A Grounded Case of Enterprise Acquisition

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Abstract: Purpose: To gain 'real world' understanding of the managerial approach adopted in an established small business when taken over by another entrepreneur from that of its predecessor. The research highlights perceptual differences internal stakeholders (employees and the new owner) have regarding the business and the managing of it. Illustrated are the commercial consequences that can ensue from the change of ownership of an established enterprise through to the managerial style perceived appropriate by a new entrepreneur, and, subsequent employees' cognitions and behaviours that ensue as reactions to changed managerial practices. Findings are reviewed against existing theories within the fields of entrepreneurship, decision theory and management. Design/Methodology/Approach: Situated within the qualitative paradigm, the unit of analysis being one small (nevertheless complex) organization affords the researcher opportunity to inquire deeply into case study phenomena. The unit of analysis soon develops, through the application of 'original' grounded theory methodology (utilizing depth interviews and observations), to being the human interactions of all actors within the organization. Discovering meanings and behaviours across a number of dimensions produces a rich textual account of actors' perceptions of enterprise events and subsequent repercussions to the business. Findings: Emergent conceptual categories and supportive properties conveyed the new entrepreneur’s limited understanding of the business he had bought, along with his technical, managerial and decision-making style seemed insurmountable management impediments. Substantive theory that captured the social processes and phenomenological contentions from the grounded theory analysis conclude. Not wholly proffering generalisable pronouncements, the research presents a robust framework for further small enterprise research and grounded approaches to data capture and analysis. Implications: Implications of the study will be of interest to entrepreneur and qualitative researchers, interested in the findings as a contribution to the field, and, the grounded theory methodology applied in establishing ontological 'groundedness' of inductively derived at theories. Originality/Value: There is a paucity of such research outside the big business spectrum. Contributes at a 'substantive' level by focusing on the entrepreneur’s ‘post take-over’ management approach, and, at a more formal level through empirical 'owner-manager-entrepreneurial' research situated within the qualitative paradigm, where a deficiency of ‘depth’ cases remains. And especially for this forum, the findings are the result of meticulous attention to data gathering, analysis and emergent theory building, through the application of grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory has seen limited application to-date in the small business and entrepreneurship field.

Keywords: grounded theory, small business, entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

The 'management' of a firm includes individuals supplying entrepreneurial services as well as those supplying managerial services, but the 'competence of management' refers to the way in which the managerial function is carried out while the 'enterprise of management' refers to the entrepreneurial function… (Edith Penrose, 1995, p.32)

The original purpose of this reported research was not primarily to offer managerial solutions or recommendations but sought to gain deeper ontological and epistemological understanding of enterprise management within its naturalistic context. However, through the application of grounded theory methodology, much 'practical' as well as 'academic' insight emerged from the research. The case study highlights the multiple perspectives of issues believed to be affecting the enterprise and the actors within it. Such multiple realities manifest personal views and subsequent behaviours that have the potential to negatively affect the viability of a business. The illustration interestingly not only shows the influences established employees can have on the day-to-day managing of a newly purchased small business but also, inter alia, the impact decisions made by a new entrepreneur can have on the viability of a recently acquired enterprise.

2. Entrepreneurialism

Irrespective of the academic debate focusing on the construct entrepreneur, as opposed to being, say, 'nonentrepreneurial' (see work by Covin and Slevin, 1988), the term entrepreneur herein denotes the ostensible owner and day-to-day manager of the target enterprise, for it is he whom contentiously displays some of the characteristics addressed in contemporary entrepreneurship theory.
The case study entrepreneur displayed, *inter alia*, a ‘need for achievement’ (McClelland, 1961), a desire for; ‘legitimacy of power’ (Galbraith, 1969; Lukes, 1986; Weber, 1930), a ‘locus of control’ (Brockhaus, 1982; Rotter, 1966); being an ‘innovator’ (Stewart et al, 1998), a ‘risk-taker’ (Knight, 1921; McClelland, 1961; Schumpeter, 1934) with ‘an intention to grow’ the business (Georgelli et al, 2000). Conversely, the notion of the entrepreneur being someone whom has, say, a desire to achieve or be in control, as displayed by the entrepreneur, does not consider Shackle’s (1966) preference to discuss the concept of entrepreneurship in terms of business, and the entrepreneur in terms of being a ‘businessman’. Pertinent to the case exampled with a spotlight on decision theory and, as a pivotal concept in business management as advanced by Shackle, ‘Decision-making is the act which marks out the businessman from all those who collaborate with him in production’ (Shackle, 1966, p.131). Decision-making to Shackle holds a precise meaning, ‘…it is patent that men’s decisions are not choices amongst actual but amongst imagined consequences’ (ibid, p.126).

We can make a contrast with Kirzner’s (1973) notion of the entrepreneur whom is alert to potential opportunities as they occur in an economy, with that of Shackie’s view of an entrepreneur as being someone who creates through their imagination opportunities of economic advantage. Shackie’s work on the distinctiveness of the entrepreneur being a decision maker, and compared with the classical-rational economic model of decision-making as proffered by Von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944) subsequently countered by the work of Kahneman and Tversky (1974) (later discussed) business decision-making whilst being a product of the human ‘entrepreneurial’ imagination, may not according to the Kahneman and Tversky thesis be of (economically) rational thought – and thus whilst not articulated in the work of Shackle, the entrepreneur’s judgments and decisions *may not* produce desired outcomes. As illustrated in this paper, decision fallibilities emerged from the empirically grounded findings of the case exampled, with potentially undesirable effects on the enterprise.

3. Research approach and case study inquiry

3.1 Grounded theory methodology

Championing their argument for the inductive discovery of theory sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) developed new perspectives on social science research grounded in a systematic approach to data. The practice of grounded theory beyond sociology has experienced application and discussion (if somewhat limitedly) over recent years, [for example: Connell and Lowe, 1997 (tourism and hospitality management); Charmaz, 1990 (medical studies); Douglas, 2003a (research supervision); Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995 (psychology). More specifically, the field of management research has seen some accounts of the application of grounded theory [Andriopoulos and Lowe, 2000 (management's creative practices); Douglas, 2003b; 2005 (management and entrepreneurship research); Locke, 2001 (management research); Partington, 2000 (management action)]. A paucity of published accounts remains of the application of grounded theory within the multifaceted research field of small enterprise.

3.2 Case background and research design

At the time of the research the case study business employed ten full-time staff - four of which could be described as *the business*. These ‘senior engineers’ had developed their skills over 25-30 years with the firm and without them the company could not offer its unique core service. The remaining six employees (five with general engineering skills and an office administrator) held tenures of between three to nine years. With the exception of the office administrator the workforce was male. The entrepreneur, who had recently bought the business, had a background in large service sector corporations, admittedly knew nothing of the service or industry he had bought into. With orders falling and employee-management discord rising, he realised the business was in trouble.

Data collection and application of the ‘constant comparative method’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) of creatively comparing incident-to-incident and informant-to-informant data, which shapes conceptual categories and their properties, formed two consecutive phases. Interviews over both phases took the form of ‘informational, reflective and feeling’ dialogue (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1167). Phase-one discussions were mostly ‘informational’ in nature and established chronology of the interviewee and subsequent events within that person’s historical reflection of his/her employment with the company. Data gathered were responses to questions of What?, Who?, Where? and When?. The ‘what?’ questioning sought identification and description of data and incidents and were the basic building...
blocks of constructs. The ‘who? where? and when?’ discussions identified the ‘temporal and contextual factors [that] set the boundaries of generalizability, and as such constitute the range of the theory’ (Whetten, 1989, p.492). These questions consequently set the substantive parameters on gathered data, emergent constructs and subsequent theoretical explanations. Phase-two were predominantly ‘reflective and feeling’ discussions in terms of ‘self’ and took the form of How? and Why? and sought to uncover individual's interpretation of incidents under consideration. These ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ questions were asked to establish relationships amongst the emergent constructs and to provide theoretical rationales for phenomena through the identifications of ‘causal relationships’ (ibid, p. 491). In sum, what was occurring was the accumulation of multiple perspectives of phenomena.

3.3 ‘Cash and clash’ – where ambition meets with opposition

This section examples (accepting word limitations) some of the emergent theoretical constructs through the application of grounded theory from gathered data of all respondents within the case enterprise. The section is divided into two sub-sections: ‘Employees’ Conceptual Categories’ and ‘Entrepreneur’s Conceptual Categories’. Each sub-section introduces the data and its theoretical properties. Firstly within each sub-section attention is drawn to the core conceptual categories of each of the two main data sets. The core conceptual categories are usually the last to become saturated with data and theoretical constructs and are central to the other conceptual categories, inasmuch as they act as a hub to which other constructs are linked. Due to natural publication constraints and conveying beneficial depth to this paper, each sub-category focuses on the core conceptual ‘hub’ categories, though not wholly discounting the remainder of the conceptual categories.

3.4 Employees’ conceptual categories

The core conceptual category that emerged from the employees’ textual data and subsequent analyses was ‘Management Decisions and Consequences’. This was the overarching conceptual category of two sub-categories: ‘Management Decisions’ and management decisions’ ‘Consequences’. Clustered around the core conceptual category are six emergent linked conceptual categories. These categories and their conceptual properties constitute the employees’ meanings across a range of issues. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual categories emergent from the employees’ data set.

3.5 Management decisions and consequences (core conceptual category)

This category was the central conceptual category that was dominant from the employees’ analysed data. The overall collective account of the decisions made by the entrepreneur and subsequent perceived decisions’ consequences as described by the employees, constitute a range of resultant organizational change initiatives sub-categorised across different management decisions.

3.5.1 Management decisions

After the entrepreneur's first major decision: to buy the company, his decisions fall into three sub-conceptual categories: growth decisions, process decisions and reaction decisions. During the first three years of ownership the entrepreneur made decisions to develop the business across a number of dimensions. He physically moved the business from an old established site in the heart of town, which he owned under the original purchase of the company, to new larger industrial units out of town, with large rental costs. He also bought an existing engineering company, against the advice offered to him by the four senior engineers, with the desire to curtail contracting out detailed part production and repair [Jennifer, “Tom tried everything for him to stop buying this company, and the lads knew that it was a bad buy. But that's the way he is, that's the way he wanted to take us. It all went wrong in a very big way. They have sort of withdrawn that advice now”]. With the new facilities and the purchase
of the engineering company the entrepreneur believed he created the potential to do work that the business had not been able to offer previously. The new owner sought a diversification strategy of pursuing work of a different nature. The abolition of staff meetings after the only one that was called was a reaction to the opportunity taken by some employees to communicate their negative feelings about how they saw the business since its new ownership and the decisions taken so far [Bernie, “We only had one staff meeting. There was an argument and never had any more”]. There appeared to be a multiplicity of views of the manager’s decisions, with perhaps the owner seeing a need for diversification, whilst others in the company having different views on such judgment.

3.5.2 Consequences

The entrepreneur’s decisions consequences clustered in to three disparate dimensions, accordingly asserted and labelled by this paper’s author as: ‘U-Turns’, ‘Drains’ and ‘Internalities’. ‘U-Turns’ were the result of a previous decision that resulted in another decision being made that then resulted in a reversed consequence to that of the previous decision, for example, the hiring of more employees then sacking them later. ‘Drains’ were the tangible observations that were the direct result of previous decisions that showed a net loss, for example, the moving to rented premises from buildings that were owned and retained (unable to sell) but not utilised and resulted in a substantial annual financial drain on the company [Mike, “He got the idea of selling the other premises. He’s still got it. We all moved to this new site. Attitudes have now changed”].

‘Internalities’ fell in to two groups: ‘Working Practices’ and ‘Personal Feelings and Emotions’. ‘Working Practices’ highlight changes that were believed to be responses to decisions that affected the internal working practices of the business, for example, observable cut backs in an attempt to claw back money lost by deciding to physically expand the business. ‘Personal Feelings and Emotions’ being the largest cluster of conceptual properties of the sub-categories, displayed peoples internal personal, and in the vast majority of cases negative, feelings to the decisions made by the entrepreneur, for example; demoralising, undermining and upsetting.

3.6 Remaining conceptual categories

As shown in figure 1, the remaining conceptual categories that made up employees’ constructs amounted to a further six categories, these being: ‘Entrepreneur’s Personality’, ‘Entrepreneur’s Managerial and Technical Naivety’, ‘Employees’ Feelings and Emotions’, ‘What is/was Required for Business’, ‘Historical Contrasting’ and ‘Co-worker Perceptions’. Briefly, across this range of constructs, the emergent findings were as follows:

There was a considerable opinion conveyed by employees on the entrepreneur’s personality. The perceived employee management problem was generally conveyed across all the employees. Along with this notion of managerial naïveté came technical naïveté, again emanating predominantly from the senior employees. Their perception of the centrality of their craftsmanship and its importance to them as highly skilled operatives contrasted to that (un-) known by the entrepreneur with regard to their expertise. Emotional emphases were of a negative nature. There were a number of instances within the employees’ data where they did express their feelings at the entrepreneur’s decisions and directed toward him at a more personal level. There was a general perception conveyed of what the business required - amongst other things the entrepreneur needed to communicate with employees, incentivise, motivate, enthuse and involve employees in the decision-making process.

Employees fell into two main categories with regards to their tenure with the company. The entrepreneur had owned the company for five years therefore the employees either fell into the category of those who preceded him or those who came after him. The employees who predated the entrepreneur also fell into two categories, ones that appeared to represent employees whom had been with the company a considerable length of time (up to 25 years before the new entrepreneur), and those employees whom had been with the company prior to the new entrepreneur but by no considerable number of years (maximum being 6 years prior to the new employer). Negatively historically contrasting the past with the present, the dominant cohort was the senior engineers’. Also, the senior engineers conveyed little about their perceptions of anyone else within the employees other than themselves as a group, and their commitment to their craft. They discussed other staff infrequently, with any comment made about other employees as only being yet another drain on the firm. Conversely, the remainder of employees perceived the senior engineers as being too powerful a group that not only challenged the entrepreneur in how the business should have been managed, but
also because of their ability to control much of the processes of the business, which in turn affected the rest of the employees in their work.

3.7 Entrepreneur's conceptual categories

The core conceptual category that emerged from the entrepreneur's textual data and subsequent analyses was ‘Self as Manager’. This was the overarching conceptual category of two sub-categories: ‘Managing Self’ and ‘Managing Others’. Clustered around the core conceptual category are seven emergent linked conceptual categories. These categories and their conceptual properties constitute the entrepreneur’s meanings across a range of issues. Figure 2 depicts the conceptual categories emergent from the entrepreneur’s data set.

3.8 Self as manager (core conceptual category)

This core category emerged from two categories, one where the entrepreneur focuses on ‘managing self’, looking in, and the other where he focuses on the ‘managing other’ (employees), looking out. In the first conceptual category the entrepreneur reflects on himself as manager of the business and what he had done as a decision maker. The second conceptual category emerged from reflections on his post-decisional position. In that the perceived problems of attaining notional planned decision outcomes are dependent on managing employee-employer relations.

‘Managing Self’, and its properties emerged from the entrepreneur focusing on himself in terms of I, Me, My [for example, I: “I have instigated a lot of change, and a lot of change to people who are not used to a lot of change”, Me: “The negative effect is that it is costing a lot more and that makes the business less profitable to me”, My: “At the end of the day it's my company, and that's what they don't appreciate”]. Under ‘managing self’ constructs focused on the entrepreneur's reflections of what he sought to do in terms of conceptual objectives, how he conceptually decided to go about reaching those objectives, what he conceptually believed in reality had occurred, his conceptual reflections on the post-decisional position he found himself to be in, and finally what he conceptually perceived to be the options, post-decisions, available to him. On purchasing the company the entrepreneur sought to make decisions that would result in changes to the company that he believed would increase his wealth [“I want to make myself wealthy at the end of the day”]. To bring about these changes he decided to manage the processes of change from a more individualistic managerial approach and not in the main seek employees' involvement in the decision-making process [“They are terrified about security and the fact that the company will go under if I continued to make these wild decisions and take it in areas its never been before”].

The results of the entrepreneur’s decisions had produced a perceivable number of outcomes that were probably best described as undesirable in reality [“It might have been a very silly thing to have done, going into a business I didn’t understand. I have had to rely on the lads for everything”]. His reflections on his position and that of the business evoked emotions [“I'm feeling pissed-off with them at the moment”] that highlighted his frustrations of not perceivably realising his desires. However, his reflections conveyed his naivety to the situation in which he had got himself [“There is a big hole on the technical side, I am not capable of filling it, I do not want to fill it. I will never be able to fill it”].

With some realisation of his position he pondered more possible decisions that he perceived as potential routes out of the position he was in. Realising that the oppositional power was predominantly from the four senior engineers and their confronting managerial decisions with intransigence, the entrepreneur considered future options: as the senior engineers won’t change, then he would have to change the rules by which they work [“You cannot change their attitudes, I must therefore change the rules”]. At least in the eyes of the entrepreneur, had quite obviously resisted change, therefore he contemplated distancing himself from managing the employees directly [“I have really come down to

Figure 2: The conceptual categories emergent from the entrepreneur’s data set
the view of getting a guy as the shop manager. If I get the right guy they will probably accept it. I think they see it as I don't know what I'm talking about"]. However, it appeared to be a short lived decision to distance himself by indirectly managing through a shop floor manager, he had tried it before ["They took a dislike to her, she was quite aggressive, I found her helpful"). He resigned himself to losing the perceived battle ["I cannot beat it so I might as well give in. It does not give me any confidence in them"] and intimatted that getting out of the business could be his final winning decision ["If one day I want to sell the business I've got to find someone who wants to buy the business and its got to have something to it"].

