produces something different in us at some level (Shotter, 2015). Striking moments create shifts in awareness or consciousness (Rød, 2020). By managing and paying close attention to our inner and outer dialogues (Simon, 2014), we capture the responses stirred in ourselves and the shifts created. My inner journey of transformation during the research process was a series of striking moments, which caused a restructuring of my sense of self. The Theory of Autopoiesis was a useful framework in my understanding of what was happening to me, why, and how.

By applying the Theory of Autopoiesis as a metamodel, I explore the simultaneous processes of cognitively recreating the self, while being a vehicle of knowledge creation, capturing the complexities of human transformation. Metamodels can act as a framework for analysis encouraging sensemaking of deeper structures in cultural phenomena (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) placing additional pieces in our knowledge creation puzzle.

### ***The Theory of Autopoiesis as Metamodel***

Developed by the Chilean biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, the Theory of Autopoiesis describes how we create ourselves through our experiences, auto meaning *self*, and poiesis meaning *making*. The theory was originally suggested as a unifying concept for defining living beings in the field of biology, but we also find its application in the theory of knowledge; parts of social and behavioural sciences (Razeto- Barry, 2012); self-organising systems (Andrew, 2007), and cognition (Seidl, 2004).

Whereas Autopoiesis focuses on the individual process, Mingers (1995) argues the difficulty of applying the Theory of Autopoiesis to the social domain. Given that Maturana and Varela define life as a way of self-organisation (1980), it is relevant to extend the concept to understanding identity and how our sense of self changes through interaction with our environments. We can use the model and the metaphor of the Autopoietic process explain how we (re)make ourselves; an unfolding process created through whatever and with whomever we are interacting. The interactional and regeneration process that happens between the organisation of self and the environment, is echoed by social

constructionists Berger and Luckman (1991). Co- construction depicts how people develop, learn and construct knowledge with others through social situations and processes, thereby creating common understandings and a symbols and language to support it (Berger and Luckmann, 1991).

### **Autopoietic Process and Five Shifts: Findings & Juxtapositions**

The Theory of Autopoiesis explains how a cell self-generates within a boundary of its own making, while at the same time being open to its surroundings (Capra, 2017). Unlike the concept of homeostasis, which describes the tendency of preserving the same conditions and resist change, the concept of autopoiesis covers the opposite describing naturally emergent structures in response to change. Every living being is an autopoietic body (Razeto-Barry and Villalobos, 2019), and the patterns of organisation that make up the autopoietic body (cell) i.e., its identity or DNA, remain the same. But the structural organisation of the cell changes as a response to the interaction with the environment (Urrestarazu, 2012). Put in other words, as humans we remain the same at the core, but our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions develop as we co- construct our realities through social interaction with those around us.

Capra (2017), uses the word “coupling” to explain and describe the interactions we have with our environment. Every coupling, he says, causes a restructuring in us on a cellular level (Capra, 2017). The cell boundary (membrane) filters external stimuli causing continuous internal activity. When the outer disruptions are rejected, a degree of disturbance will occur inside the autopoietic body causing the elements to rearrange themselves to a certain extent. Nevertheless, when the stimuli are admitted into the system, the degree of restructuring is greater. The interaction creates a constant production of self and autopoiesis becomes an abstract description of a self-organising human system (Boden, 2000). The ongoing process of how the components self-organise is what brings life to any living system, rather than the components themselves (Zeleny, 1977). Similarly, as human living beings, we continuously regenerate ourselves on a cellular level, but it is through the process of our experiences that we recreate our identities.

We know from biology that cells come together to form larger clusters. We, as humans, are complex cell structures undergoing some of the same processes as a single cell. This means that who we were, and how we reacted five years ago, is different from who we were last month or will be next week. New conversations can bring about new awareness, moving something deep inside of us. Each time we make meaning of something, an awareness, or an experience in a new way, we expand our sensory range, generating new knowledge (Rød, 2020).

With the process of self-renewal as a backdrop, I, as the “autopoietic body”, share five `couplings` that took place during my doctoral research process. Each coupling was different, triggering a reorganising of my sense of self. According to the theory of Autopoiesis, striking moments are disturbances at the boundaries of the autopoietic body causing shifts in the inner organisation of a system. Below, I share the five shifts describing my process of changing my sense of self.

