Case Study-Based Experiences and Advice on the Use of Autoethnographic Research Method in Organizational Research

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This article presents findings from a longitudinal autoethnographic case study (2016–2024) on the evolution of knowledge management within a large Finnish state-owned research and development institution. Offering a cultural perspective, the main researcher—an internal member of the organization—reflects on personal experiences while engaging in autoethnographic research.

The article emphasizes lessons learned from conducting this type of research and proposes recommendations for producing high-quality autoethnographic work. It also briefly outlines the study's theoretical framework, relevant literature, and key empirical insights.

Through thematic narrative analysis, the study uncovered nine distinct patterns that shaped the organization's knowledge management history. These patterns emerged through the fusion of empirical findings, theoretical knowledge, and intuitive application of a knowledge management framework. This framework evolved into a narrative model informed by four key perspectives: people, processes, technology, and the 'I' - the researcher's subjective lens.

Keywords: autoethnography, experientialism, organizational research, knowledge management

INTRODUCTION

Autoethnography as a research method is a relatively new way of doing organizational research. It requires an intrinsic perspective lived from the inside rather than an outsider's eye observation. Another related research method is ethnography, which has a strong tradition in cultural anthropological research. According to Eriksson, autoethnography can offer an alternative methodology for conducting research in parallel with cultural practices and with an ongoing change (Eriksson 2013, 3-4, 11-12).

In business research, ethnography has been used less frequently. The most popular business research methods often look at organizations from a positivist perspective, where the aim is to prove something true or false. In autoethnographic research, the philosophical approach is symbolic-interpretive, based on experience and eliciting perceptions from it. Autoethnography is strongly qualitative as a research method. Conclusions are first-hand and the sum of inductive and abductive observations, both of which complement each other (Hatch 2018; Saunders et al. 2019, 130; 152-156; 180).

THE CASE ORGANIZATION AND THE CASE STUDY

The case organization was the Geological Survey of Finland (GTK), one of Europe's leading experts in applied geosciences. Founded back in 1885 from a division of a ministry, GTK up to date operates under the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, employing over 400 experts in the mineral economy, green energy, water management, the environment, and digital solutions, and has offices in six (6) places in Finland. GTK provides expert service for private clients, stakeholders, and society. Partner networks include both domestic and international research institutes, companies, and universities. Decision-making and leadership has been developed towards a knowledge driven culture. Work performed is the main driver to the research and its outcomes.

The main objectives of the research were

1. To gain a holistic understanding of knowledge management in a case organization. This involved identifying the impact on organizational processes, human workflows, and technology issues during the development of knowledge management and identifying the conditions that are favorable for the organization to create knowledge management.
2. To enable the main researcher to learn a qualitative research method - autoethnography - relatively rarely used in Business administration.

The following research sub-objectives were set:

1. Understand how to write autoethnographic research coherently.
2. Produce a holistic overview about knowledge management in an organization.
3. Identify the causalities during the development of systemic knowledge management in the case organization.
4. According to the findings, conduct recommendations or roadmap to plan knowledge management for governmental organizations.

Based on research objectives and problems the following research questions were specified. The main research question was:

