

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.

Keywords: critical reflexivity, hermeneutics, critical discourse analysis, qualitative research, research into professional practice

1. Research methodologies and professional practice

The aim of this paper is to position critical reflexive thinking as having a key part to play in professional doctoral research in both developing students from all industries 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 their professional practice. 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.

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. Talk of subjectivity, bias and interpretation may, however, seriously affect the acceptability of research amongst business people and needs careful handling. The methodology must make sense to both academic and management practice. It must stand up to the scrutiny of both and must produce results that are understood and respected by both traditions. We suggest that one 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. 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). Examples of our recent research into professional practice, in particular, Leadership in Practice (Couch, 2007), The Emotions of Individuals during Strategic and Organisational Change (Cole, 2007), and Discrimination Law as an Organizational Discourse (Chase, 2007), has sought to do this and brings forward a synthesis of critical reflexivity. In introducing critical 'reflexivity' into the mix, we seek to 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 discuss critical reflexivity and in doing so, wish to provoke debate upon the way in which we engage with management research. 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.

2. 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).

Here we wish to provoke debate upon the way in which we engage with management research and how we do this. 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. 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 Sköldbberg, 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 (Cirourel, 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 (Cirourel, 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.

In this way, the role of the researcher in using 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.

We now explore this further now by considering reflexive research in practice using 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 from any industry the opportunity to engage with their research in a critically reflexive way. In carrying out research in this way, Alvesson and Sköldbörg 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 Sköldbörg, 2001:54).

3. 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 Sköldbörg, 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 that builds upon familiar methods, which, we now go on to discuss. In doing so we contend that hermeneutics as a methodology (or even considered as an epistemology given the nuances we have highlighted), 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.

4. Reflexive research in practice

Cole’s (2007) research into the emotional experiences of individuals during periods of strategic and organisational change is a reflexive hermeneutic study carried out in an environment where there is a growing interest in feelings and emotions in management theory, in which attempts are being made to, develop an understanding of the issues and the implications for management praxis. The business environment for the study was one of constant strategic and organizational change. Within this context, the early research “hunches”, drawn from the researcher’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, are considered a reasonable way of looking at and interpreting how individuals interact in everyday life, and their personal response to change, are brought to life and evolved.

Cole’s study draws upon a humanistic theoretical perspective, which places individuals and not processes or organizational structures at the centre of the research focus, and it explicitly recognizes the free will of individuals and their ability to learn, to develop and to change. It explores individuals’ emotions and individuals’ variations from organizations’ cultural expectations and cultural fit and considers individuals’ emotions collectively, and the psychology of emotions as a basis on which organizational change could be managed.

This study collects research material through semi structured discussions, observations, company documentation and focus groups and through the use of a hermeneutic framework illustrates how insights can be gathered into the emotional complexity of organizational 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 organizational 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 organizational 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.

With the same focus on understanding phenomena to develop and improve professional practice through subjective interpretation of research material, Couch (2007) carried out research into Leadership in Practice in the Civil Service using interviews within a hermeneutic epistemology.

For the professional doctoral student of any industry, the research methods illustrated in our examples will be familiar business approaches that we have taken forward to embrace a subjectivist, reflexive methodology and arrive at new understanding that can be taken back into the work place to inform business practice. For any business practitioner undertaking research of this nature, the opportunity exists for the conclusions and learning to be taken forward and used in their own places of employment.

Research methods that engage participants in gathering research material, such as, interviewing are suitable for subjectivist research as they enable deliberate engineering of an interactive relationship with the research participants. For example, with interviews, the researcher can specifically look for two things during the interviews and the later analysis; first, for the interviewee to steer the researcher away from those aspects of the research area that the interviewee does not recognise as important and to guide the researcher towards new areas or those already under consideration; and secondly, to try to identify how, if at all, the research topic is being translated into 'common sense' by the interviewees, and adopted into their day to day culture and operations, and the effect that has on their interpretation of the rhetoric and their daily lives. The interactive part of the process for us is a very important ingredient that is missing from some other research methods. For example framing a single fixed set of questions at the outset for surveys or questionnaires, is either impossible or wholly inappropriate if adopting a reflexive hermeneutic approach as with a reflexive approach, one doesn't know what new insights will be revealed and from this where the research will go.

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). We 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).

We also consider 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, of course, means they may be prone to exaggeration or over-enthusiasm and this needs to be taken into consideration in any analysis.

Just as engagement with research participants can range in type from spontaneous to those that are fully structured where the researcher scores responses in a statistical manner, the role of the participant can also change along the same continuum from being a participant, helping to shape the course of the engagement, for example the interview, to being a research subject, responding to fixed questions. King (1994) identifies a middle position, which he calls 'structured open-response interviews', which he admits suffers from being "... neither fish nor fowl ..." (King 1994:16). He also identifies the problematic interviewer and interviewee relationship this can spawn, as the latter is neither solely a participant nor solely a subject.

In our experience, the role of individuals as participants is a key feature of a hermeneutic study, so we did not conduct interviews and discussions in what Marshall (1994) considers the traditional way, with a clear distinction between interviewer and interviewee.