### **The Outset**

As I entered the doctoral programme in 2015, I felt both curious and eager to learn, but in hindsight, I realise that my boundaries were closed.

*“True to my Cartesian conditioning and linear thinking, I embarked on my field research in 2016 with a linear timeline containing three different research phases, clear objectives, and outputs for each phase. It provided a useful road map documenting the “seriousness” of my research, topic, and approach. Six months into the field research, I found that things were not evolving in the linear fashion I had expected. I was trying to force everything into my linear research timeline, staying true to the research proposal and what I felt was a moral and ethical obligation to the doctoral programme. I carried the conviction within me that sticking to the original plan was a sign of integrity and good character”*

(Rød, 2020, p. 24-25).

The excerpt captures my sense of self as I embarked on the programme. I was a professional who adhered to business logic based on an individual-focused management style, centred on control, measurement, and efficiency. During my career as a business coach and consultant, I had worked in organisations where this mind-set prevailed, and I took it to be an undisputed truth. As my international career progressed, I continued to find organisations and management strongly influenced by modernistic approaches where change would be characterised by linear, normative plans in pursuit of binary answers. People, processes, and departments would be dissected, measured, and analysed before being assembled in a different and seemingly more effective way with little regard for the intangible connecting tissue between the people that provided the basis for collaboration and creativity (Rød, 2020). At the same time, nestling in my core was an interest in humans and their lives. Without knowing it, I was a modernist in my head and a social constructionist at heart, with a disturbing contradiction inside me.

Seidl (2004) explains cognitions as constructs of our cognitive systems. In other words, what we perceive and how we make sense of our perceptions depends on a structure unique to everyone. The self-organisation in the autopoietic system means that the system determines what is being reproduced, as it recreates the structure for reproducing itself in interaction with the environment.

Thinking about myself in the beginning of my doctoral journey, I am wondering: had I then been reproducing my belief system without taking heed of events in my surroundings? Was my inner structure such that I was not open to influence? Was I setting myself up for reproducing my identity as a modernist, enacting what I had always known? The next excerpt shows how unavailable I was for influence.

### **First Shift: Disturbance at the Boundaries**

During the first part of the doctoral programme, I became aware of a niggling disturbance inside me. I recall sitting in the cafeteria at the museum, and I felt the annoyance boiling inside me. Our course director had changed the meeting up plans again and I was quite angry. I complained to my colleague sitting opposite me that the programme was unprofessional and lacking in structure. Sipping his coffee

slowly, he leaned over towards me and smiled: *“For someone who is studying change, you are not very open to change yourself, are you?”*. He sat back and my jaw dropped. He just made a very valid point.

In his gentle way, my colleague pointed out the dissonance in me, and this led me to re-examine my attitude to change, and to what I considered to be a "professional way" of doing things. To my dismay, I came to discover that I considered structure, targets, plans, and set frames within the modernist paradigm as more valuable and reliable than the flow of ideas and co-construction of realities associated with social constructionism and systemic practice. If I felt this way, how could I criticise others for insisting on proven sources of knowledge? How could I talk of openness to change when I could not handle a small change of plans? The deeper I went into the forest of systemic research, the more confused I became.

Maturana and Varela (1980) nuance the relations between the autopoietic system and environment through the system's ability to open and close itself. The operative closure of the cognitive system prevents the environment from producing operations or processes in the system (Maturana and Varela, 1980). When the autopoietic system does not allow real inputs from the environment, but only registers external disruptions or irritations, it can still trigger internal operations in the system. In other words, external events may trigger interior processes, but they cannot determine those processes (Luhmann, 2000). We can feel unease, which does not necessarily lead to any change, just a state of discomfort. At this point, I was not open to external stimuli, yet I felt an increasing inner discomfort, as captured here:

*“I felt confused and frustrated. I was losing my bearings, the ground beneath my feet. It reminded me of how once, as a little girl, I had drifted away on an inflatable mattress from the shore, while no one was watching me. Panicking, I had tried to find solid ground under my feet, only to sense the depth of the ocean. I was lying there and screaming for help when a young woman had come to my aid, pulling me ashore. The experience had left me shaken and scared for a long time. But who would rescue me now? I could physically sense the evolvment of the journey this doctorate had initiated in me. I had no idea where the floating pieces inside of me might find harbour”*

(Rød, 2020 p. 146).