A. What enables the creation of an advantageous knowledge management in organizations?

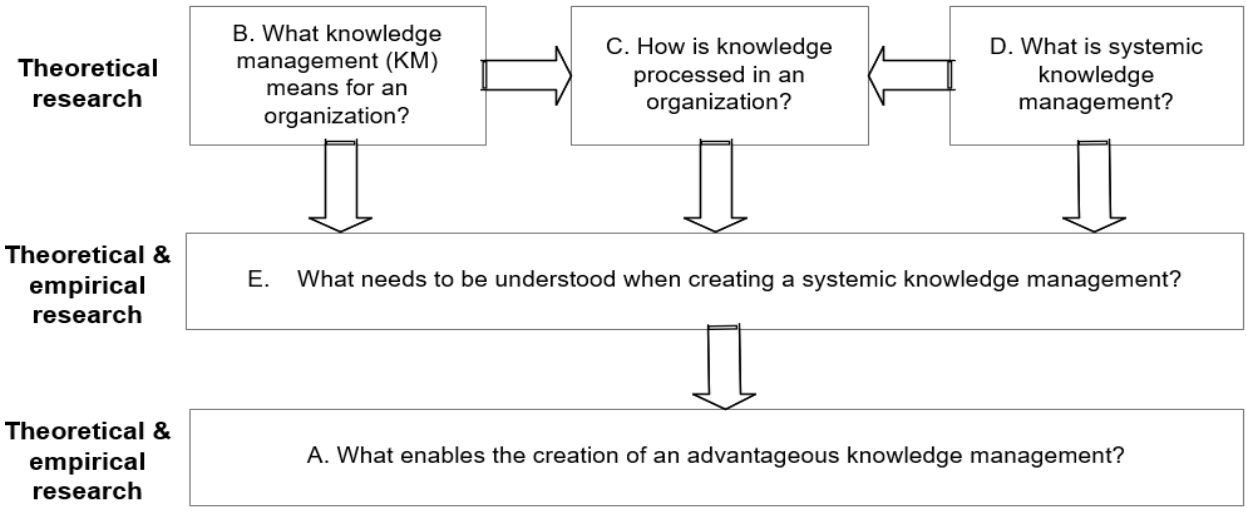
Addressing this question, the following sub questions needed to be answered:

B. What does knowledge management (KM) mean for an organization?
C. How is knowledge processed in an organization?
D. What is systemic knowledge management?
E. What needs to be understood when creating systemic knowledge management?

THEORETICAL FRAMING AND RESEARCH OUTCOME

The summary of the research setup is demonstrated in figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1
RESEARCH QUESTION, SUB-QUESTIONS, AND RELATED RESEARCH APPROACH



The setting of the theoretical framing work as a ground base for literature review. Literature review produced answers to theoretical research questions as seen from figure 2.

FIGURE 2
PRODUCED THEORETICAL FRAMING FROM LITERATURE REVIEW, RESEARCH QUESTIONS B-D

B. What knowledge management (KM) means for an organization?		C. How is knowledge processed in an organization?		D. What is systemic knowledge management?	
Key theories	**Concepts**	**Key theories**	**Concepts**	**Key theories**	**Concepts**
Defining knowledge management Knowledge discourse Knowledge value chain Nature of knowledge Knowledge management in relation to context, process and purposes	Knowledge management Knowledge absorption Prior related knowledge Absorptive capacity Value creation	Knowledge as possession versus practise Technology in knowledge management Datification Pros and cons of datification	Knowledge processing Knowledge as possession versus practise Knowledg work Information flow IT as artefact	Systems thinking Systemic knowledge management Knowledge gap Unceratainty Maturity evaluation	Systems thinking in organisation Systemic Knowledge management systems Control systems Tangible and intangible assets

Literature review: Theoretical framing

Empirical research: Qualitative mixed method autoethnography

What Knowledge Management (KM) Means for an Organization

Knowledge management (KM) refers to the systematic processes and practices an organization uses to create, share, and apply knowledge effectively. It enhances organizational learning, improves performance, and creates value by turning knowledge into meaningful and actionable insights (Newell 2015; Listenmaa 2023). KM supports exploration and exploitation of knowledge as a key resource and facilitates the operation of knowledge work systems. In practice, KM involves daily knowledge absorption, integrating prior knowledge to learn new things, and facilitates a cycle of negotiation and creation of new organizational practices. This enhances an organization's absorptive capacity, enabling adaptation and thriving in today's dynamic work environments. (Marabelli and Newell 2018; Jarenko and Kankkunen 2021.)