‘Managing others’ emerged from the entrepreneur focusing on the employees in terms of They, Their, Them [for example, They: “I told them this, and they all got upset...", Their: “No one mentioned their pay rise, it all goes to prove something doesn't it?” Them: “I have not seen a lot of change in them”]. Under managing others two categories focused on the entrepreneur's conceptual perceptions of the employees. The first category reflected the entrepreneur’s skewed perceptions of the four senior engineers as a group, as they were directly related to within the data. The second category was a general category that didn't highlight any particular employee or the group and is levelled at all employees generally.

The conceptual properties of the senior engineers’ sub-category conveyed the entrepreneur’s view that the senior engineers had adopted an oppositional stance against him as a manager of them and of the business per se ["There have been a number of things that I’ve done that they don’t approve of, I know"). Perceived as being under threat or siege by the entrepreneur due to his decision-making and change strategies (sic) ["Unless they feel they have been put upon, that they feel the need to fight back"], the senior engineers display feelings and emotions that conveyed their opposition to management ["They got very angry with me because I wanted to change"]). He realised that they had withdrawn from offering support that appeared not to have been requested by the entrepreneur and along with it they had instigated their own processes of retaining the status quo, at least in areas that they could exercise their expert power ["There is no question, they don't bust their arse"]').

3.9 Remaining conceptual categories

As shown in figure 2, the remaining employer’s constructs amounted to a further seven categories, these being: ‘Inability’, ‘Naivety’, ‘We As’, ‘Feelings and Emotions’, ‘Games’, ‘Perceptual Differences’ and ‘Decisions Consequences’. For example:

At a technical level the entrepreneur admitted his inability and was un-knowledgeable of the craftsmanship that was required to do the work and realised he would never be competent to do craft jobs. Due to his lack of knowledge and competence of the craft and skills he was not capable of monitoring work. At a managerial level he conveyed his inability to lead and motivate people - a usual competence requirement of any people manager. An admitted naivety emerged as the entrepreneur's dawning of his realization that the physical management of the business and the long established business he actually bought into had a range of issues that required concerted, appropriate, managerial competences that the entrepreneur probably had either not got, was not capable of developing or desired not to hold. Not realising when he bought the business that there were inherent interpersonal issues in buying and running a small complex company.

In discussing the collective term ‘we’ the entrepreneur actually referred to him, but he explained phenomena in pluralistic terms of we as being employees and him when a negative incident was raised. Past events that had resulted in perceivable managerially unplanned outcomes and criticised by employees were avoided being owned by the singular entrepreneur. This representation of self as a collective entity was portrayed also as what ‘we’ are going to do in the future whilst in actuality the entrepreneur was conveying what he was going to do. We as a company reified explanation of phenomena by neutralising the individual entity. However, from the data emerged the entrepreneur’s negative feelings and emotions towards the employees and predominantly the senior engineers. He conveyed a frustration of not being able to circumvent the asymmetric power relationship he held with the senior engineers and his inability to change their behaviour. He was angry at the situation he found himself in and in actuality he felt beaten. He believed he had tried hard to keep the business going.

As part of day-to-day management of employees the entrepreneur engaged in what he termed the playing of [mind-] games as a strategy to gain perceived advantage over the employees, irrespective
of effectiveness. He contends that the employees engaged in interdepartmental games with each other in order to diffuse attention away from them. In attempts to attain pivotal power and control over the processes of production games were played by especially senior staff in a belief that they could hoodwink the entrepreneur due to their depth of technical knowledge. The entrepreneur had decided that he wanted the business to broaden its service base by offering a wider range of engineering based provisions. He contended that such a perceptual difference resulted in senior engineers’ intransigence in entering into broader based tasks and was in part their defence of their craft image, and in part the defending of any diminution of the centrality of their expertise within the company. Associated with this was the senior engineers’ belief in offering their services at a price to customers that did not extract unacceptable profits. He believed jobs were deliberately extended over protracted periods but whilst finding it unacceptable felt powerless to do anything.

The entrepreneur conveyed a perceivable belief that some of his judgments did have positive decision consequences but may not have been apparent through employees’ interpretations. He believed he had gained increased profits and turnover in the first two years from his early decisions and had created a better image for the company and better working conditions for employees. Conversely, his admitted ‘U-Turn’ decisions of increasing and then reducing employee numbers did not resolve the added burden of higher irreducible costs and less profits. He realised that his decisions’ consequences had, whilst making some defence for them, created a business that necessitated change to meet increased overheads but offered no resolution in how to do so that had not already been attempted.

4. Discussion

At this juncture in a grounded theory approach it would be normal practice to introduce a ‘later-stage body of literature’ with which to discuss ones finding against existing theory. The preceding reporting of the conceptual categories emergent from the data sets delimit full opportunity for a thorough appreciation of emergent theory against existing knowledge. Nevertheless, a short discussion illuminating the potentiality for substantive theory development against extant literature is appropriate. Set below is a (delimited) discussion exampling the underpinning findings against entrepreneurship and decision literature, most of which were introduced earlier in the paper.

The entrepreneur’s contention of the business needing to change, hence the decisions he made, was posited on his logical argument that the business needed to change to survive. It could be argued that the entrepreneur’s decisions to change the business was based on his psychological drive, irrespective of costs (see ‘Biases and heuristics’ and ‘Intransivity Axiom’, Kahneman and Tversky, 1974 & 1979) to manage a business that was the product of his accomplishments and not that of others (previous or present), and, to establish a central ‘legitimacy of power’ (Galbraith, 1969; Lukes, 1986; Weber, 1930). In such a small business as depicted within the case, the differences between the employees’ perceptions and those of the entrepreneur, affected all actors’ cognitions and behaviours. The outcomes from individual cognitive differences and perceptions within the enterprise evoked feelings and emotions, evaluations, decisions, attitudes and actions. It was the emergence of such outcomes across a number of incidents with which the entrepreneur made his decisions and managed the company against how the employees cognitively evaluated his performance. All actors conveyed many perceptions of situations within which they were inherently entwined, by all being in the same naturalistic organizational environment. For the entrepreneur, his perceptions of significant business bound phenomena are arguably linked to his cognitive structuring of decisions and subsequent entrepreneurial behaviour. Maule and Hodgkinson (2003) also advance such similarities between managerial perceptions and those emanating from the field of behavioural decision-making.

Reminiscent of classical entrepreneurship theory, the entrepreneur embarked upon growth and process decisions for the business in situations that tended towards uncertainty and ‘risk’ (Knight, 1921; McClelland, 1961; Schumpeter, 1934). His reaction decisions were either reactions to his previous decisions or reactions to (perceived) employees’ behaviours to his earlier decisions. Such reaction decisions negatively affected employees’ feelings, emotions and behaviours, with ill-considered effects on the business - thus carrying risks in them selves. Because of such human differences between employees and the entrepreneur, and the senior engineers especially, due to their expertise, any attempt at explaining the restructuring of the organization by the entrepreneur had been avoided. This chasm is naturally filled by recipients’ own ‘sensemaking’ (Weick, 1995, 2001). The entrepreneur may have embarked on decisions that could be argued as being the product of his framing of the situation. However, in retrospect, his framing has been inappropriate and he needed to
have ‘imagined’ what would have been necessary to reach his goals (Beach and Mitchell, 1990). The entrepreneur appeared to over use intuition and non-logical decision-making (Barnard, 1938; Simon, 1987) as he sought to affirm pivotal position and not have to engage with employees in ‘collaboratively managing the enterprise’ (Shackle, 1966).

Assigning considerable ‘weight’ to winning, the entrepreneur’s cognitive framing of issues is intertwined with the weight he places on gains over any loses. Wishing to establish the business as his and hold a ‘locus of control’ (Brockhaus, 1982; Rotter, 1966) encourages him to gamble in his decision-making, which appears to show him as erring towards making decisions under conditions of high risk or even uncertainty - where outcomes cannot be judged. His elicitation of information required prior to decision-making appeared limited, as he preferred not to engage in a group structured framing of decisions.

Arguably, the entrepreneur did ‘gamble’ in his decision-making (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) as he placed higher ‘value’ (rather than ‘utility’) on winning. The entrepreneur sought to gain control through a number of individually contrived strategies that would place him as sole manager and entrepreneurial decision maker of the business, not in any de facto partnership. However, as every gambler knows, the ‘game’ (a term used by the entrepreneur) is one where a competitor (or combatant) can lose as well as win. The entrepreneur was applying ‘heuristics and biases’ (Kahneman and Tversky, 1974) in his decision-making. Heuristics being trial and error, he appeared to trial a number of decisions that could be interpreted as culminating in failure. He reflectively conveyed a bias that after five years of owning the business the reality was that it had not changed to meet his ‘intentions of growing the business’ (Georgelli et al, 2000) and achieve his aspirations of personal wealth creation and being an entrepreneurial ‘opportunist’ (Kirzner, 1973) owning a business flexibly responsive enough to meet potential market demands.

Tacitly or explicitly agreed decisions by the senior engineers not to comply with significant entrepreneur’s decisions, arguably gave the senior engineers organizational decision-making capabilities – at least in part. The senior engineers applied their own collective heuristics and biases, particularly the ‘anchoring’ heuristic (Kahneman and Tversky, 1974). Their initial collective starting point from which they evaluated the new entrepreneur was ‘anchored’ in historical practices. Such biases were sufficiently powerful to affect strategic and operational management of the business. The senior engineers ‘sensemaking’ (Weick, 1995, 2001) may hold some attribution to them perceiving themselves as guardians of the company against the exigencies of the entrepreneur. Retrospectively they are measuring the entrepreneur’s performance over the time of his stewardship, subsequently measured over the time the company has been in existence. The rest of the employees measured him over individual shorter historical perspectives. Such sensemaking is either ‘belief’ or ‘action’ driven (Weick, 1995, 2001). What is occurring is ‘action-driven’ sensemaking by the entrepreneur clashing with ‘belief-driven’ sensemaking by the senior engineers. The former is action-based decision-making that generates commitments, whilst the latter is founded on arguing and envisioning decision consequences. There was no evidence of reconciliation.

In summary, the application of grounded theory methodology has surfaced a number of illustrative entrepreneurial and managerial issues when considered within the context of the substantive case. The interpretive account of the analysed data of that of the entrepreneur and the employees of the established business has afforded some opportunity for comparison of finding against established entrepreneurship, management and related decision literature.

To conclude this paper, emergent theoretical aspects of the substantive case are drawn together in the following final section for the benefit of practitioner purposes and to offer the potentiality for contributing understanding at more formal levels of enterprise inquiry.

5. Conclusions

On a practical level a number of early conclusions can be drawn that give insight into the usefulness of what can be learned from the case when an entrepreneur encounters a comparable occurrence. The major decision that the case entrepreneur made from the onset was the purchasing of the new (to him) but established enterprise. What became apparent was the entrepreneur’s lack of knowledge of the industry and specifically the enterprise he was entering into. This aspect also focuses attention on the entrepreneur himself. Whilst he had a long established background in big business management he had no experience of owning or managing a small enterprise. It could be contended that his held belief that managing a small business is similar but in a reduced form to that required in managing
a bigger firm is arguably naïve. The uniqueness of the services and products the business offered and the significance of the long established and trained staff, was perhaps not considered highly enough prior to purchasing the business and his motivation for doing so.

Once the complex (with hindsight) small enterprise had been purchased, a number of incidents emerged over subsequent years. However, set against the backcloth of a multiplicity of human cognitions and perceptions by all actors within the business, entrepreneurial initiatives and managerial practices met with a variety of responses from employees. These employees’ responses in themselves engendered employer’ responses and at times circles of ‘ploy and counter-ploy’ appeared as ‘ends-in-themselves’. The entrepreneur appeared to quickly drift from making judgments and decisions under conditions of ‘certainty’ and ‘low risk’ to conditions of ‘high risk’ and even under conditions of ‘uncertainty’. Whilst trait and behaviour theory may suggest that entrepreneurs may display characteristics of being ‘risk takers’, the gambling metaphor assigned to the case entrepreneur may better allude to his personal condition rather than labelling him with the broad characteristic of being that of an entrepreneur. Measured initiatives and responses appeared to surrender to personal crusades. The costs in financial, general resources and especially human terms appeared to be all too often forgotten.

The application of grounded theory methodology surfaced a number of illustrative entrepreneurial and managerial issues when considered within the context of the substantive case. Against a backcloth of a multiplicity of human cognitions and behaviours by all actors within the enterprise, entrepreneurial initiatives and managerial practices met with a variety of actors’ responses. The final outcome was a business that had potentially damaged its reputation. The interpretive account of the analysed data of that of all actors of the enterprise has afforded some opportunity for comparison of finding against established entrepreneurship, management and related decision theories. The perspectives discussed herein require circumspection. The data examined is selectively limited, which has only proffered some possible actors’ perspectives and their interpretations, as is the reflexive accounts of the paper’s author. The resultant narrative set against existing theory and multiple actors’ accounts give some ontological grounding in establishing the credibility and dependability of knowledge claims, for this ‘substantive’ inquiry.

Grounded theory may be evaluated inter alia in its meticulousness as a research process that, as illustrated in this case, reveals understanding of human action from the perspective of the agent (emic) rather than from more dominant nomothetic inquiries and etic interpretations. The conclusion to the application of grounded theory methodology is the emergence of conceptual categories and resultant, empirically grounded, inductive theory or theories. Such conclusions highlight theoretical explanations to human behaviour, within the bounds of a chosen substantive social investigation. What is pertinent to social research, through grounded theory, is that it seeks to approximate to the context of that being studied, in this case a newly acquired enterprise, the actors involved, and their interactions - thus conveying a conceptual understanding of issues that make up their naturalistic world. The value of grounded theory is the emergence of explanations to socially purposeful questions of what is happening and why, that are “grounded” in data.

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Contextual Sensitivity in Grounded Theory: The Role of Pilot Studies

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Abstract: Grounded Theory is an established methodological approach for context specific inductive theory building. The grounded nature of the methodology refers to these specific contexts from which emergent propositions are drawn. Thus, any grounded theory study requires not only theoretical sensitivity, but also a good insight on how to design the research in the human activity systems to be studied. The lack of this insight may result in inefficient theoretical sampling or even erroneous purposeful sampling. These problems would not necessarily be critical, as it could be argued that through the elliptical process that characterizes grounded theory, remedial loops would always bring the researcher to the core of the theory. However, these elliptical remedial processes can take very long periods of time and result in catastrophic delays in research projects. As a strategy, this paper discusses, contrasts and compares the use of pilot studies in four different grounded theory projects. Each pilot brought different insights about the context, resulting in changes of focus, guidance to improve data collection instruments and informing theoretical sampling. Additionally, as all four projects were undertaken by researchers with little experience of inductive approaches in general and grounded theory in particular, the pilot studies also served the purpose of training in interviewing, relating to interviewees, memoing, constant comparison and coding. This last outcome of the pilot study was actually not planned initially, but revealed itself to be a crucial success factor in the running of the projects. The paper concludes with a theoretical proposition for the concept of contextual sensitivity and for the inclusion of the pilot study in grounded theory research designs.

Keywords: pilot studies, grounded theory, context, research design

1. Introduction

Qualitative research is context-bound. This means that the researchers have to be sensitive to the context of the research and immerse themselves in the setting and situation. (Holoway, 1997:5)

Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) is a research methodology in which theory and models are inductively extracted from the analysis of contextual data. This analysis involves the iterative discovery of concepts and tentative explanations of phenomena, as theory emerges from data. Because there is no preliminary testing or replication of any a priori theory, the method stands for its dedicated grasp of substantive areas, which is not static and suffers alterations with the discovery and constant comparison of new data, until sufficiently stable defining properties, explanatory categories, and linking sets of relationships are achieved.

This pre-emptive endeavour (Glaser, 1992) places upon the researcher a pioneering aura, in the sense that the newly discovered theory is applicable locally and solidly grounded in context-specific core values, understandings and boundaries.

Moreover, the method’s intrinsic link to practical experience and the recursive procedural loops of theoretical formulation – comprehending a permanent interplay of the human-activity system and individual characteristics – lead to one more essential condition determining any successful Grounded Theory research: it must fit to context without force (Flower, 1989:296).

Therefore, this paper argues that knowledge of the context is a fundamental information resource in improving researchers’ understanding of activities, relationships and stakeholders’ thinking. Therefore this knowledge of the context becomes a key aspect in collecting data from and interacting with...
informants. This was clearly defended by Glaser and Strauss (1967:46) when proposing that insight as well as theoretical sensitivity were the main components in the social scientist armoury. Our proposition is that this insight that must necessarily include understanding of the complex contextual characteristics of the human-activity system being studied should be considered at the beginning of the process of grounded theory rather than later on in the process.

