Research Methodologies and Professional Practice: considerations and practicalities

workshop

- **Dr Steve Chase**
- **Dr Murray Clark**
- **Dr Caroline Cole**
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Research Methodologies and Professional Practice: considerations and practicalities

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Summary

The workshop will explore the use of qualitative research approaches in traditionally quantitatively focused business environments.

Management research is dominated by quantitative approaches in environments that are often driven by traditionally hard, measurable, results-focused business management.

The workshop will consider the qualitative alternative.

Qualitative approaches can be valuable in developing professional understanding and in making a contribution to knowledge, understanding and management praxis through a combination of the subject matter, the context, and the approach taken to collect and interpret qualitative research material.

The session will draw on the presenters' experiences as professionals outside academia who have graduated on DBA programmes and will reflect on the respective research methodologies with which they worked

Workshop

There is a major criticism made by some of hermeneutics, or indeed all interpretivist approaches, that the allowed subjective position of the researcher so colours the work that the outputs and outcomes – the data and the conclusion – are not valid, to use a positivistic term (Johnson et al 2006). The epistemological commitment here is subjective, and so 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 subjective, and coloured, eyes. The aim of the researcher must not only be to admit to their bias and try to account for it openly so that the reader can make their own judgment but to go much further since "… the researcher is not looking at the experience of the subject alone; there is also the position of the interpreter as the scene unfolds, and in the process of interpretation" (McAuley 2004: 194). 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).

To this mix we must now add 'reflexivity'. Hermeneutics is not about looking for and finding absolute truths. It requires interpretation and subjective understanding of data that is already subjective. This layering of subjectivity can give rise to multiple re-interpretation of material which, if taken to extremes, leads to the problems of never ending deconstruction in postmodernism. The process must be moderated and useful outcomes found, and the mechanism for that is reflexivity. Alvesson and Sköldberg define this as,"… reflection … in conjunction with interpretation at several levels …" (2000: 238) by which, they mean that data, awareness of the interpretative act, context and representation and authority, and the ways each of these levels interact with the others. They emphasise what we consider to be the essential characteristics of this when they say that reflexive interpretation "… implies there are no self-evident, simple or unambiguous rules or procedures, and that crucial ingredients are the researcher's judgment, intuition, ability to 'see and point something out …' not only with the data but also the researcher outside the research role and with the reader" (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000: 248). The intention of this process is that a professional practitioner can draw sensible and useful conclusions from the data that are, within the bounds of the approach described here, authoritative (to use a critical theory term (Johnson et al 2006)).

This talk of subjectivity, bias and interpretation may seriously affect the acceptability of research in this tradition amongst non-academic business people and needs careful handling. We will suggest to the workshop that one way, but certainly not the only way, of bridging the gap is to encourage senior figures from non-academic fields championing the approach in their own doctoral research and in putting the conclusions of that research to work in their own places of employment.

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Research Methodologies and Professional Practice: considerations and practicalities

Dr Steve Chase, Dr Murray Clark,
Dr Caroline Cole, Dr Oliver Couch

Creating Critical and Reflexive Leaders

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welcome

- qualitative research approaches in traditionally quantitatively focused business environments
- an alternative to dominant quantitative management research
- developing professional understanding
- contributing to knowledge, understanding and management praxis
- bringing together professional practice and academic research
- creating critical and reflexive leaders

Creating Critical and Reflexive Leaders

the challenge is ...