How Knowledge Is Processed in an Organization

Knowledge is processed in an organization through multiple interconnected perspectives and practices. Newell (2015) identifies two key perspectives: the possession perspective, which roots knowledge in individual experiences, and the practice perspective, which sees knowledge emerging from group activities and shared routines. These perspectives highlight that knowledge processing often occurs in various organizational forms. Newell (2015) speaks about managing knowledge work where novices learn alongside experts in practice what and how something needs to be done in a certain work process. The possession of an expert is transferred in practical ways. Information can be transmitted dynamically across organizational operations, particularly through technology-based processes (Laihonen 2009). Information is generated through actions performed within an IT system. IT artifacts play a critical role in this process, by shaping how people interact with the system. The design or characteristics of an IT system suggest its uses or possibilities. When these affordances are embedded in organizational practices, they guide human action and shape organizational routines (Robey et al. 2013). Once an IT artifact becomes embedded in organizational practice, IT tools facilitate tasks and influence how work is conducted. Consequently, metrics and the use of various accountability and performance management systems have become essential tools for organizations. This practice fits within the epistemology of practice, as Newell (2015) proposed, where interaction with IT artifacts is materially mediated. IT systems aim to help and distinguish relevant from irrelevant knowledge, ensuring the organization focuses on essential data. Effective knowledge-based management provides critical information for operational functions, such as service production costs and resource allocation, to meet demand requirements (Jalonen, 2015). IT acts as both an actor in knowledge work and as a container for transmitting knowledge, bridging human practices and knowledge transmission and enabling effective knowledge-based management within organizations.