A number of propositions have been made to link the emerging theory with the context, such as the reflective coding matrix, which serves as a relational bridge from the analysis of axial coding to the interpretation of selective coding (Scott and Howell, 2008) or the conditional matrix coding which comes after dimensionalising and axial coding (Schatzman, 1991). These approaches aim at making the researcher’s emerging theories denser, more complex and more precise (Charmaz, 2003).

The proposition in this paper is that the insight proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967:46) should be acquired much earlier in the process of data collection and analysis, that is a precursor to the iterative process that characterises axial coding and theory building. In fact, most of the discussions on Grounded Theory application focus on “beyond the decisions concerning initial collection of data [which] cannot be planned in advance of the emerging theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:47). This poses two major problems. First, the process of identifying “what groups and subgroups does one turn to next in data collection” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:47) may be very long and depending on the researcher’s own theoretical sensitivity may lead away from the convergence of theory or even result in erroneous and biased theoretical propositions. Therefore, sound contextual sensitivity is important from the very early stages of the research process. Second, the choice of these groups should be guided by a sound contextual sensitivity in order to identify the theoretical purpose that leads to the selection of multiple comparison groups. Therefore, this contextual sensitivity is not only fundamental at the onset of the project but also during the whole process of constant comparison and theoretical sampling.

The basic principle sustaining this premise is that, in the study of organisational processes, it is important to ensure the retrievability of discussions, solutions, decisions and actions undertaken in the methodological execution of grounded theory-based research. Such a claim for context-aware scholarship and for the possibility of making locally-informed and locally-significant contributions to theory is embedded in the very propositions of Grounded Theory as a methodology committed to understanding emic perspectives.

If this principle is acknowledged by the novice grounded theorist, then the “very attraction” of the method as described by Dey (1999:24) – the compulsion to “face up to some fairly basic issues about the nature of social research”, and to accept that “to do research requires reflection on what we are doing and how we do it” – shall be dealt with pragmatically, because it exists to ensure tangible knowledge and to preserve the essential links between the abstract and the concrete.

To better perform well-grounded knowledge development and to construct tangible theory, this paper discusses and proposes a specific mechanism – i.e. pilot studies – that can be used to acquire early contextual sensitivity through the collection of essential information for effective research design and development of greater awareness of dynamic events, agents and circumstances that can positively modify the research process flow and affect decision-making.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, pilot studies are discussed as tactical instruments to obtain an entry point into the universe of reference and socialisation in which meaning making occurs. The claim here is that only after such contextual sensitivity is acquired, can Grounded Theory methods focus on making empirical events and informants understandings meaningful via the effort of refinement and conceptualisation. This paper provides four examples of how novice researchers implementing Grounded Theory-based inquiry encountered multiple contextual variables in their approach to different phenomena. The experiences described account for pilot studies as procedural scaffolds. The way pilot studies contributed to assessing, modifying and enhancing initial research designs is also discussed. The paper closes with a recommendation for the inclusion of pilot studies in Grounded theory-based research, suggesting that the inductive steps of contextual exploration associated with pilot studying provide enhanced methodological insight into how the human activity environment can be effectively studied.
2. The search for salient meanings or why do grounded theory-based studies need pilot studies?

Pilot studies are largely under-reported in the qualitative research literature (Sampson, 2004; Whitheley and Whitheley, 2005). This underdevelopment of actionable knowledge concerning the practice of pilot studies is surprising to those who, like the authors of this paper, explicitly choose to use them to frame questions, collect background information, refine a research approach or tailor efficient research instruments.

This methodological choice is mainly of pragmatic origin. Pilot studies in qualitative research are paramount in adapting to the situation on the ground, which is unique and varies for every research. This *groundedness* seems to be the very advantage of qualitative research, especially “the empirical leverage it offers on the point of view of those being studied and the sensitivity to context that is especially attractive to researchers in a variety of fields” (Bryman et al., 1996:353).

Moreover, pilot studies hold the potential of minimising problems associated with cold, unreflecting immersion in the field, as Sampson purports: “immersion in the field without any pre-exposure can provide a researcher with a feast of fascinating information and observations and can result in not knowing where to start”. So after the feast comes the reckoning.

To avoid unpleasant surprises, De Vaus (1993:54) warns: “Do not take the risk. Pilot test first”. This position suggests that a considerable advantage of conducting a pilot study is anticipating the debilities of the research project, namely by controlling the adequacy of protocols, methods and instruments.

Sampson (2004:399) also alerts for the fact that it is “often only when data is evaluated that any gaps in a research design begin to show up”, hence a running a pilot can save time invested in unfeasible projects, “particularly in the context of today’s social science, which is frequently strictly time-bounded and pressurized”.

Reflecting on the nature of pilot studies as applied in the discipline of project management, Turner (2005:5) summarizes the learning opportunities the researcher can extract from assessing the feasibility of any study, and presents them as risk mitigation strategies: “learning how to reduce uncertainty in product or process of a project; learning what will work or not in the design of a new product; learning by testing the efficacy of a research instrument”. If we replace “product” by “research project”, it is more understandable how pilot studies increase the likelihood of success in the main study.

Similarly, van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) offer a list of reasons for conducting pilot studies, amongst which are: “developing and testing adequacy of research instruments; assessing the feasibility of a full-scale study; designing a research protocol; (...) collecting preliminary data; assessing the proposed data analysis techniques to uncover potential problems; developing a research question and a research plan; training a researcher in as many elements of the research process as possible”.

To these advantages we would add the possibility of establishing whether or not the sampling frame is theoretically relevant or even feasible. Also, substantive data extractable from pilot findings can be used to design following stages of data collection, thus reinforcing the researcher’s audit trail and enhancing the rigour of qualitative research.

Such an achievement confirms Silverman’s (2000:35) assertion that in qualitative research, “what happens in the field as you attempt to gather data itself is a source of data rather than just a technical problem in need of a solution”.

For this matter, pilot studies are an invaluable source of contextual data, which have the ability of moving the researcher into the phenomenon’s ecology and into the core of respondents’ accounts, thus partitioning the broad emergent theory into workable, theoretically-relevant conceptual units.

Whitheley and Whitheley (2005:10) seem to corroborate this idea by claiming that through pilot studies, insight can be gained about how to choose among different approaches: “the notion of a
familiarization study entails visualization of the proposed research context in such a way that recognition is made that very often, the researcher’s knowledge of the context, that is the inside environment, can be improved.

The ethnographic method clearly asserts the primacy of context in the exploration and analysis of frameworks of interaction, by describing how elements of the context “help fix the interpretations that each protagonist gives” (Weber, 2001:485) to events. This occurs through the immersion of the researcher in the heart of a culture and requires them to “enter into the matrix of meanings of the researched, to participate in their system of organized activities” (Wax, 1980:272-273).

Furthermore, contributions coming from the discipline of ubiquitous computing (Coutaz et al., 2005) help to understand the nature of context, by regarding it as an interactional process, in which mutable environments are composed of “reconfigurable, migratory and multiscale” conditions affecting roles, relations and entities. For this reason, context must not be regarded as a stable set of variables.

On the other hand, Grounded Theory’s modus operandi, focuses on the incremental interpenetration of data and analysis. This approach requires of the researcher to adopt an openness necessary to “allow conditions of the field or interests of the informants to guide foci” of the investigation (Snow et al. 2003:187). The pursuit of an exploratory inductive move towards the discovery of middle range theories and explanatory propositions through coding and emergent constant comparative analysis of empirical data is Grounded Theory’s process.

For this reason, when endeavouring an understanding of phenomena to compare issues and interrelationships, Grounded Theory provides a sufficiently “open approach that invites data material to speak and subjective manifestations to come forth (…) - it may only generate local empirical theories, but results will be sufficiently grounded directly in the observed data” (Martins and Nunes, 2009), and provide an analytical framework to understand social interaction at particular phenomena level.

However, the drive in the early iterative open coding process that characterises grounded theory is to produce an emergent explanatory framework that explicates the phenomenon being studied, rather than the context in which it is rooted. The understanding of the context is facilitated during (or after axial coding) through the use conditional relationship guides and reflective coding matrices (Scott and Howell, 2008; Charmaz, 2003, Schatzman, 1991). This approach may result in very long processes and iterative cycles of data collection and analysis as the categories that characterise both the phenomenon being studied and the human-activity context where it occurs are expected to emerge from the same data collection strategy and focus. This process may be particularly difficult and fraught with frustrations and pitfalls for novice Grounded Theory researchers. Thus, this paper argues that a pilot-study stage should be considered in the research design of the Grounded Theory studies, aiming specifically at eliciting information and categories that characterise the context in support of further theoretical construct development. This pilot study should precede the main typical grounded theory process that focuses primarily on the phenomenon to be addressed. That is, open-coding and axial coding in the pilot should result in categories that explicate the context. On the other-hand, open coding in the typical (main) procedure should result in categories that support the understanding and development of integrated theoretical explanations of the phenomenon being studied.

Understanding context is consequently an attempt to map and recognise those variables through providing a structured view of the world in which systems operate. The pilot study plays a crucial role in achieving such structured view, as translated by Fig. 1.

An initial stage of recognition is essential to enhance the capacity of ascribing significance to activities, facts, artefacts and decisions as interpreted by the researcher. To enhance the awareness developed in the previous stage, the researcher must strive to make contextual knowledge explicit, therefore capturing and representing it, rendering descriptive categories and explanatory concepts accessible throughout the research process. By completion of this phase, the researcher must have developed and elaborated a primary theoretical framework with which to focus the research problem and structure the research design. It is then time to tailor sharper exploratory tools, which will aid the development of taxonomies and concepts. However, and because such taxonomies and concepts do not emerge in vacuo and separate from the context, the researcher faces again the beginning of the
context-awareness cycle, starting with recognition, essential to the discovery of analytic understandings.

![Diagram of the context-awareness cycle]

**Figure 1**: Pilot studies’ context-awareness cycle

### 3. Experiences in piloting grounded theory-based research

In order to illustrate the propositions made above, this section discusses the role of 4 pilot studies as a tool to understand research contexts based on the experiences of four novice doctoral researchers entering the field of inductive qualitative inquiry. It takes both a reflexive and a pragmatic approach towards assessing how pilot studies contributed to informed grounded theory research design decisions. In essence, the discussion is concerned with revealing how each researcher attempted to find a pilot research design that suits their particular research question and research context, offering the voice of the ordinary novice researcher. The presentation of cases follows a common structure, namely initial research objectives; reasons to conduct a pilot study; data collection and analysis; contribution of the pilot study to greater contextual sensitivity; and finally how the pilot study assisted in the design of later research stages.

#### 3.1 The role of academic librarians in HE institutional IS strategic planning: The case of Syrian Governmental universities

**3.1.1 Initial research objectives**

This research investigates academic librarian involvement in Information Systems Strategic Planning (ISSP) in Syrian Universities and is aimed at generating theoretical propositions about the role of academic librarians in University-wide ISSP. Academic librarians’ traditional roles are increasingly being questioned and expanded, with impact on librarians’ self-perceptions, institutional mission, and professional relations with students, staff and planning stakeholders.

**3.1.2 Reasons to conduct a pilot study**

The pilot study was conducted to explore these emerging organisational identities across the Syrian Higher Education ecology. Since the number of HE public organisations in Syria is relatively small, the pilot aimed at identifying groups of informants, if the groups and subgroups to be studied exist homogenously across the national scenario and if there were sufficient numbers of informants to enable meaningful data collection and analysis.

**3.1.3 Data collection and analysis**

Informants from all governmental Syrian Universities (Damascus University, Aleppo University, Tishrin University and Al Baath University) were identified using a snowballing technique, initiated by an initial holistic meta-inquiry exercise conducted with Higher Education Ministerial Department. This department implements national Syrian policies, funds, coordinates and interfaces with all public HE institutions. The key informants for the pilot study in HE organisations were high level representatives of the Information Systems Technology Department, the Strategic Planning Department and the Academic Libraries Department. Data was collected through open interviews at ministerial level and
semi-structured interviews at the HE levels. Data analysis focuses essentially on open coding and embrionary axial coding.

3.1.4 Contribution of the pilot study to greater contextual sensitivity

At top-level management there was the awareness that academic librarians’ participation in ISSP processes can potentially contribute to minimise issues related to universities’ neglect of the IS/IT interrelationship. Yet the pilot proved to be a vital tool in eliciting planning and management processes that remain largely unspoken and undocumented in the Syrian context as well as in the definition of groups and subgroups to be interviewed.

This experience was particularly insightful in the sense that it meant the operationalisation of what Shapiro et al (2007:130) name “polycontextual sensitive research”, i.e., a temporal-spatial, environmental and cultural contextualisation of phenomena that “strengthens scholars’ understanding of an organization under study at various levels of analysis (individual, group, organizational and national level)”. Pilot study’s results revealed the ad hoc contribution of academic librarians in the delivery of university-wide information services, despite their subject expertise and experience in information management. The pilot also enabled the identification of a number of both formal and informal collaborations and co-operations between the different stakeholders in ISSP process.

3.1.5 How the pilot study assisted in the design of later research stages

In this case, the pilot also enabled the identification of an initial set of informants and the identification of initial categories used in the design of the interview scripts for the next stage. The pilot also confirmed that the study was not only feasible but was seen to highly interesting and useful by both the Syrian HE authorities and the professional stakeholders involved. Finally, the initial open coding led to the focusing of the research objectives into questioning the processes sustaining the unstructured and non-formalised contribution of academic librarians in ISSP, since they de facto play a consultative role of technical and ethical nature.

3.2 Identifying knowledge sharing barriers in the inter-professional collaboration of traditional and western medicine healthcare professionals in China

3.2.1 Initial research objectives

This research project aimed at investigating barriers for knowledge sharing (KS) between Western Medicine (WM) and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) professionals in their collaborative healthcare practices taking place in Chinese healthcare organisations. The research project adopted the Straussian Grounded Theory approach as the overarching methodology to guide, manage, and analyse data collected in a single case-study design. A public hospital in Central China was selected as the case-study site.

3.2.2 Reasons to conduct a pilot study

As a deliberately designed component of the research design for the project, a pilot study was conducted prior to the main stage of data gathering and analysis. The purpose for the pilot study was to obtain a better understanding of the current situation in Chinese health care institutions with regards to the cohabitation, interaction and sharing of knowledge between TCM and WM practitioners. Specifically, to better understand the nature of the institutional relationships between the two professional groups and the organisational processes that support these relationships.

3.2.3 Data collection and analysis

Seven healthcare professionals and workers were purposively approached and interviewed. These interviewees were two WM doctors (a neurosurgeon, and an orthopaedics doctor), a neurosurgical nurse, two TCM doctors, an ICT manager, and the chief hospital administrator who is also a cardiac surgeon. Data was analysed using open coding, axial coding and constant comparison.

The pilot study also provided unique opportunities to improve the researcher’s skills in conducting semi-structured interviews: in terms of approaching potential participants, selecting the interview environment, engaging in deep conversation, and in seizing opportunities for probing and following-up emerging topics. Processes of approaching and securing access to potential informants were initially
rather frustrating due to very heavy workloads of the informants, cultural aversion to disclose information in interviews and a perceived difference of status between researchers and surgeons. The pilot enabled the consideration of strategies to minimise these problems and ultimately, determined the success of data collection during the main study.

The pilot study not only revealed insights into hospital procedures and communication channels, but also provided significant implications for narrowing of the research focus, sampling, design of the initial interview scripts and generally the design of remainder research stages. Essentially, pilot findings suggested that different departments in the hospital exhibit very different patterns of KS behaviour between the two medical communities. Furthermore, very different levels of integration of complementary treatments take place in different departments. This resulted in the decision to choose one specific department, namely the Department of Neurosurgery. This department has an apparent history of using WM and TCM compound treatments for rehabilitating patients after craniotomies.

3.2.4 Contribution of the pilot study to greater contextual sensitivity

The pilot clearly identified that KS between TCM and WM practitioners is very problematic in Chinese hospitals. Contrary to what happens in Western hospitals, these two medical communities were placed in the same physical institutions and asked to work complementarily by governmental political decision. However, the pilot indicated that the two very distinct groups did not seem to interact harmoniously. This seems to follow a national trend that was later confirmed in the literature review, since the two groups of professionals come from almost entirely different healthcare philosophies.

3.2.5 How the pilot study assisted in the design of later research stages

The pilot has validated the research question and confirmed the research gap that originated the study. The pilot also confirmed the selected case-study as a good platform for conducting the investigation and the researchers were able to secure guaranteed interview access to potential participants. Furthermore, the pilot also enabled the creation of an initial set of categories that guided the next steps of the data collection.

3.3 Adoption of information systems in Omani organisations – the case of customer relationship management in the banking sector

3.3.1 Initial research objectives

The research focus of this inquiry was to investigate perceptions on the threats facing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) use in the Omani banking sector. Initially, the strategy was to conduct this research using a Grounded Theory approach that would study the current strategies of Omani banks in terms of CRM and identify risks associated with its adoption.

3.3.2 Reasons to conduct a pilot study

The objectives of the pilot were to better understand the Omani bank sector and its business environment, namely in what concerned to CRM strategies and systems adopted. The pilot study was devised and conducted in one of the commercial banks in Muscat that agreed to grant access and support to the investigation.