- to bring together professional practice and academic research
- methodology must make sense to both ...
- must stand up to the scrutiny of both ...
- ... and must produce results that are understood and respected by both traditions

qualitative research

- an alternative to dominant quantitative management research
- a synthesis of reflexive approaches
- examples: hermeneutics and discourse analysis
- taking familiar approaches a step further ...
    - hunches and "forensic" analysis
    - semi structured discussions / interviews
    - observations
    - focus groups
    - texts
    - academic, corporate and self knowledge

the journey

HERMENEUTICS AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

ACADEMIC LEARNING

LECTURES
ASSIGNMENTS
SEMINARS
LEARNING SETS
RESEARCH
CONFERENCES

THESIS / DISSERTATION

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

IMPROVEMENT TO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

GUIDE AND DISCOVERY

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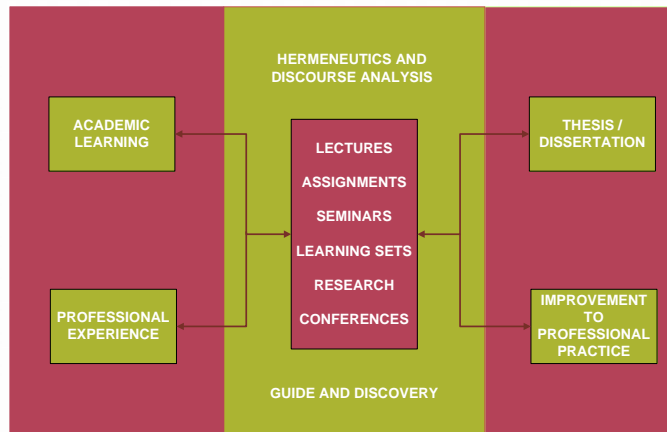
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we must prepare to be surprised ...

- ... by allowing the research material to set the direction
- .. and understanding how this plays back into professional practice
- our experience:
  - leadership in practice
  - the emotions of individuals during strategic and organisational change
  - construction of an interpretative analytical framework for discourse analysis
  - a deeper understanding of discrimination law as an organizational discourse

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reflexivity & management research

- **forms of reflexivity** *(Johnson & Duberley, 2003)*
  - methodological reflexivity – improving methods and their application
  - hyper reflexivity – a self referential outcome of discursive practices
  - **epistemic reflexivity** – attempts made to relate research outcomes to knowledge constraining and knowledge constituting impact of the researcher's own beliefs which derive from their socio-historical location
- **forms of reflexive practice** *(Alvesson et al., 2008)*
  - reflexivity as multi-perspective practices
  - reflexivity as multi-voicing practices
  - reflexivity as positioning practices
  - reflexivity as destabilizing practices

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hermeneutics - epistemology

- invariably subjectivist
- "… 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)

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hermeneutics - practicalities

- invariably subjectivist
- partial literature survey, academic and corporate; and self knowledge ... leading to
- ... hunches
- interviews based on the hunches; more reading
- renew hunches (keep, or refine, or drop)
- more interviews; more reading
- conclusions – confirming hunches that are supported by evidence
- ... but let the data set the direction – be prepared to be surprised

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discussion

- have you used hermeneutics or other qualitative methodologies?
- if yes – what did you learn, what went well, what went less well? Did it link well to professional practice?
- if you haven't – why not?
- what would encourage you to think about using these approaches?

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discourse analysis

- a vehicle for critical reflexivity
- common sense and reasonableness: a subjective epistemology

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area of research

- employment tribunal judgements
- written texts available in the public arena
- focus on one area of employment law – the standard and burden of proof in sex and race discrimination cases
- stated cases heard in the appellant courts

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approach to research

- synthesis of reflexive approaches, hermeneutic understanding and legal theory to inform epistemic stance
- construction of an interpretative analytical framework for discourse analysis
- employment of the framework to conduct critical interpretation
- seek a deeper understanding of discrimination law as an organizational discourse

detecting subjective storylines in a legal environment

- drawing of inferences
- common sense and reasonableness
- legal solutions to social issues

by way of example – common sense and reasonableness

- two of our most prevalent informal and subjective social theories
- both theories feature heavily in employment tribunal texts
- serves to undermine the legal representation of an "objective industrial court"
- important implications for workforce discourse and behaviour

thoughts

- "objective decision making" is rarely as objective as it is portrayed
- there are powerful, informal social theories at play and ...
- there are important business considerations around influencing, persuasion and understanding

discussion

- the methodologies we have discussed are under used ...
- ... why do you think this is?
- we have demonstrated how they can be used and the value they can have ...
- ... what can we do to encourage greater use of these approaches?

