

Research Methodologies and Professional Practice: Considerations and Practicalities

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Abstract

Professional doctorates have been established as key arenas for learning and research with the requirement for individuals to make both a contribution to management practise and academic knowledge. Many students on these programmes are drawn from the senior business world, for which the traditionally quantitatively focused business environment is familiar territory and, from which, we often see a natural tendency towards research that embraces the positivist approach that brings with it the familiarity of hard, measurable, results-focused business disciplines.

The insight into the academic world of ontology, epistemology and the different research approaches that form part of the learning arena of the professional doctorate provides an opportunity for students to consider the qualitative research alternative and the value of this in developing professional understanding and in making a contribution to knowledge, understanding and management praxis.

This paper does not seek to critique the criteria for what constitutes “good” research or to argue against positivist research in the professional research arena per se. Our position is that critical reflexive thinking has a key part to play in research in both developing the student and in closing the loop between the approach taken to carry out the research, the research findings, the contribution to academic knowledge and how the research practically informs professional practice.

Reflexive exploration we contend takes us beyond simple numerical objective measures and into the field of subjective understanding, which can be unsettling for the mindset of a traditionally positivistic organisation. It can be perceived as difficult and time consuming, and offering vague or conflicting outputs and we recognise that talk of subjectivity, bias and interpretation may seriously affect the acceptability of research in this tradition amongst business people and needs careful handling. The methodology must stand up to the scrutiny of both academic and management disciplines by producing results that both these disciplines accept and understand.

The rewards, we suggest, of reflexive exploration, offer the opportunity of a privileged insight into workforce behaviours and motivations that are not often articulated and recognised in the business world. Within this paper we draw upon hermeneutics and critical discourse analysis highlighting the role of critical reflexivity to illustrate how these qualitative research methodologies can be used to bring the academic and business worlds together.

Key Words:

Critical Reflexivity
Hermeneutics

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Qualitative research
Research into Professional Practice

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Professional doctorates have been established as key arenas for learning and research with the requirement for individuals to make both a contribution to management practise and academic knowledge. Many students on these programmes are drawn from the senior business world, for which the traditionally quantitatively focused business environment is familiar territory and, from which we often see a natural tendency towards research that embraces the positivist approach that brings with it the familiarity of hard, measurable, results-focused business disciplines.

For McAuley et al. positivism is "... the dominant philosophical stance in a great deal of organization theory ..." (2007:33), and, as such, can be regarded as the default position for research designed to influence and improve management practice. It is also seen as "... pivotal to management ..." (McAuley et al 2007) since it provides 'truths' that can be used to control, with the authority to do the controlling. This paper does not seek to critique the criteria for what constitutes "good" research or to argue against positivist research in the professional research arena per se and we do not argue that positivist research is de facto flawed, or that research carried out in this tradition should be disregarded; we do, however, contend that there is an alternative approach that has much to recommend it to the researcher who is specifically seeking to develop professional understanding and make a contribution to knowledge, understanding and management praxis.

For us, this is a subjectivist, often but not necessarily, critical approach to qualitative research that embraces reflexivity and takes familiar academic and business approaches a step further. The insight into the academic world of ontology, epistemology and the different research approaches that form part of the learning arena of the professional doctorate provides an opportunity for students to consider the qualitative research alternative to positivist research and the aspects of familiarity and the value that critical reflexive thinking can have throughout their research in both developing the student and in closing the loop between the approach taken to carry out the research, the research findings, the contribution to academic knowledge and how the research practically then informs professional practice.

This approach directly recognises the researcher's hunches at the start of the research journey; hunches which we often find have motivated the professional student to seek a way of bringing their academic and business worlds together; hunches that are drawn from many different sources, such as, the researcher's intuition, life history, and from corporate and academic research and literature. It offers the opportunity for research material to be gathered from methods that are familiar to the business practitioner, for example from, semi structured discussions, interviews, observations, focus groups, and texts. Forensic consideration and analysis is then used to gain and develop understanding of this and the context; the researcher gradually revealing new levels of understanding that is informed throughout by academic, corporate and the researcher's self knowledge.

There is the major criticism made by some of interpretivist approaches, that the allowed subjective position of the researcher so influences the work that the outputs and outcomes, the research material and the conclusion are not "valid", (a positivistic term from Johnson et al 2006). The epistemological commitment here however, is subjective and, as such, no research can be free from the taint of the researchers own knowledge, understanding and assumptions, and neither can the reader consult the data except through their own subjectivity. As Alvesson and Deetz put it "... recognising the interpretive nature of research means that no data, except possibly those on trivial matters, are viewed as unaffected by the construction of the researcher ..." (2000:113).