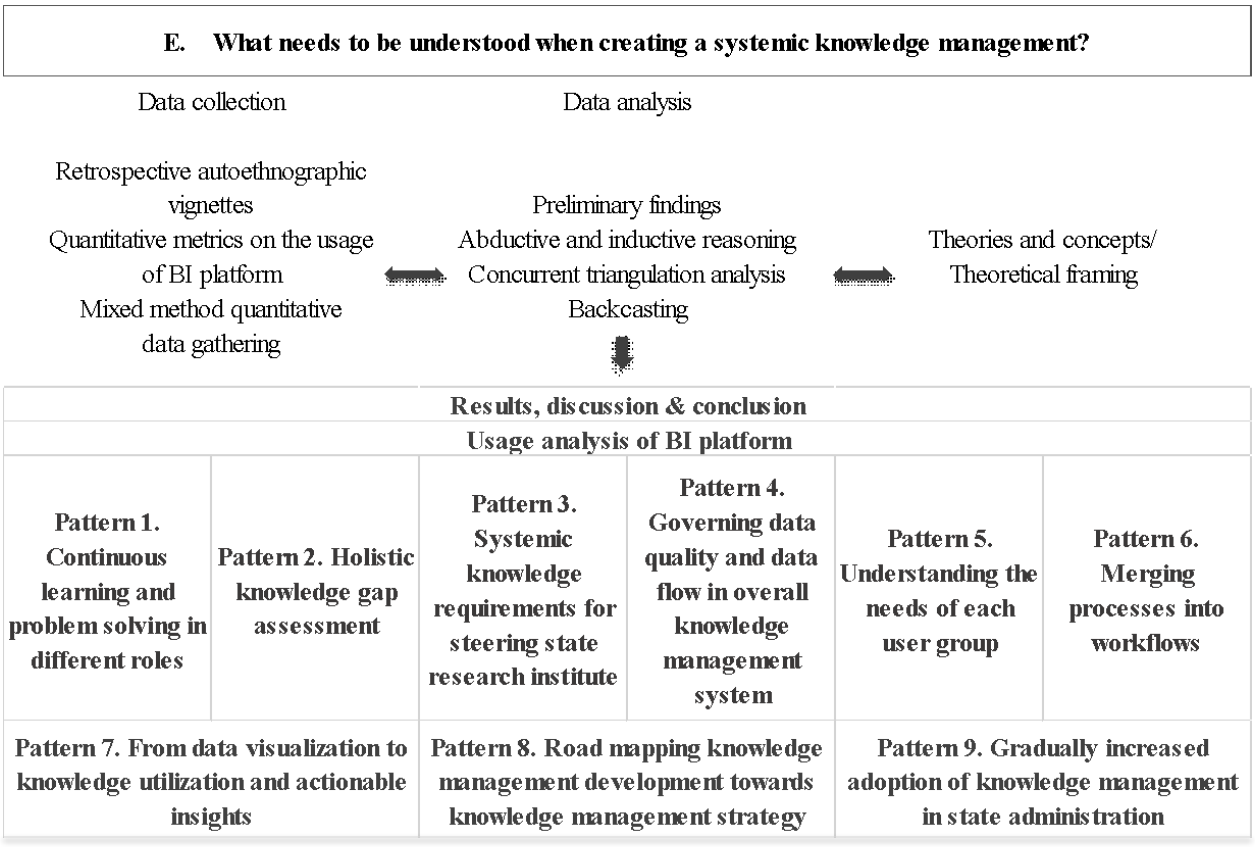
What Is Systemic Knowledge Management

Systemic knowledge management applies systems thinking to developing and managing organizational knowledge. Systems thinking focuses on understanding the interconnections within an organization (Zack 2001; Listenmaa 2023). In relation to KM, this enables sustainable improvements across processes and practices, enhancing information flow and knowledge work management. Organizations can integrate knowledge management practices into broader business strategies, ensuring alignment with organizational goals and objectives. By adopting a systemic and holistic approach, organization emphasizes adaptability and allows continuous learning from knowledge management practices and interconnected processes. This ongoing cycle of feedback and refinement ensures that knowledge strategies remain relevant and effective, helping organizations adapt to changing conditions and stay competitive in dynamic environments. *A knowledge management strategy serves as a strategic framework that aligns knowledge management initiatives with the organization's overall objectives, facilitating the integration of knowledge creation, sharing, and utilization into everyday operations.*

THE RESEARCH OUTCOME

The longitudinal autoethnographic case study demonstrated that the fundamental elements of knowledge management identified by Collison and Parcell (2001) — people, processes, and technology — serve as core pillars for the development of knowledge management. In creation of systemic knowledge management, it is essential to understand. A practical approach addressed the research question E, "What needs to be understood when creating systematic knowledge management". Figure 3 illustrates empirical process to provide research outcome. Empirical results will be described in more detail along with along with autoethnographic research presentation.

FIGURE 3
RESULTS OF EMPIRICAL DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS



Setting the Research Problem in Autoethnography

In the autoethnographic research method, the research problem can be framed flexibly; however, the approach must allow a thorough exploration of the core issue. Finding a way to get to the heart of the "problem" while carrying out the research is important. The compilation of diverse research data allows a wide range of research data to be used for your own research. These can include personal diary entries, notes from meetings, e-mails, photographs, interviews, and other documents, as well as various statistics, such as indicators of occupancy rates or other socio-economic aspects and their values. The aim is to produce in-depth knowledge of the 'problem' under study through personal experience and the research data collected. The "problem" is described and analyzed in the research process based on the experiences and perceptions generated.

Auto-ethnography is based on writing descriptions and interpretations of past experiences retrospectively and selectively. These descriptions (vignettes) can be produced through a series of iterative

processes to organize the remembered descriptions in a coherent and understandable order afterwards. The data collection with notes and field records of own journey is particularly emphasized in autoethnographic longitudinal research (Eriksson 2013; O Riodan 2014).

APPLICATION OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

An understanding of organizational research is required for conducting autoethnographic research. Organizational research spans fields such as organizational change, learning, management, and practice development. Knowledge of organizational theory can be seen as a significant advantage when examining organizational phenomena holistically and clarifying the research problem (Hatch 2018).

Our experience suggests that the more holistically and actively one examines an organization, the greater is the capacity to understand it from multiple perspectives. In an exemplary manner the main researcher developed a deep understanding of organizational change, both in practical terms and in relation to the broader evolution of a knowledge-driven culture. The application of organizational research focused specifically on the implementation of a knowledge-based management reporting system. The study's timeframe extended across approximately ten years, encompassing both historical from the past and projected developments for the future.