3.3.3 Data collection and analysis

This pilot study revealed an unexpected finding: there was no systematic use of CRM processes, practices and IT systems in the bank. These findings clearly threatened the viability and focus of the entire research project. Therefore, the pilot study was extended to include interviews with top management of the remaining five national commercial banks in Oman. Four of these agreed to participate and eight additional interviews took place. The findings of these interviews confirmed that none of the banks was actually using CRM on a systematic and strategic manner, but all five banks had a firm intention to do so in the near future.

3.3.4 Contribution of the pilot study to greater contextual sensitivity

The pilot study was therefore crucial in understanding the Omani bank sector and business environment and enabled early reaction to undesirable or adverse contextual characteristics.
Additionally, like in all other cases it allowed corrections to research design and supported the designing of subsequent data collection instruments.

3.3.5 How the pilot study assisted in the design of later research stages

Confronted with the absence of systematic CRM processes in the national scenario in Oman, the entire project had to be revised and refocused. Research questions were redrawn around aspects of customer need for CRM and user satisfaction with current service provision. Ultimately, this resulted in a research design based on a mixed-method approach rather than a pure grounded theory approach.

The final design consisted of a triangulation of literature review, in-depth qualitative case study looking at the internal perceptions of CRM in the bank sector and a quantitative customer survey to gauge customer satisfaction with current services and needs for CRM. The qualitative component of this Qual-quant approach, as proposed by Creswell (2003), was implemented by employing some of the grounded theory techniques such as coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation and memoing, but did not follow a full Grounded Theory approach.

3.4 Dynamics of attitudinal alignment, a grounded theory of Portuguese academics’ eLearning perceptions

3.4.1 Initial research objectives

The purpose of this study is to present a grounded theory of Portuguese academics’ perceptions regarding eLearning appropriation through an inquiry of perceived individual and institutional motivators, enablers and barriers.

3.4.2 Reasons to conduct a pilot study

In this case, the pilot aimed at studying and assessing the HE Portuguese context in terms of its perceptions of use and appropriation of eLearning. This was deemed necessary in order to help build a map of associations that would integrate critical enablers that foster a clear and meaningful purpose in using eLearning.

3.4.3 Data collection and analysis

The subject matter itself defined the initial boundaries of a relevant informant sample comprising eLearning experts – seven lecturers, three eLearning administrators and three eLearning strategists, including a former Minister of Science and Higher Education. Moreover, informants were affiliated with Portuguese Higher Education Institutions at different stages of their eLearning strategy implementation: two universities are recognized precursors of eLearning institutional embedding at national level; one university is acknowledged for realizing technology-based spinoffs with the community; and three other universities were chosen for the comparatively less visible dimension of their eLearning embedding planning. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed using open coding, axial coding, constant comparison and memoing.

Results from the pilot study produced formalised categories that the researcher linked and related reflectively. Emergent theoretical constructs extracted from open coding revealed that academics’ appropriation is best achieved when change introduced by eLearning is not vertically imposed by top management structures, but rather when it develops spontaneously through small scale projects, influence of champions, or teachers’ enhanced individual capacity. Furthermore, it became clear that career and reward systems for academics engaged in eLearning suffer from an effort-reward imbalance. The current compensation system in Portuguese HE institutions, does not seem to be designed to foster the scholarship of e-teaching. Finally, trust emerged as an important aspect of eLearning appropriation and seems to be a factor in academics decision making. Trust seems to increase the levels of available information on and transparency of eLearning systems, and by acting as an organising agent, particularly helpful in the management of uncertainty regarding the appropriation of eLearning.
3.4.4 Contribution of the pilot study to greater contextual sensitivity

The purposive sampling strategy adopted in informant selection during the pilot study stage contributed to the discovery of Higher Education teaching communities that manifested high levels of participation in online educational delivery. In terms of theory-building, trust emerged as core aggregating category. The study’s research questions were reformulated in order to explore trust as a catalyst for the use of eLearning by Portuguese academics.

3.4.5 How the pilot study assisted in the design of later research stages

In response to the aforementioned findings discovered during the pilot study stage, the main doctoral research will endeavour to further the inquiry into the trajectories of trust as the main leverage for academics’ appropriation of eLearning. Both micro and macro levels stemming from the pilot study’s findings seem to provide solid grounds for further theoretical development and empirical investigation. Academics’ trust in eLearning systems will be considered in the context of Portuguese Universities as aggregate social systems.

Theoretical sampling efforts will contribute to the identification and recruitment of a theoretically relevant social arena of action, composed of academics affiliated with Faculties where eLearning appropriation issues pertaining to trust and attitudinal alignment manifest themselves in considerable depth. Moreover, studying the community of academics will potentially allow the researcher to examine a specific intra-organisational dynamics (Strauss et al., 1985:158), reinforced by a common professional and occupational world.

4. Discussion

The previous section attempted at demonstrating, through the provision of examples of actual research practice, how contextual knowledge lies in the experience of each organisation, in each artefact, and moreover in the activities, events and conditions that become apparent when the researcher inquires processes pertaining to specific contexts.

Contextual information categories related to each of the research projects explained above address mainly issues of:

- Immediate context - encapsulating essential elements to the understanding and conceptualisation of organisational processes (the actual unfolding development of processes and activities, and applied governing elements that constitute these processes);
- Internal context - covering structural features, formalised methods, repertories of action, communication processes and the relationships of main internal stakeholders;
- Environmental context – including factors that can be attributed to the macro-social setting in which an organisation operates.

Pilot studies can therefore contribute to render such contextual representations suitable to inductive reasoning, as the four-tiered model represented in Fig. 2 illustrates: (1) through the establishment of causes, conditions and relationships between empirical data (which entails pursuing loops that re-centre the researcher in the core aspects of the phenomenon under investigation); (2) through inter-contextual comparison as to infer theoretically relevant information; (3) through the activation of significant functions, roles, actors and operational goals; (4) through the collection and structuring of relevant contextual aspects, facets and attributes.

Carlson and McCaslin (2003:553) also argue in favour of considering contextual constructs in the development of Grounded Theory-based projects. In the absence of what they define as a meta-inquiry, “grounded theory can erroneously create a grand tour question and subsequent main and probing questions from an incomplete perspective”.

The introduction of pilot studies in the design of Grounded Theory research gives investigators important learning opportunities prior to formal research undertakings and helps them recognise the collection of verbal and symbolic assertions that sustain theory development by identifying the conditions under which the variables of a phenomenon are related (Campbell, 1990:65).
Figure 2: Contextual knowledge elicitation with pilot studies for inductive approaches

It is certainly not by that chance that the context sensitivity of empirical research is "receiving greater attention among scholars studying organisational and management practices", as Whetten (2008:29) observes. But organisational behaviour scholars such as Rousseau and Fried (2001) and Johns (2001) have voiced earlier pleas for greater sensitivity to context as a means of adding explanatory value to research. Johns (2001:34), in particular, calls for an appreciation of context as a “helpful counterpoint to the intrapsychic perceptions, cognitions, attributions and dispositions that comprise the core of person-centred theories”. Rousseau and Fried (2001:3), on the other hand, critique the forces working against contextual awareness by misrepresenting the complexity of underlying phenomena, namely the tendency to publish research that focus on de-contextualised individuals or groups as an example of parsimonious research findings.

Strauss and Corbin (1990:127) are not alien to the centrality of context and are advocates of an enhanced understanding of the phenomenological structure sustaining any process or, in their words, of "the circumstances in which problems, issues, happenings or events pertaining to a phenomenon are situated or arise”. Theoretical relevance seems to be enhanced when the researcher and the research design clearly state the interconnectedness of problem, purpose, informants and context.

Pilot studies can contribute to operationalise context as a conceptual construct, immerse in the substance of analyses. They provide the researcher with the necessary reflexivity and awareness of the human ecology that determine what Strauss and Corbin (1990:42) define as “the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and the capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn’t”.

Being aware of the human ecology and having the insight to inscribe events and processes in perspective, the grounded theory researcher should additionally be cogent of issues related to theory credibility. Here too, enhanced contextual sensitivity can contribute in a pragmatic way, and from a very early stage of the process, to credible research findings. The further demonstration of this value, again providing examples of pilot studies’ role is certainly a future research endeavour worth pursuing.

Glaser and Strauss (1967:237) have documented how to establish the credibility of a Grounded Theory project and indicate the inter-related properties of the applicable substantive grounded theory:
(i) it must closely fit the substantive area in which it will be used (fitness); (ii) it must be readily understandable by the stakeholders concerned with the substantive area (understanding); (iii) it must be sufficiently general and flexible to make diverse changing situations understandable (generality); (iv) it must possess controllable concepts of sufficient generality (control).

The properties of fitness, understanding and control seem to be directly connected to the enhanced understanding of the research context brought along by the incorporation of pilot studies in the design of a grounded theory project:

- **Fit**, in the sense of fidelity to the everyday realities of any substantive area and to the principle of theoretical induction from diverse data. Without knowledge of what is actually going on, emergent theories are divorced from the layers of reality and do not quite apply to dealing with them;

- **Understanding**, in the sense that those engaged in the substantive area are able to grasp the emergent theory in terms of their own experiences, based on the researcher’s capacity to create relatable, explanatory constructs.

- **Control**, in the sense that the resulting theory should guide and equip its user with enough theoretical amplitude that is directly applicable to ongoing situational realities. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967)

Without the identification, conceptual understanding and rendering of context through coding and categorisation in a pilot study stage, the unravelling theory would be so underdeveloped as to lack a vital component and thus could be considered to be theoretically unrobust.

This vital component is, in summary, the capacity of any grounded theory’s research findings to “explain the social or psychosocial organization of the people”, namely the findings’ explicit contribution to “identify and conceptualise the basic processes that these people use to solve their problem” (Glaser, 2001:59).

### 5. Conclusion

While recognizing “the art of grounded theory analysis” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), many authors such as Scott and Howell (2008) suggest that a “more specific method for understanding the relationships among the categories seems necessary prior to construction of a Reflective Coding Matrix”. In this line of thought and using the experience of the four research projects discussed above, this paper makes to fundamental propositions, namely the concept of contextual sensitivity and the pilot study as vehicle for its acquisition in the early stages of the project.

Contextual sensitivity is proposed and defined in this paper as the structuring of the inductive analytical process through extending the range of theoretically sensitizing concepts that must be addressed and understood in order to use the context in which participants are situated, within a human activity system, in the creation of grounded theory. The contextual sensitive researcher has the ability to develop themes from research data through segmenting and reassembling data pertaining to context-depending realities – the unfolding development of organisational processes and activities; the repertoires of action and stakeholders’ interactions; the macro-social setting - thus achieving increased depth of analysis. Because of its preoccupation with the identification of contextual features that sustain further stages of theory development, contextual sensitivity works as a initiator to theoretical sensitivity, which involves the researchers having “attributes of insight, the ability to give meaning to the data, and the capacity to (...) separate what is pertinent from that which isn’t” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:41).

Pilot studies using open coding specifically directed at generating contextual sensitivity, may generate focused, partitioned representations of context-dependent realities, opening up locally-circumscribed opportunities of inquiry. Conducting a pilot study is an opportunity to equip researchers with a more articulated view on the internal structure of wider phenomena, preventing them from facing a large monolithic cognitive space with unmanageable possibilities for access and concomitant difficulties in reasoning, synthesis and interpretation.

As demonstrated by the accounts shared above, the use of pilot studies as a context information management tool, implemented in the process of consolidating the research design, acted as *in situ* training for developing and testing the adequacy of data collection and analysis instruments, and as a relevance filter. This latter function proved moreover to help novice researchers defining which
knowledge stocks could be taken into consideration, hence providing a sense of direction in the execution of further research tasks.

Given their contribution to research design risk assessment and to the implementation of risk-reduced strategies in main research projects, this paper recommends the inclusion of pilot studies in Grounded Theory-based research projects.

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Looking for Clues about Quality: A Multilevel Mixed Design on Quality Management in Greek Universities

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Abstract: As methodology, mixed methods (MM) provide a means to facilitate and explain several complex phenomena across various disciplines. Tashakkori and Creswell (2008), identified a nurturing and dynamic intellectual community as one that encourages scholarly debate and intellectual risk-taking as well as developing graduate students as stewards of their disciplines. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe how a multilevel mixed design was applied to a research project designed to investigate the adoption of quality management in Greek universities through the lens of neo-institutional theory. Appropriate research design is a critical choice when performing organizational research, especially when the research lacks previous precedents; thus, this gap in the literature empirically investigated these issues by using MM, which led to a process in design development and compatibility to overcome many challenges. This paper presents part of the methodological and pragmatic rationales that guided the choice to use a multilevel study mixed method design by using both concurrent and sequential data collection at the macro, meso, and micro levels in Greek universities.

Keywords: multilevel mixed design, quality management, higher education, neo-institutional theory

1. Introduction

As a methodology, mixed methods (MM) provide a means to facilitate and explain several complex phenomena across various disciplines. Creswell (2009, p. 106) noted that “the field of mixed methods will continue to expand across disciplines and [throughout the] field”, and he anticipates seeing uniquely combined MM designs in future papers. Additionally, Tashakkori and Creswell (2008, p. 294) argue for the use of MM along with many other scholars (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007; Greene 2007; Johnson and Ownuegbuzie, 2004; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009) thus, in varying degrees, all of them advocate for the empowerment of the next generation of researchers to examine issues and research problems from multiple perspectives. Tashakkori and Creswell (2008) identify a nurturing and dynamic intellectual community as one that encourages scholarly debate and intellectual risk-taking as well as developing graduate students as stewards of their disciplines. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe how a multilevel mixed design was applied to a research project to investigating the adoption of quality management (QM) in Greek universities through the lens of neo-institutional theory. It provides methodological concepts, relating to the theoretical framework of the study, and details that concern the multilevel study mixed method design using both concurrent and sequential data collection at macro, meso, and micro levels in Greek universities. This paper begins with the rationales partly methodological and partly pragmatic (how difficult it is to do research in Greece) that guided the choice of looking the clues about quality by using a multilevel mixed design.

2. Research project overview and pragmatic rationales

Quality management deals with policies, systems and possesses designed and implemented to ensure the maintenance and improvement of quality of organizations including universities. Quality management suggests a transformation process requiring a fundamental shift in management practice and culture. Thematically this study is rooted in organizational and management research on higher education within which QM practices are investigated as an instance of organizational change. Normally, organizational theorists focus on the effects of institutions on organizational structures. Although there are several studies of that type, Sporn (1999, p. 75) stated “because adaptation in universities is a relatively new and pressing phenomenon, there are no standard definition[s] of variables, let alone validated instruments for measuring them” and that has not changed in the ten years between her publication and mine.

Quality management is usually defined as organized activities dedicated to improving and assuring educational quality (adapted from Massy, 2003, p. 159). QM is supposed to systematize a university’s approach to quality instead of leaving it mainly to unmonitored individual initiative. Arguably, attempts to manage quality in universities in a more structured and systematic way emerged first in the context

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of the US higher education system and was partly inspired by models and practices from the business world. Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) point to the use of practices and models for QM that originated in the business world, which was then applied and adapted to higher education in order to improve higher education’s products and processes. Academic research which focuses on the rise of QM in the US contains, however, quite different views about the value of these processes and models. Schwarz and Westerheijden traced quality assurance, as a separate instrument in university management and to government policy, as having started in the 1970s (in the USA) and 1980s (in Europe). This move to adopt QM was followed by industry’s discovery and usage of the new management tool, which mimicked the success of the Japanese economy. Schwarz and Westerheijden interpreted this management tool from a European perspective as both the old isomorphism drive to copy whatever seemed successful in US higher education and the new isomorphism drive to copy whatever seemed successful in industry. Hence, they used the concept of isomorphism, one of the central elements of neo-institutional theory, which has become one of the dominant approaches for explaining how organizations adapt to institutionalized pressures from their environments for changes in business theory. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) stated that in neo-institutional theory, three mechanisms can be identified through which isomorphic change occurs: coercive forces, which stem from political/legal influence and the problem of legitimacy; mimetic forces resulting from standard responses to uncertainty; and normative forces associated with professionalization. Thus, I made use of these organizational insights and used them as mechanisms from neo-institutional theory in order to adequately evaluate specific changes as responses of Greek universities.

Researchers describe universities as organizations with unique characteristics (Baldridge et al. 1977; Dill 1992). Some distinguishing characteristics that affect a university’s decision processes regarding adaptation to change are: goal ambiguity, client service, task complexity, professionalism and administrative values, and environmental vulnerability. However, Johnson et al. (2003), writing about change in the modern university, stated, for example, that vision for change must come from inside the institution, at the department and college levels. They argued that leadership, technology, and academic culture are interconnected dimensions of managing organizational change. They also argued that deans and chairpersons in universities must manage all the above mentioned dimensions concurrently if they are to create systematic change in their organizations. The authors confirmed what Clark (1983) stated earlier: changing higher education from above is very difficult, although there is a lot of bottom-up change.