We do not seek to respond to this criticism of interpretive approaches per se but to embrace it as, for us, the notion of being able to interact neutrally with research subjects, for example, talking about their

understanding of organizational issues is, for us, untenable; in an interview scenario, both the interviewer and the interviewee bring subjective, interpretations of their social and professional world and their place in it. We contend that the active role of the interviewee and the interplay between interviewer and interviewee is important and it is this that provides an opportunity to look behind the prime facie data to explore the understandings of the interviewee; allowing the interviewee as well as the researcher to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about the issues being researched. A case for a positivistic approach to this kind of intervention could of course be made, but the possibility of collecting neutral and objective data in this tradition is a non starter as the research material would be coloured and subjective; , albeit for us, all the better for being so.

We must be prepared to be continually surprised by allowing the research material to set the direction but this from within a framework that a professional practitioner can draw sensible and useful conclusions from their research material and from the bounds of an approach that is “authoritative” (a critical theory term from Johnson et al 2006). To this mix we add critical ‘reflexivity’ and emphasise that for us research of this nature is not about looking for and finding absolute truths but that through critical reflexivity we can seek to inform the development of professional practice through the interpretation and subjective understanding of research material that is already subjective.

In this section we have suggested that a subjectivist, often critical approach to qualitative research that embraces reflexivity is an approach to research into professional practice that has much to recommend it to the researcher who is seeking to bring the worlds of academic and professional practice together.

We now introduced critical reflexivity into this mix. The aim is that at a minimum, as researching practitioners we can hope to become more consciously reflexive. That is, as researchers we can see the importance in noticing and criticising our own pre-understandings and to examine the impact of these on how we engage with the social world of management.

Reflexivity

Once the researcher starts down the path of subjective intervention, they need to consider their role not only methodologically but also epistemologically. If it is not a transcendent truth that is being sought, but instead that of understanding, consensus or an authoritative position, with an understanding of how this plays back into professional practice, then the researcher’s whole approach can be different (Johnson et al 2006). This is something which, Johnson and Duberley (2000) refer to ‘the new spirit of reflexivity’ which they say is ‘developing in management research and from which, we contend, offers the opportunity of a privileged insight into workforce behaviours and motivations that are not often articulated and recognised in the business world.

But what is the spirit of reflexivity? For as Johnson and Duberley go on to say the form that reflexivity takes, “... not to mention whether or not it is perceived to be possible in the first place, are outcomes of our *a priori* philosophical assumptions” (2000:178).

This form of self-comprehension requires, as Johnson and Duberley (2000) argue, researchers to ‘challenge their epistemological pre-understandings’ (pp.5) and to explore ‘alternative possible commitments’. This ‘reflexive turn’ increasingly encourages management researchers to be aware of, to evaluate and to be suspicious of the relationship between the researcher and the object of the research (Johnson and Duberley, 2003).

Whilst individual accounts and narratives might be seen as creating ‘order’ in social events, they also as Blaikie (2007) suggests, ‘obtain their meaning and intelligibility with reference to this social order; they possess a fundamental reflexivity’ (p.142). Following Blaikie, it might be argued that this relates to the principles of hermeneutic understanding, that is, that understanding is interpretation and that this understanding underpins notions of critical management research. Thus at the heart of reflexivity are issues concerning, intuition, interpretation, understanding, the relationship between the research and the

subject of the research (McAuley, 2004:192). In this sense, reflexivity takes the position that observations are only intelligible with respect to the social context in which they originate and that the meaning and order of the context is dependent upon such observations (Blaikie, 2007).

Since the 1930's, there have been studies that have explored organisational and managerial practices, and how individuals understand each other and work together in business environments; the aim being to reveal the underlying "taken-for-granted" culture (Alvesson and Sköldbeg, 2000; Garfinkel, 1967/2004; Gill and Johnson, 1997). The ethnomethodologist researcher, for example, is interested, amongst other aspects, in common sense knowledge, in what happens when there are breaches of common sense understandings, and where, "the "reflexive," or "incarnate" character of accounting practices and accounts (or telling stories), make up the crux of (the learning) recommendation" (Garfinkel, 1967/2004:1), (our emphasis).