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Thank You

We will be delighted to hear from you

If you would like to continue the debate or if you
have any questions to ask, please contact us at;

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Abstract

A Reflexive Approach to the Critical Interpretation of Employment Tribunal Judgements

Dr Steven William Chase

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration

July 2007

This thesis is based on the critical interpretation of a selected series of employment tribunal judgements all of which deal with aspects of standard or burden of proof in sex and race discrimination cases. A reflexive approach is adopted in an attempt to provide a better understanding of discrimination law as an organisational discourse and as a potential force for emancipatory change in the workplace. The research examines the conceptual links between management, employment relations, discrimination law and everyday social processes in an attempt to uncover the influence on employment relationships and professional practice of a more thoughtful interpretation of employment tribunal texts.

My contributions to knowledge in the domains of research methodology and professional practice fall into 3 categories. First, an exploration and synthesis of reflexive approaches, hermeneutic understanding and aspects of legal theory to develop and embed my subjective epistemic stance within a pluralistic conceptual framework. Second, the design and employment of a distinctive interpretative analytical framework for discourse analysis drawing on established perspectives in the fields of management and legal theory. Combining the 2 contributions in an epistemologically consistent way has allowed me to bring a methodologically individual dimension to the examination of employment tribunal narratives under the banner of *discourse analysis with a critical edge.* My third contribution has been to use the analytical framework to detect the storylines of inference drawing, common sense interpretations and legal responses to social issues. By exposing the key role played by the subjective concept of drawing inferences, I have undermined the perception of the employment tribunal as an 'objective industrial court'. Further, I have shown how 2 of our most prevalent informal social and subjective theories – commonsense and reasonableness – feature heavily in the legal arena of the employment tribunal and how legal solutions to social problems may present unintended consequences for the employment relationship. In so doing, I have disturbed the image of discrimination law as a sealed and singular phenomenon operating beyond the social contexts in which it impacts and opened up potential avenues of further multi-discipline research around subjective interpretations in environments framed by legislation and authority.

Finally, I have unearthed some personal dilemmas and opportunities as a senior professional working within a large public sector organisation around how I engage with my professional practice.

Abstract

The emotions of individuals during strategic and organisational change: a hermeneutic exploration

Dr Caroline Susan Greeney Cole

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration

August 2007

This is a reflexive hermeneutic study exploring the emotions of individuals during strategic and organisational change from an objectivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology. It explores individuals' emotions and individuals' variations from organisations' cultural expectations and cultural fit. It considers individuals' emotions collectively, and the psychology of emotions as a basis on which organisational change could be managed.

It provides insight into the emotional complexity of organisational life during periods of change, the work derived feelings and emotions individuals struggle with on a daily basis, the feelings and emotions that influence and shape, and can in turn be influenced and shaped, by change events, and the stark management conditioning arising from the emotional devoid reality and manipulation of organisational expectations and mechanistically driven change programmes. This emotional insight belies the emotion arid legacy of process driven change solutions, and adds to the growing voice that seeks to usurp the emotionally sanitised picture of organisational life. It informs the debate that seeks to influence the transformation of managerial objectivism, change practise, and behaviour, so that emotions are recognised, welcomed, respected, supported and embraced in the workplace.

The research environment is one of constant strategic and organisational change. Within this context, the early research "hunches", drawn from the author's intuition, and life history, that an individual's feelings and emotions, their nature of being, their self motivation, their relationships, and the nature of control, can be considered a reasonable way of looking at and interpreting how individuals interact in everyday life, and their personal response to change, are brought vividly to life and evolved.