As part of the researcher's autoethnographic study Buchanan and Dawson's (2007, 683) ideas about *using narratives to explore organizational change were applied.* Narratives serve both retrospective and proactive purposes. In the context of autoethnography, *narratives facilitate an understanding of past events, the extraction of lessons learned, and the acquisition of insights into factors most relevant for future change*. Understanding this was the starting point for the writing process. *This understanding formed the foundation for the writing process, during which the researcher began composing her first retrospective. Narratives aid as the starting point for the overall writing process.*

The initial phase provided foundational elements essential for forming a clear and linear understanding of cause-and-effect relationships between individual events and their outcomes. *Centering 'one's own voice' in the autoethnographic journey brings meaning to the experience of organizational change (Eriksson 2013, 3-4, 11-12; O Riordan 2014, 3). Conversely, the researcher reflects on the individual's relationship with the organization, embedding themselves within the broader organizational and managerial research context.* The researchers' own reflections concerning the deep meanings on what autoethnography really is, led her to rewrite and reinterpret her own experiences with implementation of the centralized knowledge-based management reporting system. The process of rewriting is an integral part of autoethnographic research. This *cyclical nature of reminiscence and writing allows events that are not memorable to be organized either chronologically or in any other desired order.*

A cycle is a series of repeated events or processes. Cycles are characterized by the fact that they start from the beginning each time a cycle is completed and form the necessary repetition in a sequence of events. The researcher's second round of post-written description elicited further memories, although the process highlighted the need for the emergence of theoretical understanding. However, deeper causal understandings did not emerge in sufficient quantity to open fully unambiguous narratives.

The researcher´s grasp of organizational and management research deepened as time passed. Concurrently, ideas and approaches for developing knowledge management have converged, enhancing the researcher's theoretical understanding of knowledge management as a discipline. This *integration of empirical and theoretical knowledge enabled the intrinsic, thought-driven application of the theoretical framework of knowledge management to better identify changes within the target organization. The combined empirical and theoretical knowledge, rooted in the researcher's own reasoning, enabled the researcher to identify the changes that occurred and the effectiveness of them.*

Table 1 describes all three reminiscence cycles and their milestones that the researcher wrote afterwards during her autoethnographic study.

TABLE 1
CYCLES AND MILESTONES PRODUCED BY RETROSPECTIVE VIGNETTES AND FINDINGS

Year	Retrospective vignette from 2020	Retrospective vignette from 2021	Retrospective vignette from 2022, 2023 and 2024
2016	Piloting the idea	Piloting the idea	Learning how the information systems work
2017	Development to communicate with the systems	Development to communicate with the systems	
2018	Introduction in a culture	Introduction in a culture	Learning how the information systems are developed
2019	Project structure	Project structure	Learning to plan in advance as a project manager, and developing steering metrics
2020	Ground modification	Ground modification	Establishing a holistic approach of developing knowledge areas
2021		Harmonization and data quality	Developing in-depth insight about leadership, knowledge management, and knowledge gaps
2022		Synergies and futures thinking	Developing a story: the beginning, the present, and the future
2023			Holistic approach into knowledge management system development, knowledge management, and steering metrics
2024			Applying the fruits of previous experiences and know-how in creation of knowledge management strategy
Vignettes	**Cycle 1**	**Cycle 2**	**Cycle 3**
Milestone	Producing a thesis plan and research onion.	Producing theoretical framework on organisatonal change, leadership and knowledge management.	Producing in-depth understanding about autoethnography and performing empiric part of the research.

An important insight was the incorporation of the basic pillars of knowledge management presented by Collison and Parcell (2001) into the researcher´s own research. That is, the intersection of people, process and technology, and Newell's (2015) similar examination from a technological perspective: the

relationship between contexts, processes, and purposes. This realization enabled structuring her own experiences through four essential pillars or prisms: a. knowledge, knowing, and b. the need for knowledge; c. people and interpersonal knowing; and d. processes, the flow of information, and the interconnection between systems; and finally, myself and I.