The disturbance did not create a conscious shift in me, but unknowingly, I had started to drift from my original point of departure. The process was beginning to challenge my sense of self, who I had been, and who I was becoming. It was without cognition, merely a visceral experience of a transition within my body. Although my autopoietic system had been triggered, it was not sufficient to challenge the organisation of my inner structure or my patterns of reproducing myself.

### ***Second Shift: Doing Something Wrong***

According to Maturana and Varela (1980), autopoietic systems are open systems that depend on coupling with the environment and exchange of energy to exist. The interactional openness is regulated by the autopoietic system, which decides when, what, and through what channels energy is exchanged (Maturana and Varela, 1980). My interactions with the literature, research topic, and process felt like a continuous bombardment of disturbances at the gates of my autopoietic entity,



forcing an inner transformation and reshaping. Nevertheless, I kept hiding and resisting, and the feeling of nausea continued.

*“Emerging from the summer holidays at the beginning of August 2017, I should be feeling charged up and ready to go. I am not. My head and mind are spinning in a vortex. I feel heavy, dizzy, and nauseous without any logical explanations. What is wrong with me? While walking one day, I am struck by a feeling of being told off, as if I am a little girl and have done something wrong. The feeling hits me in clear daylight, and the sensation resonates throughout every cell in my body. Every part of me recognises the fear nesting inside me. Am I doing something wrong? Unfolding the “struckness” within me, I come to understand what the feeling is about. Thinking back on what I have read about uncertainty and mankind’s search for a truth to hold on to and to help him make sense of the world, I come to understand my process and what is going on. In someone’s world, I am doing something wrong. I recall words uttered during a doctoral seminar: “it is almost like we are subversives”. Ever since I was a little girl, I have challenged the rules and norms society had conditioned me into. I was the “why”-person, always asking the questions or stepping up to try new things. I remember my mother’s words: “Why do you always have to stick your head out?” “Why do you always have to do things out of the ordinary?” “Why can’t you just be like everyone else?” At the time I felt very unsupported, for which I blamed her, but as I sit here forty years later, I see that she was only afraid. I rocked her boat and she responded in fear-based anger. Every time I questioned something or did something out of the ordinary, my parents were dismayed because I threatened their order, their stability, and their worldview. And now I am doing it again, but in another environment, surrounded by different people”*

*(Rød, 2020 p. 94-96).*

Instead of sabotaging myself with worrying thoughts about what was right and wrong, maybe I should stop resisting and instead be open to the experiences, whatever that meant to my sense of self. The Theory of Autopoiesis clearly distinguishes between the reproduction of the system and the structures according to which this reproduction takes place (Luhmann, 2000). For a system to remain living, it must continuously adapt the latter to ensure the former. If the system closes its borders, it will cease to exist. Maybe it was time for me to ease up the border control if I wanted to continue in my field and remain relevant.

### **Third Shift: Not Feeling Good Enough**

As we know, a cell with strong boundaries will not let energy or stimuli in and thereby fail to adapt to the environment, the consequence of which is death. Similarly, a cell without boundaries will be flooded or even taken over by the environment and cease to exist. To survive, the cell must maintain a careful semi-openness, balancing its own core identity while reorganising its structure. For a human unconsciously restructuring herself, this can be frustrating, and result in a feeling of incompetence. The further I moved away from my known sense of self, the more inadequate I felt. The next excerpt captures my frustrations:

*“When arriving at the analysis, it was as if I had lost all my confidence and thrown away everything I knew worked in my practice. I had not found a scientific, evidence-orientated way of showing what shifts and differences my work with teams had produced. How do you re-render an air of relief going through a room; a participant leaning into a colleague in a way they never would have dared before? How do you describe to an outsider the lights going on in people’s eyes as they have a revelation or the tenderness with which vulnerability is received and held? How do you explain to someone about the energetic slap of a rejection? Or the tangible disappointment when hearing a colleague’s interpretations of events? What words do you use to give evidence of how someone finally stands up, their lips trembling, and has it out with a colleague because the space feels safe? How do you communicate the vibrant energy in a room when participants engage in enthusiastic conversation about the insides and workings of their topic of passion? Words and descriptions feel insufficient, explanations and linear accounts inadequate. Analysis of similarities and differences does not capture the essence of the shifts. And how do you reflect a co-constructed dialogical experience without referring to descriptive dialog using each word, breath, and movement? But the work, the research, and my practice are not worth anything to anyone, outside the teams, if I cannot convey it in a manner that makes sense to others”*

(Rød, 2020, p. 203).

Left in no man’s land, I was not who I had been, nor could I embrace who I was becoming; and I was lacking in confidence. Simon writes:

*“I have noticed in my teachings of systemic practice and in supervising systemic masters and doctoral research that smart and experienced systemic practitioners often feel they must now jettison all they have been taught, all that they have learned on the job as if it is irrelevant to the doing of the research”*

(Simon, 2018, p. 54).

When I read Simon’s words, I wanted to cry because I felt as if she described me and my experience. As I was analysing my findings, I felt that my thirty years of experience as an international consultant were worthless. I experienced a profound imbalance and consequently felt very lost. In my view, the research findings did not count as proper knowledge according to my modernist past. At the same time, I felt that what I was doing was important. The reflexive moments I had come to cherish deeply helped me process my feelings.

Maturana and Varela (1980) argue that the interactive opening and closing of the boundaries of the autopoietic entity becomes particularly important when considering cognitive processes. Cognition, they say, is directly linked to the concept of living. They say humans’ ability to know depends on biological integrity and careful balancing of ourselves with our environment. The basis of the process of cognition is founded on self-knowing, followed by real knowledge (Capra, 2017). I was facing deeper shifts inside of me, and as I was getting to know myself and my new identity, I was gaining new knowledge. Something was stirring inside of me as my sense of self was being restructured to a higher level; almost like a butterfly cocoon ready to burst.

### **Fourth Shift: An Emerging Sense of Self**

Whitaker (2000) describes living systems as dynamic structures with an inner circularity. The internal operations maintain the identity and unity of the system. Whereas the process can be influenced by events in the living system's environment, the interior operations are unique to the living system itself. If you move the autopoietic system to another environment, its inner circularity will continue determining its capacity to survive (Whitaker, 2000). In other words, a system's existence will depend on its ability to develop and adapt. As I moved from a consultant to a researcher, the contexts and application of my skills changed, as did my willingness to challenge existing paradigms of knowledge creation:

*"I am indeed a part of these paradigms which discourses have made imprints on me from an early age, all through my education and professional life. As I have started to question the validity and purposefulness of such paradigms in today's contexts, these approaches seem increasingly insufficient in a world where emergence is everywhere, and the ability to shift and move needs to be part of an organisation's DNA if it is to prolong its life expectancy. For someone who was brought up on, and force-fed, the drive for setting and achieving goals and results, this journey is transformational. While I am researching change, I am also an instrument of change. I observe the process while being part of it. I am changing too. Within me, new insights are brimming, and I am longing to share and to apply my new learnings in my professional practice"*

(Rød, 2020 p. 196).

Pecek and Ovsenik (2018) point to the inseparable connection between a person and an organisation. The organisation's level of creativity can influence a person's ability to express their potential and freedom to exist. I was feeling controlled by the culture in my working environment, and this influenced both my sense of self, purpose, and motivation. In an autopoietic system, a person is both an observer and creator, bearing witness to the reproducing and restructuring of self in a continuous process. I was observing my inner change and my responses to this. How could I break free from my self-imposed limitations? What thoughts, feelings, and attitudes did I need to alter?