A research journey
the emotions of individuals during strategic and organisational change: a hermeneutic exploration

Dr Caroline Cole

Creating Critical and Reflexive Leaders

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research context

- a reflexive exploration focused on the emotions of individuals during strategic and organisational change
- there is doubt about the extent to which, emotions are genuinely welcomed in the work place
- the ontological considerations are that …
  - work is purposive
  - organisations are instrumental in that they exist to deliver goods or services
  - management is a legitimate activity
  - change is directed to organisational benefit
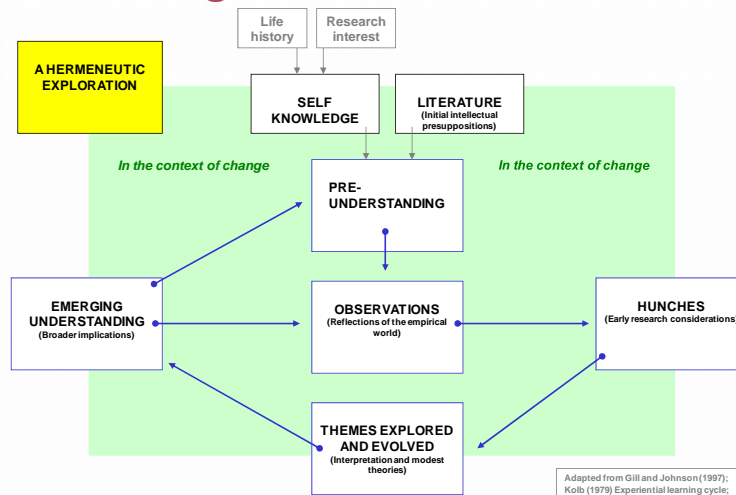 - an understanding of emotions will "add value"

new insight arises from …

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preunderstanding is drawn from …

- self knowledge and experience illustrated through a life history set in the context of change

- early considerations in the form of hunches

- understanding developed from an initial literature review that informs these early hunches and provides the confidence to proceed

- at the outset …

- … there is no clear path and no decision on the research journey and …

- … no clear view of the research objectives

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a hermeneutic exploration that …

- … is a world view
- "the science of the spirit" Bettleheim 1983
- "the science of interpretation"
- recognises the researcher's "authority" and bias
- takes familiar approaches to collect the research material a step further using a variety of different methods and sources of knowledge: -
  - hunches and "forensic" analysis
  - semi structured discussions
  - observations
  - focus groups: "warmth, light and the spiders web"
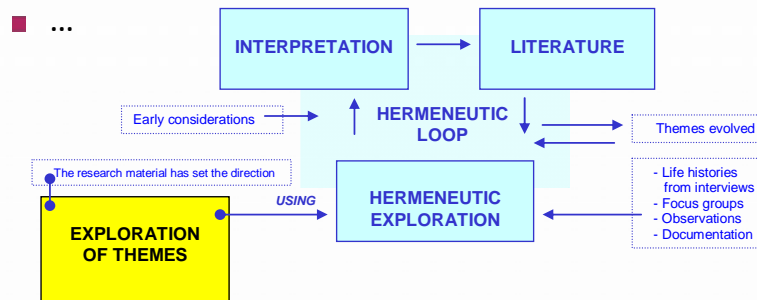 - company documentation
  - academic, corporate and self knowledge

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exploration and interpretation through …

- …

- this approach …
  - enabled individuals to reflect on their experiences in different ways
  - allowed the researcher to be the "monk in a cave"
  - enabled qualitative material to be transferred into texts
  - enabled exploration and interpretation …
  - … until there was nothing new being revealed