The present, adopted research design was conducted in Greece. Greece may be an attractive place for a holiday because of its rich history, food and night life, but news around 2005-2006 about its universities seemed dominated by reports about strikes, student marches, protests and similar issues rather than the QM of Greek higher education institutions. Other news regarding quality assurance in higher education could be read in the Greek National Reports published in the framework of the Bologna Process in 2003 and 2005 (Ministry of Education, 2003, 2005). The reports claimed that the framework for operating a national system for quality assurance in higher education was under consultation before the Greek Parliament. This framework, however, only became an active law in 2007. Related news was that the Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency’s for Higher Education website went online in March 2007. In the absence of any national quality performance monitoring system (until 2006) eight of the twenty-one Greek public universities voluntarily had participated in the European University Association- Institutional Evaluation Program (EUA-IEP).

In Greek higher education at least until 2007, QM was in an early and debated stage. The purpose of that study was to examine the adoption or non-adoptions of quality management within the universities in Greece as outcomes of organizational change practices. To study organizational change by using neo-institutional theory in universities is a challenge and especially in Greece, where the environment for conducting empirical social science research has been characterized internationally as notoriously difficult. The hot debate which took place in Greece during the period of the study made it difficult to study quality management directly using only qualitative or quantitative approaches.

That study examined QM at macro, meso and micro levels in Greek universities up to 2007. The reason for drawing a specific time border was that in 2007, the context changed considerably when a new law was adopted regarding quality assurance in higher education, and consequently the national system for quality assurance in higher education made its first public appearance. Thus, that study examined a period during which quality assurance, evaluation, and QM were heavily debated as to...
the meaning for the universities in Greece. As this historical event occurred in Greece, it became a good place to study forces for change and stability as QM was introduced and implemented and led to the problem statement of my study: to identify relationships between the organizational factors for stability and/or change in Greek universities and the universities’ adoption (or lack of adoption) of quality management. For these pragmatic reasons, a sophisticated approach of the study became necessary and a multilevel mixed design was chosen because it was the most appropriate method.

Ultimately, the central concern of that study was to understand the adoption of QM practices (if any) in public universities in Greece through the lens of organizational theory. That study employed some core concepts of neo-institutional theory as applied to QM in organizations. Given that the focus of this paper is not the research itself, but rather, it is the adopted research design that was used to answer the research question of that study. The next sections will address issues to explain why it was necessary to choose a sophisticated approach to investigating QM in Greek universities through the lens of neo-institutional theory.

3. Choosing a sophisticated approach to investigating quality management in Greek universities: Why mixed methods

A mixed methods strategy is defined as: research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in a single study or program of inquiry (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007, p. 4). Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) suggested that a variety of data sources and analyses is needed to understand complex social phenomena or realities thoroughly. In addition, Currall and Towler’s (2003) review suggested that when organizational and management researchers used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate organizational phenomena, their research yielded greater information than could be achieved through single methods. The authors pointed out that MM are considered appropriate when research questions concern process and dynamic phenomena such as innovation and change. Furthermore, Currall and Towler (2003) advocated that quantitative and qualitative research methods are complementary rather than opposed approaches: thus, this combination of techniques can enhance and enrich current knowledge by “filling the gap” that other studies, which only adopt a single approach, are unable to do. Thus, the MM strategy seemed the most appropriate methodology for that study (Johnson and Owuwegbuzie 2004; Tashakkori and Creswell 2007; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998, 2003; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009).

The MM strategy was also chosen for additional reasons. First, the introduction of QM in a higher education system is a complex issue that may appear different at various levels. Each level may need individualized research to fully explore the core theoretical approach that neo-institutionalism contributes to the complete study. Mizruchi and Fein (1999, p. 678) for example, suggested that for organizational analysis, the neo-institutional theory has become a leading perspective. One of the problems that arise in cases where authors stipulate just one type of isomorphism is at work occur when they ignore alternate options that are equally possible. Mizruchi and Fein (1999, p. 678) also claimed when authors assume that only voluntary mimicry accounts for an organization’s behavior, without consideration of alternate explanations, which include coercion, the author(s) might, in effect, provide a limited and biased picture of the processes one is attempting to analyze.

Another reason that guided my choice in methodological matters was related to the heated debate, which took place in Greece during 2005-2006, thus making it difficult to study QM directly. Studying a ‘hot topic’ is already a sensitive and difficult matter in the best of circumstances. But Greece is an environment that is internationally notorious for its difficulty for conducting empirical social science research: accordingly, very low levels of cooperation have to be expected (as also found by Bourantas and Papadakis 1996; Makridakis et al. 1996) while only few empirical studies report good access to the field and high response rates in surveys (e.g. Gotzamani and Tsiotras 2001, Lipovatz et al. 1999, Papadimitriou and Westerheijden 2008).

Those difficulties necessitated a sophisticated approach of the study. As noted by Greene (2008, p. 14), “there has also been some work in the area of integrated mixed methods data analysis, although this work has not yet cohered into a widely accepted framework of set of ideas”. My study attempted to explain the rationale and the purposes for conducting MM analysis by combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, while illuminating the QM phenomenon in three levels and under difficult research circumstances. I argue that this research amalgamation provided a deeper understanding of the study phenomenon (QM) and its relationships with isomorphic pressures: coercive, normative and...
mimetic. My study used several research techniques such as document analysis, surveys and interviews with a variety of respondents (i.e., rectors, department heads, laboratories’ directors and academic support services administrators).

3.1 Multilevel mixed design

Teddlie, and Tashakkori (2009) proposed that “multilevel designs are possible only in hierarchical organized social institutions, such as schools and hospitals, in which one level of analysis is nested with another” (p. 146). Also, the authors pointed out that “the most dynamic and innovative of the MM designs are mixed across stages” (p. 146). The authors argued that typologies of MM designs are “valuable, researchers should not expect them to be exhaustive” (p. 139). Multilevel mixed designs, characterized by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) are “very powerful, they are challenging to conduct due to the complexity of running multiple research strands often simultaneously” (p. 153). Teddlie and Tashakkori, (2009) provided several diagrams in their book; however, they suggested that “multilevel mixed design may be considered specialized designs because only certain types of data are structures in a nested manner with the different levels of analysis” (p. 156). The following section presents the multilevel mixed design that was developed for the purpose of my study.

4. From theory to praxis: Practical considerations in developing a multilevel mixed design

As explained above, taking into account the problem statement, the research questions as well as the circumstances (rationales) of my study, my research intended to use different methods of investigating the QM and synchronously explain its relationships with neo-institutional theory in Greek universities. That study attempted to be explanatory and at the same time it had exploratory elements. For a better understanding, that study involved multiple qualitative and quantitative data (surveys and documents analysis) to converge information in the best way possible and to provide evidence for a variation of QM in an organization. This design involved mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches in three levels (macro, meso, and micro) in an interactive way. Like a scaffold, each empirical study of this research was built on and was designed to harmonize with the other elements. The empirical study took place over a two-year period from 2005 to 2007. However, each empirical study occurred at a specific period. The visual model of the procedures for the multilevel mixed design of this study is depicted in Figure 1.

1st Stage
The raison d’être of the first stage of the model was to include the problem statement and the research questions (RQs) that this study aimed to accomplish.

2nd Stage
The rationale of the second stage was the development of the conceptual framework. Thus, this stage was designed to include the theoretical considerations of that study (quality management, isomorphism, and university characteristics). The first research question was linked to QM and it was approached through a review of quality management in higher education, which included the European University Association-Institutional Evaluation programme (EUA-IEP), the Malcolm Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence (MB), and ISO. In addition, as a pilot test for putting quality management theories into practice and to make it more application-oriented, quality management practices from abroad were also used (two from US universities and one from Europe). The second research question was approached through open system theory, neo-institutional theory, and isomorphism more specifically. From a neo-institutional view, organizations (such as universities) operate in an environment dominated by rules, requirements, understandings, assumptions, beliefs and procedures (scripts) about what constitutes appropriate or acceptable organizational forms and behavior. In addition, to gain a better understanding of isomorphism, I focused on the use of neo-institutional perspectives in empirical studies in organizations as well in studies undertaken in the field of higher education. Furthermore, universities are characterized as complex organizations with many layers; therefore, universities’ characteristics reflect intra-organizational elements of the adoption of quality management. In the case of the Greek universities, due to their state idiom, some characteristics such as their mission and decision-making processes were equal in all universities. The key elements of these characteristics fall into six categories: leadership, vision, age, size, location, and range of studies. This stage ended by presenting the study’s conceptual framework (Figure 2) and the variables enclosed in the conceptual framework, which was operationalized in this stage as well.
Figure 1: Visual model of the procedures for the multilevel mixed design
Figure 2: Study's conceptual framework

3rd Stage
When studying QM it is important to consider that there are differences between countries. Other difficulties arise when introducing QM because the complexity of higher education requires individual analysis of unique and multiple levels within the structure of Greek universities. Since each these different levels should probably be researched separately, the core theoretical approach of neo-institutionalism contributes to realizing that need. Thus, this stage which related to the empirical studies of the entire project was divided into three levels (macro, meso, and micro) for better understanding.

Macro level
The macro level was understood to include issues related to the elements of the external and internal environment in which Greek universities operate. As a preliminary to the actual empirical studies, the entire project contained a ‘quick scan’ of the environment derived from documents and observations. The first empirical study (A) was directed at how the printed media addressed quality management in higher education during a peak period of the debate in 2005. This included a quantitative and qualitative (QUAN+QUAL) content analysis with mixed analysis of data for this particular study’s inference. The study was based on content analysis of newspaper inputs from May 2005. This analysis considered whether articles in newspapers were for or against the introduction of quality assurance and which reasons were given for the stated points of view, interpreted in terms of coercive, mimetic, or normative pressure. Results from the ‘scan’ of the external environment and the media study (A) were intended as the “cultural knowledge” to give fuller understanding of the study’s observed phenomenon and they became a valuable asset in the process of making inferences (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Thus, the macro level “reflects the researcher’s prior understanding of a phenomenon under study” and provided answers to the RQ3 (macro level). In terms of Teddlie and Tashakkori’s (2009) definition of purposive sampling techniques, this study used “sampling of [a] politically important case”, which “is a special or unique case that involves selecting politically significant or sensitive cases for study” (p. 175).

Meso level
Taking into consideration inferences from the macro level and the potentially difficult circumstances that this researcher could face while interviewing and surveying individuals, the author decided to schedule the meso level in this way to investigating QM and isomorphism by using document analysis. At the same time, a survey study was employed for better understanding. Here, two studies (B and C) aimed to fully understand the phenomenon at the university level (meso) by using documents and leaders’ experiences and perceptions.

The first empirical study (B) in the meso level was a concurrent qualitative (QUAL) content analysis where the main data were derived from the eight EUA-IEP evaluators’ reports. The EUA-IEP was perceived as a key event concerning isomorphism and QM within universities in Greece. Fetterman
(1998, p. 100) noted that “key events are extraordinary useful for analysis”, because they shed light on mechanisms and processes that otherwise remain hidden in a routine examination. I began this research with the expectation that reports would explore the three categories of themes highlighted in the conceptual framework of this study, (i.e. isomorphic pressures, university characteristics, and quality management). The data were analyzed by hand using qualitative content analysis procedures. Each report was analyzed against the three categories of themes.

The second empirical study at this level was focused on understanding how leaders (rectors and vice-rectors) in Greek universities perceived the environmental pressures and to what extent they adopted quality management in order to improve their universities’ performances (C). The questionnaire I used was based on the Malcolm Baldrige Award Criteria for Performance Excellence (2005 version), to collect data on quality management and isomorphism. Questionnaires were sent to all rectors and vice-rectors in all Greek universities. The MB criteria enabled me on the one hand to study university leaders’ perceptions of quality management, while on the other hand, to understand the extent to which it was being implemented at the meso level. Besides, this instrument facilitated an understanding of the leaders’ perspectives with regard to criteria for performance improvement in relation to neo-institutional pressures. This study was planned as a sequential quantitative and qualitative (QUAN+QUAL) study; however, I was unable to complete the second qualitative (QUAL) part of this study, as most participants were unwilling to participate in the second phase of the study. Therefore, the final design of this study was a concurrent quantitative (QUAN). The quantitative overall results were integrated in the final 4th stage by using MM analysis (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2007). Questionnaires were sent to all rectors and vice-rectors in all Greek universities.

**Micro Level**

In an effort to build a deeper understanding of the study of phenomenon at the micro level, I incorporated another two empirical studies (D and E). The first one (D) was a concurrent quantitative and qualitative (QUAN+QUAL) survey and included department heads' perceptions and concerns about QM, such as quality assurance systems. To study the isomorphic pressures that 266 department heads in Greek universities experienced in deciding whether to adopt QM practices I employed an electronic survey largely modeled on the questionnaire by Ursin (2007, personal communication). In Finland, he carried out a survey to find out how quality assurance systems are understood by the academic unit heads. My research was conducted in 2007 when the law concerning quality assurance in Greece was active. That research was able to provide a different angle for the study of phenomenon for both levels (meso and micro) and was designed in that way for triangulation purposes. Questionnaires were sent to all department heads.

ISO provides a framework for QM in organizations. The final empirical study (E) at the micro level was a qualitative (QUAL) study. It was developed to present the extent of use of the ISO at the laboratories and academic support services in universities and simultaneously to examine isomorphic pressures that might influence the adoption of this particular QM practice. In that study, I included all available ISO cases in all Greek universities and interviews with directors. The inferences of these two studies (D and E) were also integrated into the final 4th stage.

**4th Stage**

As noted in Teddlie and Tashakkori’s (2009) view, as well as others, the most important step in any mixed method study is “when the results from the study’s QUAL and QUAN strands are incorporated into a coherent conceptual framework that provides an effective answer to the research question”. Consequently, the final stage of this study was related to the integration process of the overall study. In order to answer the third research question, I presented the results by grouping the findings by detailing the corresponding qualitative and quantitative questions related to the explored factors influencing the adoption (if any) of QM in Greek universities.

During the analysis process in each of the empirical studies, I followed Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie’s (2003) suggestions. In quantitative (QUAN) studies, I used data reduction techniques computation of descriptive statistics. In qualitative (QUAL) Miles and Huberman’s (1994) and Creswell’s (1994), I followed their suggestions. In addition, I analyzed quantitative data qualitatively and vice versa. I also used a “construction technique” which helped to identify isomorphism and adoption of QM in different levels.
Answers to RQ3 were provided from multiple viewpoints (angles). Inferences from 3rd stage did not measure the quality management directly but provided a blend of pragmatism up until 2007. These approaches link to the documented QM practices, and derived from rectors/vice-rectors and deans from the same university (empirical B and partly C). The empirical study of EUA-IEP and ISO (empirical D and E) are linked with documented QM. In addition, inferences from empirical studies C and D were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2004; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003; Wang et al. 2007) in order to give readers a different viewpoint of the adoption of QM and isomorphism.

In the integration stage, I took into consideration inferences from empirical study B to triangulate the data provided by rectors (empirical study C) and deans (empirical study D) derived from the same university. Another view in integration was to examine if there was any evidence of universities using quality management, such as EUA-IEP (empirical study C) and ISO (empirical study E). The final step was to verify if the empirical evidence coincided with the theoretical lenses—whether the neo-institutional perspective adopted for this study related to the answer of the fourth RQ. Additionally, the 4th stage was designed to include a section on “the future challenges and changes in Greek higher education”, which aimed to provide the latest considerations of the study phenomenon and concluded with recommendations for future avenues of QM research in Greek higher education.

5. Conclusion

Proper research design is a critical aspect of organizational research, especially when the research takes place for the first time. The present research design was an authentic multilevel mixed design which was able to investigate QM and isomorphism in Greek universities. Adoption of QM reflects a complex change process, where data collection and analysis from different levels provides a better understanding. Additionally, when the QM is related to a policy such as quality assurance, outcomes of this research could have valuable answers and insights into why this practice, as a policy, fails and what needs to change in order to have full implementation; in other words, this design could be used in order to evaluate policy implementation as well. Thus, investigation requires a deep and cogent understanding of QM in any organization under study, which in my case was Greek Universities.

MM research is time consuming and incorporates methodologies that require one to overcome many challenges. Implementation of this design was time consuming and difficult, as might be expected, but there were foreknown challenges associated with using it.

Considering that few publications appeared to cover these issues empirically, I provided some of the process that I used to overcome those challenges. I argue that documents related to the study of the phenomenon are always a very useful source for analysis. Therefore, future researchers facing similar problems such as a low response rate from people who they initially targeted as prime subjects, but who refused to participate in the research, might find it helpful to look for other related issues/events that might give indirect explanations about their study of the phenomenon from perhaps geo-political, socio-economic, socio-cultural conditions, which might drive the decisions that affect the response rate. In organizational research like adoption of quality management, an environmental scanning always is a good source to start a research project. Also, debatable issues could be found in media such as newspapers and transcript of television new casts, where researchers might find indirect explanations for their studies.

Decisions made in QM research are always in need of special attention by all researchers who decide to study any organization. Additionally, special attention must be directed at how powerful the organization’s leader is, especially in nonprofit organizations. Another issue to consider in an investigation should be in regards to the process of the decision-making within the organization.