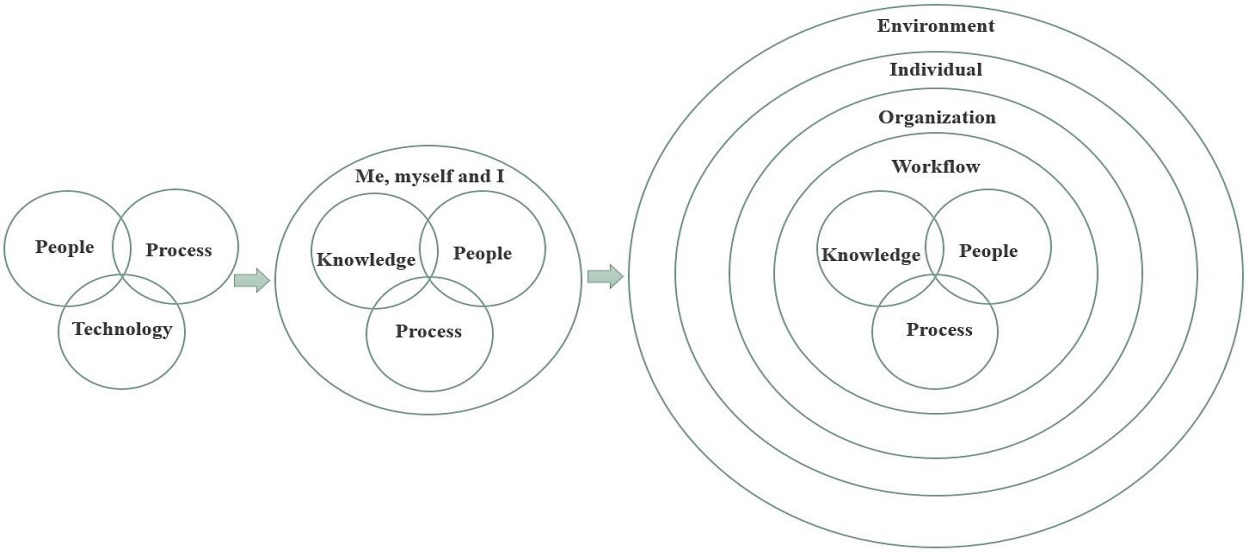
The researcher's narrative produced the utmost precision vignette cycle only through this framing. The main researcher was able to grasp and identify the relevant events in the case organization and their impact on the development of a culture of knowledge management from a holistic perspective. Indeed, O Riodan (2014) has argued that *autoethnographic research is more reliable the more detailed notes the autoethnographic researcher is able to elicit in his/her study.*

The researcher also observes that by delving into deeper layers of memory and examining past fragments in a detailed, daily manner, additional fragments emerge from the most hidden recesses of memory. Consequently, the narrative becomes, in a sense, 'all-encompassing' on its own. The writing process itself inadvertently generates a coherent trajectory in the form of a narrative. This 'exercise' proved highly productive for the researcher in her final retrospective, which was included as an appendix to the final research report.

As part of the process of writing the final autoethnographic description, *the main researcher also added quantitative data to support the qualitative data to improve the consistency of the results. The main researcher defined and limited the quantitative data to describe organizational change in the period following the implementation of the centralized reporting system. This meant looking at usage statistics for the system over a period of several years.* The findings in quantitative data supported the causal relationships in qualitative data and in some places filled in the 'gaps' in the qualitative data.

The three-dimensional setting between the experiential qualitative and quantitative data allowed for parallel analysis and the formation of derived development paths. Nine (9) paths or patterns emerged in the study, and all of them were pragmatically linked to the theory. The researcher further refined the theoretical framework to describe the organization's journey and the causal relationships that emerged from a theoretical-popular perspective. Figure 4 illustrates *the refinement of the theoretical framework for knowledge managemen*t that the main researcher developed during the research.