It is this ethnomethodologists principle of what Garfinkel (1967/2004) calls "reflexivity" that we find an interesting consideration for research into professional practice; the idea that meaning can be drawn from the reflexive interaction between the organisation of memory, practical reasoning, and talk (Cicourel, 1970), and the idea that as a collective we reach and share implicit definitions of situations some of which are dependent upon hidden agendas, and all of which are steered by unquestioned underlying expectations and implicit rules (Cicourel, 1970; Garfinkel, 1967/2004), which generates common sense knowledge, that is captured in the symbols, myths and stories of organisational life (Cicourel, 1970; McAuley, et al 2007).

With the increasing emphasis in the management literature for the researcher to 'think about their own thinking' and to embrace the need to question our natural and taken-for-granted attitudes, such as, our prejudice, bias, thought and habits (Cunliffe, 2003), we contend that is important for professionals undertaking business research to become reflexive thinkers in order that they may close the loop between their research and how this informs and further develops professional practice.

The process of engaging in a reflexive methodology as implied by many authors tends to be more similar to reflective practice, mirroring Schon's reflective practitioner. Schon (1991), articulates through the concept of the 'reflective practitioner'; reflecting on action as professionals we construct an understanding by drawing on cumulative personal and organizational knowledge and engaging in a reflective conversation with the situation. Reflection, we contend, can form the basis for more effective problem solving but it does not require one to question the ends, means and relevance of practices, which is often the aim of critical management research practices. To question the basic assumptions of management practice or to seek new understanding of it, there is often a need to unsettle practices and discourses that are used in describing reality.

This paper is a start to develop what we mean by reflexivity for management praxis and research and to reinforce the need for a drive towards the critical. Our current thinking concerning the role of reflexivity in management research is very much influenced by the work of Johnson and Duberley (2003). Arguing from a Kantian synthesis perspective, they contend that management research cannot be carried out in some intellectual space which is autonomous from the researcher's own context. They develop the notion of epistemic reflexivity, in which the researcher's participatory approach increases awareness of their own intuitive processes. Their argument is that, "*Management researchers should be concerned to develop new modes of engagement that allow subjects to pursue interests and objectives which are currently excluded by the dominant management discourses [e.g. foundationalism, determinism and managerialism]*" (pp.1291). By engaging with the notion of *epistemic reflexivity*, the researcher attempts to relate research outcomes to the knowledge constraining and knowledge constituting impact of the researcher's own beliefs which derive from their socio-historical location. Here, though, the researcher has to be aware of the difficulties, as epistemic reflexivity can lead to a never ending reflexive spiral and the challenge of "incipient and debilitating relativism" (Johnson and Duberley, 2000, pp. 179), or at its extreme, even silence.

Later in this paper, we discuss hermeneutic and critical discourse analysis as examples of interpretivist methodologies that afford the researcher the opportunity to comprehend and challenge their issues and

problems and also to examine how they are part of their own research material and question their taken for granted assumptions which traditionally inform knowledge claims and practice.

"..... to read and express their own organizational realities through their creation of their own texts; those texts would become the basis for reflexive action by enabling the development of knowledge and transformative strategies that are practically adequate for coping with and resolving their own problems [professional practice]" (Johnson and Duberley, 2003:1291).

Epistemic reflexivity encourages researchers towards questioning accepted practice and to critically assess their role as a researcher. By adopting an epistemically reflexive process, the focus of the critical modes of management research discussed in this paper, we suggest, offer the researcher the opportunity to enhance the development of new interests and new interpretations of professional practice which are currently "excluded by the dominant management discourses".

Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008) offer some possible guidance through their analysis of reflexive textual practices in organizational theory. Whilst, reflexive practices are evident in both conducting and writing up research (Alvesson et al., 2008) there is also a need to examine how reflexivity is embodied in the practices of designing and conducting research. For us, there is a need for researching practitioners to develop the ability for intellectual critique and in this sense the textual practices that underpin this are seen as critical for reflexivity thinking. Reflexive practices challenge the conventional mainstream in management research practices by highlighting the questionable assumptions that researchers are objective, neutral observers of the social world.