Challenges that relate to the presentation of the project need particular attention, especially when individual empirical studies are presented without a full disclosure of the research methodology. For instance, in my project’s operationalization section, I mentioned only once the methodological issues about surveys, content analysis, and interviews. In each empirical study, I concluded with research results, but the overall inference appeared in the section that I called “Integrations and Reflections” and where I used a construction technique for QM dimensions and isomorphic pressure, which then allowed me to make inferences for the overall project, and where inferences were provided at each level.
I argue that the success of this endeavor was enhanced because I had considerable mentorship support and understanding in carrying out a dissertation thesis in a way that was more integrated research mentorship and support. They noted that this goal is only possible if the mentorship (the community of scholars and scholar-practitioners) “provide an open, diverse, and dynamic culture of enquiry” (p. 291).

The study investigated the adoption of QM in Greek higher education through the lens of neo-institutional theory. The implication of this empirical study lies in the fact that no existing studies have investigated the adoption of QM in Greek universities at the different levels. Further research should pay special attention to QM and the various organizational relationships, both external and internal while at the same time utilize neo-institutional theory along with MM design when approaching the relatively uncharted Greek higher education because a MM strategy poses multiple challenges. From a methodological point of view, I would like to characterize this practice not just as “good practices” but as a “good process” because it merges multiple approaches and processes as well as providing a design in which researchers can begin further inquiry into understanding the complex organizational change at different levels within organizations and especially within the universities.

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References


The Application of Mixed Methods in Organisational Research: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Mixed methods research (the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods in the same study) is becoming an increasingly popular approach in the discipline fields of sociology, psychology, education and health sciences. Calls for the integration of quantitative and qualitative research methods have been advanced in these fields. A key feature of mixed methods research is its methodological pluralism, which frequently results in research which provides broader perspectives than those offered by monomethod designs. The overall purpose and central premise of mixed methods is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems and complex phenomena than either approach alone. Despite calls for the combined use of quantitative and qualitative research in business and management studies, the use of mixed methods in business and management has seldom been studied. The purpose of this paper is to review the application of mixed methods research within organisational research. The study reported in this paper identifies the use of mixed methods in three organisational journals for the period 2003 to 2009: the Strategic Management Journal, Journal of Organizational Behavior and Organizational Research Methods. The landmark Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research, played a pivotal role in providing both the visibility and credibility of mixed methods as a third methodological movement and since the publication of this seminal work the mixed methods movement has rapidly gained popularity. Business and management researchers need to be made aware of the growing use and acceptance of mixed methods research across business and organisational journals. This paper examines the main characteristics of mixed methods studies identified in the sample in terms of purposes and designs, and posits suggestions on the application of mixed methodologies.

Keywords: mixed methods research, strategic management, organizational behaviour, quantitative methods, qualitative methods

1. Introduction

Mixed methods research (the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods in the same study) is becoming an increasingly popular approach in the discipline fields of sociology, psychology, education and health sciences. Calls for the integration of quantitative and qualitative research methods have been advanced in these fields (Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989; O’Cathain, 2009; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). The overall purpose and central premise of mixed methods is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination may provide a better understanding of research problems and complex phenomena than either approach alone (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007).

Despite calls for the combined use of quantitative and qualitative research in management and organisational studies (Currall and Towler, 2003), the use of mixed methods in business and management has seldom been studied. The present study focuses on two main areas that represent micro and macro management research domains: organizational behavior and organizational strategy. These areas are the two largest divisions within the Academy of Management. Regarding research methods, scholars in both fields employ qualitative and quantitative methods, but the use of quantitative approaches dominate both strategy (Phelan, Ferreira and Salvador, 2002) and organizational behavior (Greenberg, 2007). Calls for methodological diversity and the use and integration of quantitative and qualitative research methods have been carried out in organizational behavior (Greenberg, 2007) and in strategy (Boyd, Gove and Hitt, 2005). Moreover, mixed methods research may play an important role not only in encouraging the use of a diversity of methods in these fields but also in bridging the micro and macro domains.

The purpose of this paper is to review the application of mixed methods research within organisational and management research. The study reported in this paper identifies the use of mixed methods in the leading journals in these two organisational fields: the Strategic Management Journal (SMJ) and the Journal of Organizational Behavior (JOB). In addition, Organizational Research Methods (ORM) is

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also examined. Management and organisational researchers need to be made aware of the growing use and acceptance of mixed methods research within these fields. This paper examines the main characteristics of mixed methods studies (purposes and designs) and posits suggestions on the application of mixed methodologies.

The paper is organised as follows. First, several important aspects of mixed methods research are examined (definitions, applications, barriers and benefits). Subsequently, the methodology employed, including the sample selection and search strategies for identifying the mixed methods studies, is described. This is followed by a discussion of the main characteristics of the articles that have been identified as mixed methods studies. The paper concludes with suggestions on the application of mixed methods research in management and possible future research directions.

2. Mixed methods research

2.1 Definition

A monomethod study uses only one type of method, one quantitative or one qualitative. In general, in a quantitative study, the data is in numerical form and this information is analyzed using quantitative data analysis techniques. In a qualitative study, the information, which is mainly in textual form, is analyzed employing qualitative data analysis techniques. Drawing an initial distinction between monomethod research and multiple methods research may be helpful to determine what is understood as 'mixed methods'. A multiple methods study uses more than one method. Moreover, a differentiation can be made within multiple method designs between multimethod research (multiple qualitative or quantitative methods) and mixed methods research (integration of quantitative and qualitative methods) (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007).

Several definitions exist for mixed methods research. Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989) defined mixed methods research designs as those that include at least one quantitative method (designed to collect numbers) and one qualitative method (designed to collect words). Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) refer to mixed methods studies as those that combine the qualitative and quantitative approaches into the research methodology of a single study. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) indicated that mixed methods research is the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study. In this paper, the following definition supplied by Plano Clark (2005) is applied in this study: mixed methods research is research that combines qualitative and quantitative data collection and data analysis within a single study.

2.2 Is the application of mixed methods research possible?

Several debates or “wars” (Datta, 1994) have raged in the social sciences regarding the superiority of one or the other of the two major social science paradigms: the positivist approach and the constructivist orientation. Along with superiority, another important aspect examined in those debates has been the idea of incommensurability and incompatibility, which means that qualitative and quantitative approaches could/should not be used in the context of the same study. This idea is based on the fact that there are quite different epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin different paradigms and methods. The organising idea of a continuum, with hard positivism at one end and constructionism at the other, can be used to point out the main epistemological and ontological assumptions. A hard positivism ontology asserts that an objective reality is out there to be found and epistemologically this can be done with knowable degrees of certainty using objectively-correct scientific methods (Long, White, Friedman and Brazale, 2000). The result is certain knowledge, and concepts such as reliability, validity and statistical significance are used carefully in good hard-positivist research with the purpose of describing some part of reality with certainty. A softer version of positivism also infers that objective reality exists, but epistemologically suggests that techniques to uncover the world produce probabilistic and ultimately uncertain understandings. Constructionism has a relativist ontology, that is, each person has his or her own reality. Epistemologically, the achievement of objectivity is rejected, and emphasis is placed on individual understanding of particular viewpoints.

The positivist paradigm underlies what are called quantitative methods, while the constructivist paradigm is more related to qualitative methods (Howe, 1988). Therefore, the debate between these paradigms has also been called the qualitative-quantitative debate (Reichardt and Rallis, 1994). In
this debate, many purist researchers were very stringent not only in their defense of their own methodological positions but also in their attack on the position of the “other side”. Both sets of purists view their paradigms as the ideal for research, and, implicitly if not explicitly, they advocate the incompatibility thesis (Howe, 1988), which posits that qualitative and quantitative research paradigms cannot and should not be mixed, and then compatibility between quantitative and qualitative methods is impossible due to the incompatibility of the paradigms underlying the methods. This led to a dichotomy between these two paradigms and between these two general groups of methods. From this paradigmatic viewpoint, to accept the combination and mix of different approaches and methods is misleading as these methodologies are derived from fundamentally different epistemological positions and are therefore incommensurable.

However, there have been numerous calls and attempts in the social sciences to make peace between the two major paradigmatic positions. “Pacifists” have appeared who state that qualitative and quantitative methods are compatible. Reichardt and Cook (1979) countered the incompatibility thesis based on the paradigm-method fit by suggesting that different philosophical paradigms and methods are compatible. Moreover, these authors argued that paradigms and methods are not inherently linked. Mir and Watson (2000) pointed out that a researcher who is anchored in constructivist methodology may employ a variety of methods including statistical analysis, just as a researcher employing a realist methodology may use qualitative research. Thus, research methods are more independent of epistemological and ontological assumptions than is sometimes supposed (Bryman and Bell, 2007). In addition, some researchers try to find philosophical assumptions that form the foundation for conducting mixed methods research. From this point of view, it can be pointed out two positions: the use of multiple worldviews and the use of a single paradigm or worldview (Creswell and Creswell, 2005). Regarding the first position, Greene and Caracelli (1997) advance a “dialectical” perspective in which researchers use multiple worldviews. This perspective maintains that mixed methods research may be viewed strictly as a “method”, thus allowing researchers to use any number of philosophical foundations for its justification and use. The second position is related to the best paradigm issue. The key question is what philosophical paradigm is the best foundation for mixed methods research. Many authors advocate for a pragmatism worldview for mixed methods (Cherryholmes, 1992). Pragmatism advances multiple pluralistic approaches to knowing, using “what works”, a focus on the research questions as important with all types of methods to follow to answer the questions, and a rejection of a forced choice between postpositivism and constructivism. Thus, a major tenet of pragmatism is that quantitative and qualitative methods are compatible.

2.3 Barriers and benefits of mixed methods research

Mixed methods research is not intrinsically superior to research that relies on a single method. An important consideration prior to designing and conducting a mixed methods study is whether mixed methods, as compared to monomethod designs, best addresses the research problem and the research question(s).

Moreover, there are important barriers to conducting a mixed methods study. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) pointed out that conducting mixed methods research is not easy. Mixed methods studies are a challenge because they are perceived as requiring more work and financial resources, and they take more time. Increased time demands arise from the time it takes to implement both aspects of the study (Niglas, 2004). In addition, mixed methods research also requires that researchers develop a broader set of skills that span both the quantitative and the qualitative. Another barrier is related to the challenges of publishing mixed methods studies (Plano Clark, 2005; Bryman, 2007). The challenges generally arise from existing constraints such as word and page limits in journals.

In spite of these barriers, mixed methods research is carried out and published. Several authors have examined the utility and advantages of this approach. Regarding the main benefits, the overall purpose and central premise of mixed methods studies is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination may provide a better understanding of research problems and complex phenomena than either approach alone (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Better understanding can be obtained, for example, by triangulating one set of results with another and thereby enhancing the validity of inferences. In fact, the concept of triangulation of methods was the intellectual wedge that eventually broke the methodological hegemony of the monomethod purists (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Jick (1979) discussed triangulation in terms of the weaknesses of one method being offset by the strengths of another. It is often stressed that different methods have different weaknesses and strengths, and therefore the main effect that triangulation can offer is to overcome the weaknesses of
any single method. Thus, if we use several different methods for investigating the phenomenon of our interest, and the results provide mutual confirmation, we can be more confident that our results are valid (Niglas, 2004).

Other purposes, reasons or rationales for combining qualitative and quantitative methods can also be pointed out. These purposes may be considered as benefits and advantages of mixed methods research. Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989) stated four additional purposes along with triangulation: complementarity (seeking elaboration, illustration, enhancement, and clarification of the results from one method with the findings from the other method), development (when the researcher uses the results from one method to help develop or inform the use of the other method), initiation (discovering paradoxes and contradictions that lead to the research questions being reframed), and expansion (seeking to extend the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components).

With respect to these main purposes, other authors indicated a wider range of reasons. For example, Collins, Onwuegbuzie and Sutton (2006) provided a comprehensive list of reasons or purposes for conducting mixed methods research, and each of these purposes was grouped under one of the four main rationales: participant enrichment, instrument fidelity, treatment integrity, and significance enhancement. Bryman and Bell (2007) also presented a variety of purposes in mixed methods research: triangulation, qualitative research facilitates quantitative research, quantitative research facilitates qualitative research, analysis of static and processual features, qualitative research may facilitate the interpretation of the relationship between the variables, and analysis of different aspects of a phenomenon.

2.4 The application of mixed methods research

Two main factors that help researchers to design and conduct a mixed methods study are implementation of data collection and priority (Morse 1991; Morgan 1998; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998; Creswell 2003). Implementation of data collection refers to the sequence that the researcher uses to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The options consist of gathering the information at the same time (concurrent, simultaneous or parallel design) or introducing the information in phases (sequential or two-phase design). By concurrently gathering both the forms of data, the researcher seeks to compare them with the search for congruent findings. When the data are introduced in phases, either the qualitative or the quantitative approach may be gathered first, but the sequence relates to the objectives being sought by the researcher. Thus, when qualitative data collection precedes the quantitative data collection, the intent is to first explore the problem under study and then follow up on this exploration with quantitative data that are amenable to studying a large sample so that results might be inferred to a population. Alternatively, when quantitative data precede the qualitative data, the intent is to test the variables with a large sample and then carry out a more in-depth exploration of a few cases during the qualitative phase.

Regarding priority, mixed methods researchers can give equal priority to both quantitative and qualitative research, or emphasize more on qualitative or quantitative parts. This emphasis may result from research questions, practical constraints for data collection, the need to understand one form of data before proceeding to the next or the audience preference. Mixed methods designs can therefore be divided into equivalent status designs (the researcher conducts the study using both the quantitative and qualitative approaches equally to understand the phenomenon under study) and dominant-less dominant studies or nested designs (the researcher conducts the study within a single dominant paradigm with a small component of the overall study drawn from an alternative design).

These two dimensions and their possible combinations can lead to the establishment of several designs which are represented using the notation proposed by Morse (1991). In her system, the main or dominant method appears in capital letters (QUAN, QUAL) whereas the complementary method is given in lowercase letters (quan, qual). The notation “+” is used to indicate a simultaneous design, and the arrow “→” stands for sequential design. Thus, the following four groups and nine types of mixed methods designs can exist using these two dimensions (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004):

- I- Equivalent status/simultaneous design: QUAL+QUAN.
- II- Equivalent status/sequential designs: QUAL→QUAN; QUAN→QUAL.
- III- Dominant/simultaneous designs: QUAL+quan; QUAN+qual.
IV- Dominant/sequential designs: qual→QUAN; QUAL→quan; quan→QUAL; QUAN→qual.

3. Methods

A review of the use of mixed methods in the SMJ, JOB and ORM over a seven year period (2003-2009) was carried out. The beginning of this time period aligns with the publication of two very important works signifying the growing emergence of mixed methods as a methodological movement in its own right. In 2003 Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (2003) landmark Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research was published, which played a pivotal role in providing both visibility and credibility to the field of mixed methods. In the same year, Creswell’s seminal book on research design across the three approaches (qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods) was also published (Creswell, 2003). This time period is recent, giving us the opportunity to see how research designs are applied in current settings. Moreover, the time period spans seven years, providing a long enough interval representing research within these fields.

An important aspect related to identification and prevalence of mixed methods articles is the search strategy used. In this study, we have utilised two main search strategies: an electronic online word search and a manual search. The rationale behind this decision was to investigate the use of mixed methods terminology and nomenclature within the empirical studies employing a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003, p. 8) state that ‘the development of a nomenclature that is distinctly associated with mixed methods is both extremely important and overdue’.

The online searches were conducted through the SMJ and JOB website (Wiley InterScience database) and the ORM journal website (SAGE publishing). This electronic search strategy utilised the following phrases: “mixed methods”, “mixed method”, “multi-methods” and “multi-method”. The searches were filtered for the following sections of the articles: title; abstract; keywords and; full text for ORM and for the SMJ and JOB the searches were through the following sections: title; keywords and; abstract/full text. Each article identified in the searches was checked to determine what context the search words were being utilised for (e.g., the application of a mixed methods research design; book review; description of other studies being discussed, methodological discussion).

In addition, a manual search was used for the SMJ and JOB. Thus, all articles published in SMJ (n=498) and JOB (n=373) from 2003 to 2009 were read and reviewed. Bryman (2006) points out that the electronic search strategy may provide a biased sample of mixed methods studies in the sense that by no means all authors of articles reporting mixed methods research foreground the fact that the findings reported derive from a combination of quantitative and qualitative research, or do not do so in terms of the key words that drove the online search strategy. Moreover, apart from identifying mixed methods studies, the manual search strategy can be used to classify the articles in two main groups, non-empirical and empirical articles, and, additionally, the group of empirical studies can be further divided into three types: quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods articles.