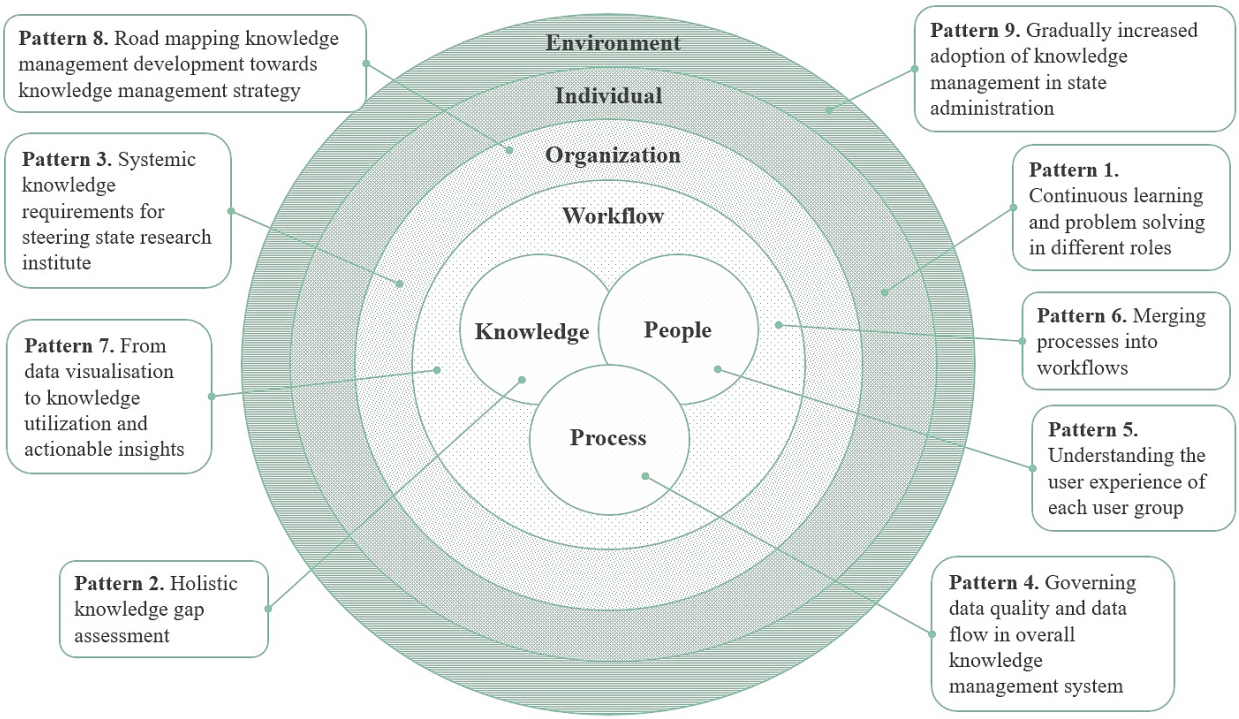
FIGURE 4
THE REFINEMENT OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AS PART OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH



THE MAIN EMPIRICAL RESULTS IN BRIEF

The thematic narrative analysis conducted in the study revealed nine (9) paths or patterns that emerged from the knowledge management development history in the case organization. By combining produced nine (9) patterns in Figure 5 the main *researcher could develop a holistic overview of the autoethnographic journey of systemic knowledge management development in a case organization*. All this is illustrated in figure 5.

FIGURE 5
THE PRODUCED JOURNEY IN THE CREATION OF SYSTEMIC KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT



The research demonstrated that introducing the centralized management reporting system had a comprehensive impact on advancing knowledge management maturity. Key findings indicated that through the application of an autoethnographic approach, *a committed individual can significantly influence an organization's capacity to absorb new knowledge, while simultaneously fostering both personal transformation and an organizational shift towards a more knowledge-driven culture. Additionally, the study highlighted the critical importance of embedding knowledge management practices into the formal workflows of the organization.*

It is also essential that individuals within an organization change have opportunities for reflection and collaboration throughout the transition process. The research underscores the importance of continuous and deliberate advancement of knowledge management practices. From a holistic standpoint, effective knowledge management development necessitates not only the formulation of a knowledge management strategy but also sustained, organization-wide commitment to this strategy and the selected practices.