Alvesson et al (2008) present four forms of conceptual practices associated with reflexivity: multi-perspective practices, multi-voicing practices, positioning practices and reflexivity as destabilising processes, and they link these practices to ways in which they might usefully differentiate between those that highlight problematic issues with existing theories and to those that attempt to 'produce new insights'. In this way the concept of *D-reflexivity* is associated with practices of deconstruction, declaiming and destabilizing theory, whereas *R-reflexivity* is about 'developing or adding something' (2008:494), reframing; reconstruction and re-presentation.

D-reflexive practices challenge the orthodoxy, by highlighting the limitations of the research, in the way the researcher and research are influenced by the shared orientations of a research community and it targets the unreflexive practices and research of others, often taking a position that undermines claims to knowledge. In contrast, by drawing attention to the limitations of looking at things in the ways dictated by the assumptions and practices of a particular view and by asking questions about the different 'voices' in the relationships between actors, the R-Reflexivist is in the construction not demolition industry. Reflexive practices are used to illustrate what is left out and marginalized and to provide alternative description, interpretations and voices.

The textual practices suggested by Alvesson et al. (2008) and in particular the notion of reconstructive reflexivity, seem to offer a strong epistemological consensus with the generic form (*epistemic reflexivity*) identified by Johnson and Duberley (2003). Thus, these practices can, it may be argued offer a means from which the researcher may begin to engage with a meaningful approach to reflective practice.

We now explore this further now by considering hermeneutic and critical discourse analysis as examples of interpretivist methodologies that explicitly recognise that a researcher's own feelings, knowledge and experience have a part to play in the research, and as such, afford the professional researcher the opportunity to engage with their research in a critically reflexive way. In carrying out research in this way, Alvesson and Sköldböck contend that it is possible for the researcher's knowledge or experience to be greater than that of the individual being studied, and be it different or related, it is possible for the researcher to have a better understanding about the subject individual than the individual has of themselves. This is, they suggest, one of the key principles of the hermeneutic approach (Alvesson and Sköldböck, 2001:54).

The role of the researcher in both hermeneutics and critical discourse analysis is to try and become aware of many things through the interpretation of text that the author may have not themselves been consciously aware of. They must recognise that there may be meaning within the text that is culturally dominant and, as such, will not be revealed openly by the author themselves but will be just be a taken for granted part of the context.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutic has been defined as, “the science of interpretation” (McAuley, et al 2007), and by Bettleheim (1983) as, “the science of the spirit”. Hermeneutics is invariably subjectivist and has a long history going back to the early written word where it was used to interpret and bring understanding to texts. Over time its scope has extended with modern hermeneutics embracing all human behaviour and its consequences with understanding arising from interpretation that is imbued with the imaginative sympathy and analogous experience of the interpreter as they relive the past through the information they have. It is now used to explore the underlying meaning within texts through critical interpretation and with continual reference to context. (Blaikie, 2007; Gadamer, 1975/2006, 1976/2004, Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000).

The evolution of hermeneutic methodology has been complex, not surprisingly as different individuals with different life experiences and different views have attempted to explain how people make sense of the world we live in. One challenge from those who adopt a pure positivist position is on the reliability of the interpretation, the absence of material validation, equivalence or directly reproducible results but equally there are challenges, albeit from looking through a different lens, from hermeneutic scholars themselves. These arise from the differing views on the subject of hermeneutics ranging from what Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) term objectivist hermeneutics to alethic hermeneutics.

In objectivist hermeneutics, Alvesson and Sköldbberg suggest that we can explain how people make sense of the world we live in through intuition that arises from “the understanding of underlying meaning, not the explanation of causal relationships” (2000:52). With this ambition, objectivist hermeneutics have attempted to position interpretation as a controllable activity by attempting to develop qualitative criteria that is aligned to quantitative criteria of generalisability, hypothesis testing, reliability, sample selection and representation, and validity (Denzin, 1989). Here, the starting point is often the development of a modest hypothesis, which may be no more than a hunch based on instinct or intuition, where, objectivity and truth considerations are drawn from the traditional qualitative view of information as the outcome of social interaction, and where the objective aspects are those attributes of the subject’s life that cannot be changed. The adequacy and validity of the interpretation is considered on the basis of the researcher’s ability to account for and explain the ways in which, the subject definitions have been produced (Denzin, 1989; McAuley, 2004; McAuley, et al 2000). This criteria logic issue has been subject to much debate (Johnson, et al 2006) and is a key consideration for us. Lincoln and Guba (1985) for example, call for principles within qualitative research that enable the reader to make judgements about its rigour that include, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For Hammersley (1989), this requires the researcher to critically reflect on the research material to reduce sources of contamination and enhance its ecological validity. For Foster, “... any science of social life must ... be a hermeneutic one, which is concerned to make sense of ‘objects’ of study as ‘text or text-analogue’. Such a science is based on an immersion in the data and reading of meanings. This process is invariably confused, cloudy, often contradictory and always incomplete.” (Foster 1994:149–150).