### **Fifth Shift: A Creator of Knowledge**

We can argue that contexts give a person both life and a sense of self (Capra, 2002). Our ability to explore knowledge and express ourselves is influenced by contexts. In other words, an organisation, a professional field, or a community's ability and willingness to continuously challenge its overall reproductive structure strongly influence individual room for expression. Contexts therefore play an instrumental role in supporting or hindering our role as knowledge creators,

Back at the academic bastion of hierarchy and modernism where I worked, I started to notice shifts. Was something happening in my environment as well? Slowly, I experienced that sticking my head out did not mean decapitation. No one fell to the ground when I said "social constructionism" or "systemic practice". Rather, I noticed remarks such as "collaborative research practices" and "communities of learning," with students nodding and listening attentively in my classes.

I was asked to present my doctoral findings to my colleagues with long academic records of

accomplishment. Slightly nervous, I stood in front of them and spoke of Participatory Action Research (PAR), reflexivity, and autoethnography, sharing my research methodology and findings. I was humble and soft-spoken, knowing that what I presented would be very different from other research projects shared during the meetings. I was uncertain if this would even count as knowledge in their minds. As the host invited the participants to comment on my thesis, I was prepared for the floor to open and for me to sink into an academic abyss, never to surface again. A senior colleague, whom I held in high regard, coughed slightly and I braced myself: here it comes, the final act of my short-lived academic career. “Anne,” he said, “*there is a lot here I don’t understand or even agree with, but you are a true creator of knowledge.*”

### **Reflections and Conclusions**

In this paper, I have used the Theory of Autopoiesis as a metamodel to describe the cognitive and biological processes taking place when we regenerate and evolve ourselves. With autoethnography as a method, I have shown how humans can be instruments of knowledge creation and that the rendering of human experiences is of equal value to diagnostic and objectivist approaches when creating knowledge. Through the process of analysis, I have examined how knowledge is created through our inner experiences. I have shown how our context influence our development of self and creation of knowledge, and what tensions and possibilities this embeds.

### ***Being with not knowing***

The human need to reduce uncertainty acts as fuel for our ongoing search for more knowledge and assurance. As I reflect on what counts as knowledge and what kinds of knowledge is validated in the context of Western society, I realise we are facing a dilemma. I believe that traditional scientific research methods designed to discover hidden truths fall short, and we need to embrace the human experiences as equally important and valuable, adding profound insights.

*“From the early philosophers through to the theories of the past century, and up to present day, change has always been present as an inevitable part of life. What strikes me is the human need to find the “right” way of doing things, hence we seem left with a binary “right – wrong” thinking about the approaches we engage in and apply. It appears to me as a power struggle between discourses emerging from a tension around how to be with the unknown. I can feel the sentiments of mankind through the centuries echo into the boardrooms and teams of the 21st century. We are still preoccupied with limiting uncertainty and controlling our environments, but our (current) means and methods may be more sophisticated at first glance. The fundamental issue here is how we deal with the fact that the future can never be known; should we try to control it or allow it to emerge? I wonder to what extent Cartesian approaches and Newtonian science, reflected in modernism today, are used to limit uncertainty and almost protect us against, not only the uncertain future but also each other?”*

(Rød, 2020 p. 195-196).

### ***But the Core Remains***

Capra (2017) states that the coupling of an autopoietic entity with its environment creates changes in its structure, while the core identity, or the operating system, governing the cell's inner organisation, remains the same. This has helped me accept that while I can adapt and evolve, the core of my being remains the same.

*“When I started this research journey I was biased in a contradictory and paradoxical way. I preferred to follow the linear approaches I had been conditioned into, resisting the seemingly chaotic unfolding of my research journey. What my findings have shown is the value of daring to separate ourselves from our paradigms, becoming aware that these ideas are not us. It is about building bridges between our experiences to co-create what serves us as we move forward and navigate our future”*

(Rød, 2020 p. 238-239).

Through poiesis, something new is being brought into existence. By using myself as an instrument, I have shown how a shared human experience is of value in knowledge creation, adding pieces to the puzzle. The emergence and manifestation of the “something” new is a response to a given time and context (Wiens and MacDonald, 2020). As we become aware and recognise the ‘something’ that was not there before, we can develop knowledge, appreciation, and understanding of new phenomena. As humans, we are living, autopoietic systems engaged in processes of cognition (Maturana and Varela, 1980), we are knowledge creators. For my professional practice this means that I encourage others and myself to continuously challenge what counts as knowledge and question what we know, and how we know that we know.

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