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Abstract

The Meaning of Leadership in the Civil Service – an Hermeneutic Study

Oliver Couch

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration

September 2007

There has been much written about leadership; so much in fact that it tends to cloud rather than illuminate the issue. But little of that work has been about how leadership is understood by professionals in their workplace and the impact that has on their day-to-day activities. This research covers the period from early 2002 until the end of 2004, and includes fieldwork in the Department of Education and Skills (as it was known until June 2007). The research was conducted in a traditional hermeneutic style from a critical perspective, and the evidence is taken from interviews with twelve senior civil servants. There were three aspects of leadership that came to the fore in the research. First, leadership in the civil service cannot be satisfactorily described by existing models in the academic literature. For these civil servants, leadership is made up of four elements, vision, motivation, monitoring progress and reaching planned outcomes, which itself could lead back to renewed vision. Thus there was a cycle from conception to results.

This thesis proposes a new model of leadership that describes this cycle, called the Leadership Circle. Second, training in leadership is problematic (some trainees think it very valuable; others see little or no worth in it) and discussion on it throws up some unexpected related issues such as isolation in the workplace and lack of confidence amongst leaders. The way training in leadership is set in the wider context of support for leaders needs to be re-considered by HR departments; there is a wide range of benefits that can accrue if leadership training is seen as part of a suite of continuing support.

Finally, civil servants' scope to act as leaders is constrained by the parallel role filled by Government Ministers. Theoretically there is a clear division of responsibility and authority between the two groups but there are overlaps in the day-to-day situation. And the roles of each group have changed significantly over the last 30 years without any overt acknowledgement of that change or consideration of the consequences. Is either group well placed to deliver their evolved roles? It is suggested that this situation is serious enough to merit further work.

NOTE ON THE USE OF HERMENEUTICS AS A METHODOLOGY IN RESEARCH FOR A PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

Dr Oliver Couch

The research was conducted in a hermeneutic manner from a critical standpoint. This was appropriate because I wanted to gain an understanding about how senior civil servants understood, and made sense of, the concept of leadership in their everyday lives. The civil service is an established hierarchical structure with power relationships between staffing grades and between staff and the organisation (for example in the Department's use of leadership in terms of reward and promotion) in which 'leadership' is part of the dominant discourse but not distinctly defined and this approach facilitates a discussion on that point. Finally, my subjectivity, and that of the interviewees, is a crucial element to recognise in evaluating the data and reaching conclusions, and that rules out some of the methodological options.

This approach had a number of benefits. Those being interviewed did more than just contribute data; they shaped the direction of the research both directly (by confirming or rejecting my hunches or suggesting new ones) and indirectly (by focussing their replies on particular aspects of the areas under discussion), and thus underlining their own interpretation of leadership and indicating which aspects of leadership were important to them.

However, it is necessary to consider data collected in this manner as highly coloured by the social constructs of the individuals concerned and by the interviewer's own subjectivity. So, conclusions arising from this approach must be treated as one, only, of many possible views, but they carry the authority of the weight of the interviewees and researchers and, if supported across the research data, conclusions can be regarded as authoritative enough to warrant serious consideration as influencers of change in the work place.

As a pair critical theory and hermeneutics work well together. Neither critical theory nor hermeneutics is about looking for and finding absolute truths. Both require interpretation and subjective understanding of data that is already subjective. This multiple subjectivity can give rise to multiple re-interpretation of material which, if taken to extremes, leads to the problems of never ending deconstruction in postmodernism. The process must be moderated and useful outcomes found and the mechanism for that is reflexivity. Alvesson and Skoldberg define this as "… reflection … in conjunction with interpretation at several levels …" (2000: 238) by which they mean that data, awareness of the interpretative act, context and representation and authority, and the ways each of these levels interact with the others. They emphasise what I consider to be the essential characteristics of this when they say that reflexive interpretation " … implies there are no self-evident, simple or unambiguous rules or procedures, and that crucial ingredients are the researcher's judgement, intuition, ability to 'see and point something out …' not only with the data but also the researcher outside the research role and with the reader" (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000: 248). The intention of this process is that we can draw sensible and useful conclusions from the data that are authoritative.