A sequential mixed methods study with two stages was undertaken to identify mixed methods articles and determine their main characteristics. In the first phase, a qualitative stage was used in the manual search strategy for the purpose of determining whether each article represented a non-empirical, quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods study. This content analysis involved using all information presented in each article (title, abstract, keywords, introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion and conclusions). This initial data collection created individual tables by journal and by year, listing the journal title, year, volume and issue number, number of total articles, number of non-empirical articles, number of quantitative articles, number of qualitative articles and number of mixed methods articles. These tables were aggregated across journals. In addition, the mixed methods articles identified were re-examined through a content analysis and coded according to two main dimensions: priority (equal or dominant status of the quantitative and qualitative parts) and implementation of data collection (simultaneous or sequential). The main mixed methods purposes were also determined. In the second phase, descriptive statistics were used for the quantitative analysis for prevalence, providing numbers, sums and percentages by type of article (non-empirical, quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods articles) and by journal. In addition, regarding the mixed methods articles, numbers and percentages by type of priority (equal or dominant status), type of implementation (simultaneous or sequential) and purpose were also provided.
4. Results

4.1 Strategic Management Journal

The electronic search utilising the “mixed method(s)” and “multi-method(s)” phrases identified 10 articles in the SMJ for 2003-2009. Upon closer examination, 9 of the SMJ identified articles were classified as QUAN studies and 1 was conceptual. Therefore, this electronic search strategy did not identify any empirical mixed methods studies.

Through the manual search, the 498 articles published were read. Table 1 shows the prevalence frequencies of each type of article by year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of articles</th>
<th>Total number of non-empirical articles</th>
<th>Total number of empirical articles</th>
<th>Number of quantitative articles</th>
<th>Number of qualitative articles</th>
<th>Number of mixed articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in Table 1, the SMJ is dominated by quantitative articles (365 articles, 73.3%) The second type of article in importance is non-empirical articles (53 articles, 10.6%), and the number of mixed methods studies (64 articles, 12.9%) is higher than the number of qualitative articles (16 studies, 3.2%).

One way to organise and describe the 64 mixed methods articles published in the SMJ is to examine the designs and the purposes of these studies. Through a content analysis, identification of the main characteristics of the mixed methods articles published in the SMJ has been carried out (see Table 2). The most common purpose was development (82.8%), followed by complementarity (9.4%), expansion (4.7%) and triangulation (3.1%). Regarding implementation of data collection, sequential implementation was the most common implementation pattern used in the mixed methods articles published in the SMJ (61 articles, 95.3%). In these sequential articles, the first part in most studies was the qualitative one (54 studies). Finally, the most common type of priority was different priority of the quantitative and qualitative parts (53 articles, 82.8%). Moreover, in these 53 articles, the dominant part was the quantitative one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purposes</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>2 (3.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complementarity</td>
<td>6 (9.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>53 (82.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion</td>
<td>3 (4.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simultaneous</td>
<td>3 (4.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequential</td>
<td>61 (95.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equivalent status</td>
<td>11 (17.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>53 (82.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, the typical mixed methods article in the SMJ is a qual→QUAN study where the main mixed methods purpose is development (see for example Ethiraj, Kale, Krishnan and Singh, 2005). Several aspects of the quantitative part may be improved through the use of a previous qualitative phase. Thus, the qualitative part may help to develop or extend theory, identify the industry-specific
resources and competences as well as the dependent variables and/or improve the measurement instrument of the quantitative phase.

4.2 Journal of Organizational Behavior

In this case, the online search utilising the “mixed method(s)” and “multi-method(s)” phrases identified 13 articles in the JOB for 2003-2009. However, upon closer examination, 10 of the 13 articles were quantitative studies, 2 conceptual and 1 was considered to be a mixed methods study (Challiol and Mignonac, 2005).

Using the manual search which involved reading all the articles published in the JOB from 2003 to 2009 (373 articles), 20 mixed methods studies were identified (5.4%). Table 3 shows the number of articles classified by article type and year. As is the case with the SMJ, the JOB is also dominated by quantitative articles (235 articles, 63%) followed by non-empirical articles (101 articles, 27.1%). Moreover, the number of mixed methods studies is also higher than the number of qualitative articles (17 studies, 4.5%).

Table 3: Types of articles in the Journal of Organizational Behaviour (2003-2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of articles</th>
<th>Number of non-empirical articles</th>
<th>Empirical articles</th>
<th>Number of quantitative articles</th>
<th>Number of qualitative articles</th>
<th>Number of mixed articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to determine the characteristics of the 20 mixed methods studies, a content analysis was undertaken. Table 4 shows these characteristics with regard to purposes, implementation and priority. In the JOB, the most common purpose was development (45%), followed by complementarity (35%), triangulation (15%) and expansion (5%). Sequential implementation was the most common implementation pattern used in the mixed methods articles identified (15 articles, 75%). In these 15 sequential articles, the first part in most studies was the qualitative one (9 studies). Finally, the most common type of priority was different priority of the quantitative and qualitative parts (12 articles, 60%). Moreover, in these 12 articles, the dominant part was the quantitative one.

Table 4: Characteristics of mixed methods studies in Journal of Organizational Behavior (2003-2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purposes</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complementarity</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>9 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implementation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simultaneous</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequential</td>
<td>15 (75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equivalent status</td>
<td>8 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>12 (60%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Organizational Research Methods

As stated earlier, in the case of ORM we conducted the electronic search and not the manual search. The online search identified 8 documents, which includes a book reviews and a methodological paper that made mention of mixed methods as a methodology within their respective discussions. Only two articles may be considered as mixed methods empirical studies: Yauch and Steudel (2003) and Pratt (2008).
For example, Yauch and Steudel (2003) is an exemplar of QUAL+quan design. These authors analyzed an important intangible resource, specifically the organizational cultures of two small manufacturers using qualitative and quantitative data. The article described not only how qualitative and quantitative data contributed to the validity of the results through triangulation but also how the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms were used in a complementary fashion to produce a more complete understanding of the organizational cultures. Using methods from both research paradigms enabled a greater understanding of cultural artefacts and behaviors but more important of the underlying cultural values and assumptions. A prospective exploratory case study approach was used to examine the impact of organizational culture on the cellular manufacturing conversion process. The ultimate goal of the research was to identify key cultural factors that had a positive or negative impact on the process of converting from a traditional functional manufacturing system to cellular manufacturing. Cultural assessment of the organizational values, assumptions, and behavioral norms was accomplished through qualitative and quantitative means. Qualitative assessment of culture was accomplished through document review, participant observation and group interviews. The Organizational Culture Inventory, a cultural assessment survey, was used as an additional measure of organizational culture at each company. This study relied most heavily on qualitative data but supplemented it with quantitative survey results.

The different results from the two search strategies brings to light not only the use of mixed methods research in the sample but a strong indication that commonly used mixed methods terminology and nomenclature emerging from the mixed methods movement is not being utilised in these studies.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Creswell and Tashakkori (2007) pointed out that the literature base about mixed methods research may not be well known to individuals in specific fields. To check this issue, the references sections of the mixed methods articles identified were reviewed. Despite the availability of mixed-methods-related books, book chapters and journal articles, studies about this type of research have seldom been found in the references sections of these mixed methods studies. On this evidence it seems likely that the advantages, possibilities, purposes, designs and potential of mixed methods research may be unknown to researchers in these fields. Put differently, mixed methods research is used in organisational and management studies but it may be completely unknown and without recognition that mixed methods research constitutes a specific approach to research. Therefore, although mixed methods research is used in these business fields, these mixed methods studies may not exploit the full potential for mixing methods and researchers are probably not maximizing the extent to which they are using this approach.

Some authors provide guidelines about how to carry out a mixed methods research. Creswell (1999) offers nine steps in conducting a mixed methods study:

- Determine if a mixed methods study is needed to study the problem.
- Consider whether a mixed methods study is feasible.
- Write both qualitative and quantitative research questions.
- Review and decide on the types of data collection.
- Assess the relative weight and implementation strategy for each method.
- Present a visual model.
- Determine how the data will be analysed.
- Assess the criteria for evaluating the study.
- Develop a plan for the study.

Similarly, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006) provide a seven step process for researchers selecting the best design for their projects:

- The researcher must first determine if his/her research question require a monomethod or mixed methods design.
- The researcher should be aware that are a number of different typologies of mixed methods research designs and should know how to access details regarding them.
The researcher wants to select the best mixed methods design for his/her particular study and assumes that one of the published typologies includes the right design for the project.

Typologies may be differentiated by the criteria that are used to distinguish among the research designs within them, and the researcher needs to know those criteria.

These criteria should be listed by the researcher, who may then select the criteria that are most important for the particular study he/she is designing.

The researcher then applies the selected criteria to potential designs, ultimately selecting the best research design.

In some cases, the researcher may have to develop a new mixed methods design, because no one best design exists for his/her research project. Regarding the last step, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006) point out that mixed methods designs have an opportunistic nature. Thus, in many cases, a mixed methods research study may have a predetermined research design, but new components of the design may evolve as researchers follow up on leads that develop as data are collected and analysed. The point is for the researcher to be creative and not be limited by the existing designs.

Hanson, Creswell, Plano Clark, Petska and Creswell (2005) offer some recommendations for designing, implementing, and reporting a mixed methods study. Thus, they recommend that researchers attend closely to design and implementation issues, particularly to how and when data are collected (e.g., concurrently or sequentially). The study’s purpose plays an important role here. They also recommend that researchers familiarize themselves with the analysis and integration strategies used in the published mixed methods studies. Moreover, because mixed methods studies require a working knowledge and understanding of both quantitative and qualitative methods, and because they involve multiple stages of data collection and analysis that frequently extend over long periods of time, they recommend that researchers work in teams. Moreover, in preparing a mixed methods manuscript, they recommend that researchers use the phrase “mixed methods” in the titles of their studies, and that, early on, researchers foreshadow the logic and progression of their studies by stating the study’s purpose and research questions in the introduction. Clear, well written purpose statements and research questions that specify the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study help focus the manuscript. Additionally, these authors recommend that, in the introduction, researchers explicitly state a rationale for mixing quantitative and qualitative methods and data (e.g., to triangulate results, to develop or improve one method with the other, to extend the study’s results). Another recommendation is that, in the methods, researchers specify the type of mixed methods research design used.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2010) provide several principles for designing a mixed methods study:

- Recognize that mixed methods designs can be fixed and/or emergent. Fixed mixed methods designs are mixed methods studies where the use of quantitative and qualitative methods is predetermined and planned at the start of the research process, and the procedures are implemented as planned. Emergent mixed methods designs are found in mixed methods studies where the use of mixed methods arises due to issues that develop during the process of conducting the research.

- Identify an approach to design. There are several approaches to design, and researchers can benefit from considering their personal approach to conducting mixed methods studies. These design approaches fall into two categories: typology-based and dynamic.

- Match the design to the research problem, purpose and questions. The importance of the research problem and questions is a key principle of mixed methods research design. This perspective stems from the pragmatic foundations for conducting mixed methods research where the notion of “what works” applies well to selecting the methods that work best to address a study’s problem and questions.

- Be explicit about the reasons for mixing methods. Another key principle of mixed methods design is to identify the reason(s) for mixing quantitative and qualitative methods within the study. Combining methods is challenging and should only be undertaken when there is a specific reason to do so. Two frameworks have been provided by Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989) and Bryman (2006).

In addition, Creswell and Plano Clark (2010) also point out several key decisions in choosing a mixed methods design:
Regarding the conclusions derived from this study, several aspects may be emphasised. First, with regard to the characteristics of the mixed methods articles identified, the most common purpose in regard to the characteristics of the mixed methods articles identified, the most common purpose was different priority of the quantitative and qualitative parts; and sequential implementation of data collection was the most common implementation pattern used in these fields. Second, the number of mixed methods studies shows great variation year to year and journal to journal, and there is not a clear trend in the publication of mixed methods research in business studies for the journals studied. Third, with regard to the search strategies to identify mixed methods studies, the online search and the manual search provided very different results. As said above, Bryman (2006) pointed out that the electronic search strategy may provide a biased sample of mixed methods studies. It may also indicate the lack of awareness within the management research community of the emerging body of literature and methodological frameworks being developed from within the mixed methods movement. In any case, this electronic search may be further expanded to use a greater range of mixed methods terminology and nomenclature.

We would like to indicate that we agree with the "paradigm of choices" emphasized by Patton (1990). A paradigm of choices rejects methodological orthodoxy in favour of methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality. Thus, this paradigm of choices recognizes that different methods are appropriate for different situations. The predominance of more quantitative-based methodological tools in the development of strategy and organisational behaviour research does not mean that these tools are applicable to all research questions. The research question and context should dictate the choice of the appropriate research methods. However, we must also take into account that the knowledge about mixed methods research can stimulate a researcher to better define and analyze innovative problems and research questions in management research. Mixing methods therefore offers enormous potential for exploring new dimensions (Mason, 2006). Hopefully, this review of management empirical studies which have used mixed methods designs along with the ideas offered for the application of mixed methods studies may favour progress on management research.

Finally, with regard to future research, although the current study attempts to extend the knowledge of the application of mixed methods research in management research, much remains to be learned. For example, it would be interesting to analyze the yield from mixed methods studies regarding the added value of these articles, or the contribution to the improvement of several methodological aspects such as validity or construct measurement. Moreover, an analysis of the use and application of mixed methods research in other organisational and management fields would also be interesting and could expand upon the research reported here.

References


Subtextual Phenomenology: A Methodology for Valid, First-Person Research

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Abstract: This paper presents a methodology for first-person, intuitive research. It argues that it is possible to do rigorous research using subjective, first-person data. The methodology, which I call Subtextual Phenomenology (sometimes shortened to Subphenomenology), provides a theoretical framework for such practice. Subtextual Phenomenology evolved out of my research into theatre and the phenomena of play directing (Vallack, 2005). It remains a methodology to identify and process as research the everyday, subjective ways of knowing what we know, and to formalise this knowledge in a theoretical framework for rigorous, intersubjective insight. It identifies and articulates what we do intuitively, whether that be in a business or workplace, academic research or in our personal lives. Based on the previously maligned and often misunderstood philosophy of Edmund Husserl, who is known popularly as the father of phenomenology, it embraces an epistemology of Objectivism, which (arguably) is essential to pure phenomenology. Husserl’s thinking was beyond the limitations of its modernist context. Now, one hundred years later, scholars are able to appreciate Husserl’s insight that the most universal knowledge comes from the most intensely personal data. Intersubjectivity springs from subjectivism.

Keywords: subtextual phenomenology; phenomenology; arts-based research; first-person research, transcendental phenomenology, intuitive research

1. Introduction

1.1 Phenomenology in the context of twentieth century modernism

Qualitative Inquiry is increasingly credited with the capacity to give information about social research that cannot be gleaned through statistics. Few will now question its usefulness in contemporary, academic research, but this was not the case throughout most of the twentieth century. Dominated by modernism, twentieth century research was seen to be most valid if it was scientific – that is, about testing a hypothesis about the physical world. Science was all. Feelings were seen as immeasurable, and therefore they were not fit for research. Even when psychology was emerging and vying to be recognised as a valid science, it needed to demonstrate that it was also “scientific”. Consequently, Behaviourism was favoured, as it claimed to be based on measurable and repeatable experiments. It was statistical, so it looked like rigorous research to modernist scholars.

Early in the twentieth century, Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were writing about ideas that were ahead of the times. They embraced more abstract concepts – transcendental phenomenology, psychoanalysis and archetypal forms, respectively. Like Plato, who gave us ancient archetypes in the forms of the Greek Gods, their ideas were more about how to know (epistemological) than how to be (ontological). But modernism favoured the ontological domain. It preferred the measurability of sensory data, and its ability to tell us things about the lifeworld in which we live. The metaphysical genius of Husserl was not recognised because Husserl, like Freud and Jung, was ahead of his time. Unfortunately, in Husserl’s case, contemporaries who did not understand his phenomenology, stole his terminology and attempted to use it to fashion a version of “phenomenology” that made little sense outside of Husserl’s transcendental context. Heidegger, and those who followed him, created the nonsense that some will call ‘phenomenology’ in research today. His letters to Jasper, to which I refer later in this text, show his outrageous and arrogant intention to displace the “old man” and become a “famous philosopher”. Politically, too, Heidegger was a Nazi and Husserl was Jewish, but that may or may not be relevant to Heidegger’s belligerent ignorance of Husserl’s phenomenology.

In this new millennium, one hundred years after Husserl, pioneers in Qualitative Research have hacked through the woolly thinking of modernism to lighten our ways of knowing ourselves. In the context of Husserl’s thinking, phenomenology makes sense. It is pretty straightforward, actually, once the reader gets past the confusion surrounding the terminology, caused by a century of misrepresentation of phenomenology. Subtextual Phenomenology emerged through my reading
Husserl’s words – his explanations – not the second-hand, misconstrued applications that remain censored by the limitations of modernism. There are more ways of knowing about ourselves than through the senses. Husserl recognised intuition as the catalyst for phenomenological reduction. Jung identified intuition as an important component in one’s personality profile. Universally, intuition is known as a legitimate means to insight, despite the coy hesitations of the western world to embrace it unconditionally. Husserl, and later Jung, knew that the most subjective truth may also be the most universal (intersubjective) truth. So through researching one’s own experiences one may reach profound, social insights. But how do we put this theory into practice?

Subtextual Phenomenology is a step-by-step approach to putting Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology to work in research. It is a methodology for social inquiry, which depends on first-person research. The subjective data is then analysed through art, or meditation or some other method of dipping into the unconscious. The researcher works first-hand in the area to be researched. The most candid and personal data is collected. And when the time is right, there is a metamorphoses – emerging from the unconscious will be the universal archetype that is the essence of the research; an answer to the research question. This is the true meaning of phenomenological reduction. This postmodern age invites it to come forward.