There can of course be a difference in interviewing as a subjectivist research method if one distinguishes between hermeneutics and discourse analysis as the research epistemology or methodology. For Marshall, "... discourse analysts see the interview as a form of social interaction and the interviewer's contribution is seen to be important. Both interviewer and interviewee are seen as constructively drawing on a range of interpretive resources which are of interest in the subsequent analysis" (Marshall 1994:95). King generalises the same point and applies it to qualitative interviews in general "... the relationship is part of the research process, not a distraction from it ..." (2004:11). However, Marshall goes on to say that interviews in discourse analysis are not seen as a "... a means of measuring the genuine views of a participant ...", but as "... a means of exploring the varied ways of making sense ... available to participants ..." (Marshall 1994:95). He says the concern is not at the level of the individual interviewee, whereas we have seen that McAuley (1985) sees hermeneutics as a process that includes a role for the individual, "... and then get [interviewees] ... to explore for themselves the implications of what they are saying

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. Further, Fontana and Frey (1998:56) suggest that unstructured in-depth interviewing, which they call ethnographic interviewing, goes hand in hand with participant observation. For us, these are all options for the researcher that afford the opportunity to develop new understanding and with reflexion, the opportunity to inform professional practice.

5. Some considerations for subjectivist researchers

In order to make the leap from research material be it document or interview material to conclusions with weight and authority when applied in the professional workplace, the subjectivist researcher has to do rather more than their positivist counterpart. Interviews are often tape recorded and transcribed and become documents that can be treated as any other document, except that the researcher was, first, present and thus an influence, and second, even if not using participant observational techniques would at least have memories of how an interviewee behaved. And of course the tapes still exist. So whilst a questionnaire, for example, generates quantitative data from which an objectivist researcher could draw immediate conclusions, documents and interviews generate qualitative material less easy to work with and analyse, except this is what the researcher must, and will, do. The process needs to be recorded so that others can see what happened and see why the researcher believes their conclusions are meaningful.

Reliability and validity of interview data are now often regarded as positivistic values that cannot apply to critical research (Johnson et al 2006). As Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000: 271) say, "... critical theorists and a whole host of other non-positivistic scholars have gone beyond the truth criterion ... what may be 'true' in one context may not be so in another. After all, published research also affects social conditions..."

As Johnson et al (2006) put it "... a subjective view of epistemology repudiates the possibility of a neutral observational language: language does not allow access to, or representation of, reality". The search for an objective 'truth' is not part of the equation, so the quest is not to eliminate bias but to acknowledge it. Data obtained in interviews, for example, is not neutral, but "... constructions made by the researcher to a higher (interviews) or lower (observation) degree in interaction with the research subjects ..." (Alvesson and Deetz 2000:112). King (1994) suggests two steps that should be taken to maximise reliability, or "authenticity" as Johnson et al (2006) might put it. First, he suggests "... researchers should explicitly recognise their presuppositions ... and make a conscious effort to set these aside". As he says, researchers "... should allow themselves to be surprised by the findings". Both King and Saunders et al 1997, refer to the importance of interviewer preparation in the minimising of bias. Second, he suggests the involvement of other researchers, with room for discussions about disagreements (King 1994:31). 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).

A major consideration for this approach to research is to be clear about the status of the outputs of the research. If subjectivist research is not about discovering a truth in a positivistic sense then what is it about and how can the outputs be legitimised? As McAuley (2004:196) puts it when discussing hermeneutics, there are two ways “... one lies in the professionalization of the hermeneutic researcher; the other is the methodic processes through which hermeneutic work is conducted”. We would add a third, which McAuley implies but we **consider** needs setting out clearly. Subjectivist research is legitimised as well by the recognition and acceptance of the authority of the outputs by a consensus of the peers of the researcher and, perhaps even more importantly, by a consensus of the research participants.

6. Critical discourse analysis

By way of a further example of reflexive 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. In doing so, we briefly draw upon Chase’s (2007) research which seeks to illustrate the emergence of employment legislation as an influential and pervasive discourse, particularly for those employed in the personnel profession, and illustrates how one element of this legislation discrimination law, has become part of the psyche of the workplace. The emerging argument is that legislative provisions are now so embedded within organisation policies and practices that it is impossible to escape their reach. As a result, it is suggested that an understanding of the dynamic between this legislative framework, the ‘theatre’ played out in employment tribunals, the practice of the personnel profession and the influence on individual employment relationships adds value at both the professional and intellectual levels.

The language, legal interpretation and debate around this whole area of the employment environment present opportunities for critical and reflexive study. 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.

7. Closing thoughts

In this paper we have sought to provoke the debate and 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 sought to position critical reflexive thinking as having a key part to play in professional doctoral research for students from all industries. We have discussed how the professional doctoral student can draw upon familiar business techniques and by developing their use of these through self reflexivity can reach new understanding that can be taken back into the workplace to inform and develop business practice. We have drawn upon hermeneutics and critical discourse analysis highlighting the role of critical reflexivity to illustrate briefly how these research methodologies offer a framework to do this.

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, for any business practitioner, we have suggested that by undertaking research of this nature, the opportunity exists for the conclusions and learning to be taken forward and used practically to inform professional practice.

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