I chose to use interviews as my method. Alvesson and Deetz (2000:194) describe interviews as a "… difficult but highly useful method …". It is "… the most common method of data gathering in qualitative research …" (King 2004:11), which is flexible, well understood by participants, and delivers rich data (King 1994:14). I like Kvale's definition of a qualitative research interview which is "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena", to which he added "neither in the interview phase nor in the later analysis is the purpose primarily to obtain quantifiable responses" (quoted by King 1994:14).

It is also worthwhile reflecting on the point that "… most people like talking about their work… but rarely have the opportunity to do so with interested outsiders" (King 2004:21). This means they may be prone to exaggeration or over-enthusiasm and that needs to be considered in the analysis.

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What is important is that "... things that are simple to ... extract from interviews are not really what critical theory sees as an essential subject of research" (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000:131). So names and dates, for example, may be interesting, and are simple to extract, but the core of the interview is the individual's understanding and that may not be at all easy to synthesise.

I interviewed twelve civil servants in the former Department for Education and Skills, in Sheffield. The number was not fixed in advance and was in the end determined by the extent to which I reached a form of 'closure'. Whether twelve is a sufficient number is a interesting question. As King says this is "... not solely a matter of research logistics ...". Interviews need to be planned, scheduled, conducted, and the texts typed and analysed, so a large number is unfeasible. The validity of the research outputs depends not on volume but on the extent to which a "... task does not require a large number of texts to ensure representativeness, as it is assumed that these practices and resources are shared within a social context..." (King 2004:16). Neither, of course, even with a large number of texts, can we be sure of capturing all viewpoints, so complete comprehensiveness is unattainable both theoretically and practically. So we must accept that the interviews in this mode capture a sample of the views held.

This should also help with a problem identified by Alvesson and Deetz (2000:194), which is "... whether accounts in interviews refer to something external to the interview situation and the language used ... or are a reflection of the interview situation as a complex social setting ...". As the authors admit, this is almost in the 'too difficult' category and one has to "... manoeuvre between two unhelpful positions" (2000:194). It is here that self-reflexivity becomes crucial. If, as Alvesson and Deetz (and post-structuralists) say "... language does not stand in a one-to-one relationship to (partially) non-linguistic phenomena such as behaviours, thoughts and feelings ..." (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:112), then it is crucial to ensure that the researcher responds to the idea that "... reflexivity involves the self-critical consideration of one's own assumptions and consistent considerations of alternative interpretive lines and the use of different research vocabularies ..." (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:112).

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September 2010.

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the use of hermeneutics as a methodology in research for a professional doctorate

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issue

- bringing academic research and professional practice together
- methodology must make sense to both …
- … and stand up to scrutiny by both
- must produce results that are understood and respected by both traditions
- for example, hermeneutics can do this through interviews or text analysis

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hermeneutics

- partial literature survey, academic and corporate; and self knowledge … leading to
- … hunches
- interviews based on the hunches; more reading
- renew hunches (keep, or refine, or drop)
- more interviews; more reading
- conclusions – confirming hunches that are supported by evidence
- … but let the data set the direction – be prepared to be surprised

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hermeneutics epistemology

- this is invariably subjectivist
- "… 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)

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interviews and hermeneutics

- it is always interpretivist
- "… reflexivity involves the self-critical consideration of one's own assumptions and consistent considerations of alternative interpretive lines and the use of different research vocabularies …" (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:112)
- hermeneutics and most interviewing have substantial subjective elements …
- … which must be acknowledged, since "… Some interpretation becomes essential …" (Goulding 1999)

hermeneutics in practice

- it is essentially practical
- "… what we would do is get data from [interviewees] … and then get them to explore for themselves the implications of what they are saying … what is crucial … from a hermeneutic point of view, is the emphasis on drawing and shaping their data , and being able to confront our own commonsense assumptions as they confront theirs …" (McAuley 1985)

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