It is also important that people in the organization undergoing change can reflect and collaborate throughout the transition process. The research *confirms the importance of continuous and determined development of knowledge management practices.* From a holistic standpoint, effective knowledge management development necessitates not only the formulation of a knowledge management strategy but

also long-term and organization-wide *commitment to this strategy and the selected knowledge management practices.*

It is important to acknowledge*, however, that subjectively interpretive autoethnographic research may retain inherent biases unless the findings can be meaningfully generalized*. Theoretical ambiguities, potential misconceptions, and the sheer volume of data posed significant challenges at the study's outset, making it impractical to organize the data chronologically. Although the main researcher's role in knowledge management served as the primary data source, it also presented substantial obstacles to completing the study. Nevertheless, the long-term structuring of research data, along with peer support within the professional community, gradually helped to elucidate the central narrative of the research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS

Based on our own experience, here are some practical tips for conducting successful auto-ethnographic research in organizations:

1. **An auto-ethnographic researcher should precisely define the topic and the approach to be used.** *Careful planning in both study design and implementation is required to be sufficient.* The researcher must engage deeply with the community under study. This embedded cultural focus distinguishes the approach from writing a biography or personal life story, instead emphasizing self-reflection within a cultural context.
2. **The research question should closely align with the organization's activities.** Ideally, participant observation entails immersion in the organization's routines, rituals, language use, and social relations. *Self-awareness and reflective analysis of one's role are essential in autoethnographic research. The researcher must carefully determine the degree of subjectivity-objectivity in relating personal experiences to the changes that happened within the organization.*
3. **A meticulous data collection phase is essential.** *Various materials, such as diary entries, meeting notes, emails, photographs, interviews, and other documents that describe the organization's activities and the researcher's role, should be collected.* Ethical considerations must be addressed throughout the research process, including obtaining a research permit if required.
4. **The analysis and conclusions are built on the theoretical framework**. The analysis must closely tie into this framework. A solid understanding of the relevant literature enhances the researcher's ability to utilize the autoethnographic research method and increases the ability to relate personal experiences to the collected data and theoretical constructs. Ideally, the writing output will be well-defined themes and lifespans that thoroughly address the research question. This makes the story's description as clear as possible and allows comprehensive presentation of findings.
5. **Maintaining a consistent writing style is crucial in auto-ethnography.** While auto-ethnographic research may allow for varied writing formats, the style should remain consistent to ensure coherence throughout the research.
6. **The iterative process is a fundamental aspect of autoethnographic research, as deductive and inductive reasoning complement one another.** The researcher formulates tentative conclusions and hypotheses based on observed phenomena, which are then attached the observed phenomena to broader themes and topics. This iterative process helps deepen understanding and ensure that research findings are well-founded and comprehensive. It can be repeated as many times as needed to refine insights.
7. **Engaging colleagues and peer reviewers into discussion further refines the findings.** *Peer feedback and critical discussion of hypotheses and conclusions enhance the study's quality. Through holistic reflection, autoethnographic research can generate new insights into the*

causes of organizational change, the process by which it occurred, and the lessons to be learned from it.

8. **Sharing the findings supports broader understanding and application.** Discussing results within the organization and sharing them with professional or research communities fosters knowledge dissemination and potential impact.

By drawing on the previous advice and the strengths of different inferential approaches, the autoethnographic researcher will achieve a deeper and richer understanding of the research subject. This verifies and validates that *the autoethnography is carefully conducted, that the results can be trusted and that the research provides a profound description of the organization and the role of the researcher within.*

Finally, it should be noted that *autoethnographic research is challenging to manage and evaluate due to its subjectivity and temporal cyclicality.* The cyclical recollections (vignettes) and their interpretations may also change from time to time. *Understanding and interpretations change over time as knowledge and understanding increase and mature – this must be accepted.*

Because of the varying interpretations due to cyclicality, regular contact with the research supervisor is necessary to ensure that the research supervisor does not forget the previous and recent interpretations. This will help the supervisor to stay 'on the map' of where the research is going.

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