We regard a hermeneutic approach “... with its focus on truth as an act of disclosure ...”, as especially appropriate for research aimed at developing professional practice. This is Alvesson and Sköldbberg’s (2000:52) definition of alethic hermeneutic: people, intuition and explanation do not exist apart from the world but are intimately caught up and immersed in it and it is this basic understanding that must be explored to reveal the hidden meaning.

For us, the differences and the common tenets recognisable in the hermeneutic literature, provide a framework to develop insights that can be useful for reflexive organisational research and we contend

that hermeneutics as a methodology (or even considered as an epistemology given the nuances we have discussed), has characteristics that make it highly suitable for investigations in the workplace. It is about understanding, disclosure, social life, about making a difference and it is a two way learning process.

Critical discourse analysis

By way of a further example of critical management research meeting professional practice, we now briefly offer the same argument for critical discourse analysis which seeks to illustrate the emergence of the influential and pervasive discourse, and how, for example, this may become part of the psyche of the workplace.

As with hermeneutics, the routes to critical discovery allow the researcher considerable scope for epistemological perspective and methodological choice. As far as the former is concerned, there is an opportunity for exploration by drawing on a blend of critical perspective, reflexivity and hermeneutic understanding. Indeed, the researcher may be encouraged by such latitude and the apparent endorsement given by Cassell and Symon (2004:2) “qualitative methods might be informed by all possible epistemological positions” and the assertion by Fournier and Grey (2000) that critical research draws on a number of intellectual traditions and is committed to some form of reflexivity. McAuley et al (2007:48) record with elegant simplicity the opportunities provided by a critical theoretical perspective, “it enables us to reflect on the ways in which we need to constantly question issues of organisational design, leadership and communication.....” The challenge set by Alvesson and Deetz (2000) was to articulate a relationship between the critical tradition, characterised by critical theory and the interpretive tradition characterised by hermeneutics under the more generic banner of critical management research. In part, we seek to embrace this to consider how we might take new learning from the academic research journey and use this to practically inform professional practice.

Discourse analysis as a methodology has emerged as one of the ‘new’ critical approaches that are becoming increasingly evident in management and social research. Interest in discourse does, of course, go well beyond the epoch referred to here as ‘new’, but there is some support for the view that discourse analysis is a topical theme in management studies and one that offers the potential for an exciting contribution to qualitative research, (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000).

Critical discourse analysis, as a distinctive brand of discourse analysis opens up we suggest, the potential to explore the discourse in the professional arena as one component of the business environment. Scollon (2001:140) provides a useful definition: “Critical Discourse Analysis is a programme of social analysis that critically analyses discourse, that is to say language in use, as a means of addressing problems of social change.” Equally helpfully, Van Dijk (2001:96) terms critical discourse analysis as “discourse with an attitude” and claims that “Critical discourse analysis can be conducted in, and combined with, any approach and sub-discipline in the humanities and social sciences.” Accordingly, a central theme in critical discourse analysis involves the conversation or narrative being studied to be viewed from a political perspective to reveal the *power* relationships and to *emancipate* the meaning for those who do not hold such authority (Travers, 2001). Although discourse analysis methods may differ in detail, they would normally involve the adoption of some of the principles of literary theory applied to a particular context.

Closing thoughts

In this paper we have sought to illustrate that there is an alternate approach to the dominance of positivistic research into professional practice and to suggest how this can be used to develop professional and academic understanding through the research approaches taken. We have drawn upon hermeneutics and critical discourse analysis highlighting the role of critical reflexivity to illustrate how these research methodologies can be used to bring the academic and business worlds together.

The rewards, we have suggested is that reflexive exploration offers the opportunity of a privileged insight into workforce behaviours and motivations that are not often articulated and recognised in the business world and, as such, we suggest that critical reflexive thinking has a key part to play in professional doctoral research in both developing the student and in closing the loop between the approach taken to carry out the research, the research findings, the contribution to academic knowledge and how the research practically then informs professional practice.

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