The chart below shows the cross-roads of phenomenology. It situates Subtextual Phenomenology to the left, between the transcendental philosophy of Husserl and the archetypal, story-based categories of Jung. Through Transcendental Phenomenology, we file away the life-world experiences, in the unconscious, under ‘universal stories’. Subtextual Phenomenology is the methodology in between that tells us, intuitively and sometimes cryptically, how to retrieve that file.

**Overview of Phenomenology**

![Diagram of phenomenology showing the relationships between different philosophical approaches](image)

**Figure 1:** This chart shows how Subtextual Phenomenology is informed by the work of both Husserl and Jung, It also shows the off-shoot in thinking, the illegitimate weed of phenomenology, which through Heidegger’s carelessness is now raging out of control in academic circles

### 1.2 Subtextual Phenomenology

All of phenomenology, or the methodological pursuit of a philosopher’s self-examination, discloses the endless multiformity of this inborn a priori. This is the genuine sense of ‘innate’...

Phenomenology explores this a priori, which is nothing other than the essence,...and which is disclosed, and can only be disclosed, by means of my self-examination (Husserl, 1964, p.29).

Subtextual Phenomenology is a *radical* methodology in that it returns to the fundamental ideas about phenomenology, as written by its founder, Edmund Husserl. It aims to rectify twentieth century,
modernist distortions of Husserl's ideas and terminology that have confused academic debate and deterred potential students of phenomenology. Subtextual Phenomenology refers to the consistency of Husserl's philosophical phenomenology, and offers a set of methods for realising his Transcendental Phenomenology in research, within a sound, theoretical framework. Essential to both Transcendental and Subtextual Phenomenologies is the notion of first-person research. The researcher inquires into his own practice, generates his own deeply subjective data and then seeks the transcendent, intersubjective archetypes inherent in that data, which make that research relevant to others, socially and probably also interculturally.

The diagram below presents a big picture view of Subtextual Phenomenology:

### SUBTEXTUAL PHENOMENOLOGY

#### THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPistemology</th>
<th>OBJECTIVISM</th>
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<td>Theoretical</td>
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<td>Perspective</td>
<td>PHENOMENOLOGY</td>
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<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>SUBTEXTUAL</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PHENOMENOLOGY</td>
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#### METHODS

1. EXPERIENCE: First-person, free-association data
2. EPOCHE: THE RESEARCHER TRANSCENDS LIFE: WORLD CLUTTER TO A TRANSCENDENTAL PERSPECTIVE – THROUGH STILLNESS OF MIND
3. EPIPHANY: A MYTH ARISES FROM THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS
4. EXPLICATION: CREATIVE REPRESENTATION OF THE EXPERIENCE Eg. Writing
5. EXAMINATION: Understanding the phenomenon rationally, and analysing it further with reference to the EPIPHANY and EXPLICATION

Husserl refers to a priori objects and phenomenological essences. To be clear, my understanding is that they are the phenomenological objects that are sought by the researcher, in order to give meaning to the research. They exist in time, whether or not the researcher actually ‘discovers’ them, and this assumption is what identifies the methodology as epistemologically objectivist. Throughout the paper I will also refer to them as universal forms, Platonic forms and archetypal images. Neville’s explanation of the universal nature of Jung’s archetypes may explain the sorts of objects the Subtextual Phenomenologist is seeking:

Archetypal psychology as a contemporary way of thinking about culture and behaviour is largely based on the work of Carl Jung. Jung devoted himself to documenting the patterns he found in human behaviour, both individual and collective. When it came to explaining these patterns, he fell back on Plato's notion of archetype. Following Plato, he was inclined to understand archetypes as pre-existent forms which are replicated again and again in nature and in our experience. He wrote of archetypes as "instinctual patterns of behaviour", which are genetically inherited, as "structures of the collective unconscious" and as "modes of apprehension" which shape our encounter with reality....We can learn something of the nature of these patterns in the "old stories" or myths of ancient cultures (Neville, 1989, p.22).

There has been a lot of talk about reflective practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2006) and more recently, online blogging (Vallack, 2009a, 2009b), in research. Subtextual Phenomenology is a type of reflective and reflexive practice that harnesses such data for academic or entrepreneurial inquiry. Everyday management and academic work in Action Research demand reflection and intuition. I hear the term, reflective practice bandied about, but like phenomenology, there appears around it a confusion of connotations and understandings. Subtextual Phenomenology aims to provide scaffolding on which to build an approach to phenomenological, transcendental, reflective practice. In other words, it helps the researcher to work intuitively, using both the conscious, rational mind as well
as the unconscious. Transcendental Phenomenology is the theory about phenomenological, reflective practice. Subtextual Phenomenology is the methodology I used to realise this theory. Others may find the framework useful.

2. Subtextual Phenomenology: What's in a name?

In its most basic sense, Subtextual Phenomenology is an approach to data analysis that seeks meaning underneath literal, linguistic description. It embraces the psychoanalytical understanding that meaning is more directly and accurately delivered via the unconscious. Dreams, meditations and other practices that enable us to enter trance-like states, are the means through which such unconscious information is sometimes accessed. These practices form some of the methods towards Subtextual Phenomenology.

Subtextual Phenomenology began as an investigation into play directing. Actors and directors use subtext, that is, the unconscious motivation of the character (and sometimes the actor, via a type a psychoanalytical process known popularly as method acting) to bring truth to a performance. It seemed appropriate to therefore apply the term subtextual to my phenomenological investigation into what lies at the bottom of all this rhetoric about directing. Subtextual Phenomenology gets underneath the description, however thick the description may appear.

3. What is subtext? In acting? In Subtextual Phenomenology?

McKee informs us of this popular Hollywood expression:

*If the scene is about what the scene is about, you're in deep shit* (McKee, 1998, p.252).

He is referring to the need for subtext in drama. Without subtext there is no conflict; no art. As a drama student in the 1970’s I was privileged to train under Lindy Davies, who has since achieved much acclaim as an actor and teacher, having held positions of responsibility at both the Victorian College of the Arts, in Melbourne, and the National Institute for Dramatic Arts, in Sydney. Lindy introduced me to the notion of subtext, although I do not recall her actually using the term.

I performed a forty-five minute monologue, which she directed. I was not permitted to see the script. At each rehearsal session, Lindy would deliver a line or two in neutral voice. I was not to repeat it, but rather to tell her a story about something in my life that came to mind. At the end of the story, Lindy sometimes asked clarifying questions. If I was holding back painful information, or clowning, she knew and delved deeper. When I was ready, I would say the line – but I was really saying something significant to myself, about my own life. Curiously, I never remembered the lines in performance (although they came out according to the script apparently), I just remembered the related incidents. Those were the most powerful performances I have ever done – and I don't remember much about them. I was working not on the surface of the lines, but from the meanings that they created for me. To use the cliché, I wasn't acting, I was just being (or maybe reliving?). The audience could sense the difference apparently, and they were drawn in by the honesty. Of course, I couldn't tell that at the time, because my mind was elsewhere.

The term method-acting describes a similar process that originated with Stanislavski (1962). His realism stunned its early audiences. Breaking away from stylised, theatrical convention, actors from the Moscow Art Theatre played with complexity of character and psychological truth. They used subtext – that sea of memory and emotion, which lies just under the surface of behaviour. McKee (1998) explains:

*Actors are not marionettes to mime gestures and mouth words. They're artists who create with material from subtext, not the text. An actor brings the character to life from the inside out, from unspoken, even unconscious thoughts and feelings, out to a surface of behaviour. The actor will say and do whatever the scene requires, but they will find their sources for creation in the inner life* (McKee, 1998, p. 253)

Subtextual outcomes of research based on Transcendental Phenomenology assume universal, archetypal forms. These intersubjective phenomena are not attained through life-world research that uses only description and rational consciousness. They hide. Like the person who seeks psychoanalysis to better understand the driving force of the unconscious, the subtextual phenomenologist seeks essences, arguably located in the collective unconscious (Jung, 1966.). Actors wade into the murky depths of affective memory so as to better understand their role and
motivations. Researchers trek such uncharted domains to reach an apodictic appreciation of the phenomenon. They are akin to one another. McKee (1998) agrees:

*Just as a personality structure can be disclosed through psychoanalysis, the shape of the scene’s inner life can be uncovered through a similar inquiry* (McKee, 1998, p. 252)

I contend that the shape of the research can also be uncovered this way. An actor creates a working subtext through affective memory and according to Small (2001), phenomenologists can know an object from a similar starting point:

*Essential intuition is not ‘experience’ in the sense of perception and memory, and is certainly not to be identified with introspection, since that too is directed towards objects which have a reality, if only within the mind. It may be based on experience of some actual thing, but Husserl argues that it may just as well start from imagination. In any case, it will draw on variation in imagination to isolate what is constant in any given object. Under these conditions, Husserl maintains, the resulting judgements will have a validity which is quite independent of experience* (Small, 2001, p. xv-xvi).

Through Subtextual Phenomenology the researcher arrives at the universal object. The methods to this end involve transcendence via affective memory, free-association, dream and intuition - the harvest of which may then be synthesised and concretised through the play writing process. Like the actor, the researcher then applies rational judgement to this creative process. The work is presented to a life-world audience. Feedback is given – and then the artist and researcher may choose to accept the feedback or not, even if their critics don’t know much about theatre but know what they like.

Let us now examine the theoretical framework for doing Subtextual Phenomenology.

4. Epistemology - objectivism

There are three recognised epistemological positions for researchers – objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism. Crotty (1998) correctly points out that phenomenology must be informed by either constructionism or objectivism. Constructionists assume that the researcher creates a reality by interacting with life-world data. Objectivists – transcendental and subtextual phenomenologists as well as hypothesis-based practitioners in modern science – work on the assumption that there are actual objects of knowledge, which exist independently, whether or not the researcher discovers or interacts with them. As we have discussed, in Subtextual Phenomenology, the objects external to the researcher are archetypal or Platonic forms, common throughout humankind. The methods employed throughout the inquiry aim to make visible the image or metaphor that embodies the inquiry. For example, my research into the nature of directing (Vallack, 2005) resulted in the analogous symbol of the Wizard of Oz. Like the wizard, the director is commonly seen as all powerful in the play-making process, but the research outcome suggests that in reality it is troupe itself who usually create the magic during the rehearsal process. The director is however essential to the group, because like the Wizard of Oz, s/he enables the participants to recognise and realize their creative powers.

5. Theoretical perspective - Transcendental Phenomenology

The theoretical perspective of phenomenology aligns logically with an epistemology of Objectivism. Although interview-style, Existential Phenomenology remains popular in social research, it is only first-person, empirical Transcendental Phenomenology that takes the researcher to the universal object. It is what Husserl called ‘philosophical phenomenology’ (Husserl, 1964) and it begins with a study of one’s own, personal experience. He explains:

*All of phenomenology, or the methodological pursuit of a philosopher's self-examination, discloses the endless multiformity of this inborn a priori. This is the genuine sense of "innate"...Phenomenology explores this a priori, which is nothing other than the essence...and which is disclosed, and can only be disclosed, by means of my self-examination* (Husserl, 1964, p.29).

Husserl goes on to establish his theory of Transcendental Phenomenology, the ‘only’ phenomenology, and a science which takes one on a journey past psychological idealism (Husserl, 1964, p.33), through transcendental idealism (p.34) and solipsism to metamorphosise as the alter ego (p.34), that is, the intersubjective embrace of the universal object.

The theoretical perspective of this methodology is underpinned by its methods:

- Experience and solo research, free association methods for data collection;
Epoch – the surface-still, incubation period;
Epiphany – the phenomenon of the archetype surfacing into consciousness;
Explication – the creative expression, usually coinciding with the Epiphany;
Examination – the academic reasoning applied to the phenomenon in order to make sense of it.

6. The methods of Subtextual Phenomenology

6.1 The experience: First-person research

It is essential to Transcendental Phenomenology, that the researcher exceeds mundane subjectivity through intersubjectivity. In other words, the first-person experiences undergo a metamorphosis and become universal insights. The process occurs through one's solo journey into the epoche, beyond which lie the eternal forms of existence. Husser says,

“Subjectivism can only be overcome by the most all-embracing and consistent subjectivism (the transcendental). In this (latter) form it is at the same time objectivism (of a deeper sort)…” (Husserl in McCormic & Ellison, (1981), p.34).

Transcendental Phenomenology must therefore be a first-person endeavour. The researcher collects data on his own practice. Later, from this solo data, there will emerge a transcendental object or archetype, which will transform the status of research from subjective to intersubjective and therefore universal. A point to mention here is that although the research might seem to be narcissistic in its endeavour, the epistemological focus is always the research object, not the researcher himself. It is this discrepancy that makes the work truly phenomenological rather than narcissistic.

When doing this phenomenology, data inspired by the research topic is freely voiced and recorded without censorship or judgement. It may be collected on a micro cassette recorder, videoed, written in an online weblog or any such other means. Data collection could take place prior to, during, or directly after the activity relating to the research, or it could take place at any time, on inspiration. Unlike conventional qualitative approaches, the data is not transcribed or deliberately analysed. It is left to float, to “incubate” (Moustakis, 1990), later to be gathered as image rather than language. Parts of it may drift into the unconscious synthesising activity, which takes place prior to the mental presentation of archetypal image.

6.2 The Epoche

This is a period of quiet. The researcher stops thinking about the inquiry as much as possible, in order to allow objects to surface from the unconscious. These images will later enrich understanding and become conscious and articulated. But at this stage the researcher should withdraw from actively and rationally analysing the data, and just accept any patterns or impressions that emerge. For me it felt like the suspended prelude to a psychic experience, but it may occur differently for others. Dreams and meditations provide images that hold potential insight. This is the transcendental stage when the form may appear, but remain unrecognised by the researcher until the epiphany.

6.3 The Epiphany of the collective unconscious

The peak experience for the Subtextual Phenomenologist occurs when the metaphor for the research is realised. This metaphor, which as we have mentioned, is also referred to as a Platonic form or universal image, comes from what Jung would call the collective unconscious.

Jung stated in his book Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (p.43) “My thesis then, is as follows: in addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents.”

Jung, Plato, Husserl and many other scholars, known and unknown, and probably from any given culture, make sense of personal experience through story, symbol and metaphor. Subtextual Phenomenology uses this sense-making system and applies it to research.

The researcher may have the research archetype just dawn on him, or she may be inspired to produce an artwork, which will act as a vehicle to bring forth the pregnant research metaphor; which holds the research essence; the research phenomenon. It may be through writing that ideas related to the topic find voice. A play is an excellent genre option, because the various characters can represent different aspects of the research or different viewpoints to be tested through the next stage, which involves rational argument.

### 6.4 The examination

This is the rational, academic phase of Subtextual Phenomenology. It coincides with the last method, Explication. The two may be interchanged in the framework. Actually, none of these methods have a prescribed order. The researcher may well find the steps repeating themselves. Through the artistic expression, the researcher may see the sense of it all emerge. The researcher may write using the characters in a play to analyse and clarify the data. Creating debate amongst the characters, throughout the writing period, will cause the author/researcher to engage both his rational, left-brain and his creative right-brain (Guillaume, 2005). Plato (1952) used this genre for his Socratic dialogues. It is at this examination stage that language becomes essential to Subtextual Phenomenology. In contrast, hermeneutic methods specific to Existential Phenomenology require immediate and precise language for data analysis. As I indicated earlier, it is my view that this is not genuine phenomenology.

An important image, which may have appeared earlier to the researcher, but which had been unrecognised, may now reappear. In this language-based form, it might become more apparent, more comprehensible. The object specific to the phenomenology in my earlier work, was the image of the Wizard of Oz; a metaphor for the stage director. It formed during the Epiphany stage but became explicit and obvious to me through the Explication and Examination brought about through writing.

More recently I worked on a research project about academics who shy from using technology (Vallack 2009a, 2009b). The epiphany produced in that study, again using Subtextual Phenomenology, brought forth the forms of Echo and Narcissus. Like Echo, the recalcitrant technologist feels dumb and inarticulate in its presence, and like Narcissus the technology itself is without empathy or emotion. Examination of the study concluded that some academics require empathy and emotion in order to engage with learning, and consequently it is they who struggle with technology. Reciprocally, the study was also informed by the myth. Echo was limited in her ability to communicate. She seemed dumb. This led me to then observe that similarly, many academics are bamboozled by the acronyms and jargons used by skilled technologists, and are consequently silenced and alienated. The more I looked into the metaphor, the more it informed the research. Jung said that, “As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.” (Jung, 1966)

### 6.5 The explication and rational evaluation

Much of this methodology is about the internal phenomenon of intuition, or right-brain (Guillaume, 2005) work. As a kind of research triangulation, to evaluate the outcomes, I found it useful to see the relevant artwork, in my case the plays that are the transcendental carriages, realised through performance in the life-world. When I see the play performed and see how it is received by others, my left-brain (Guillaume, 2005) is engaged. I am then in a better position to make a rational judgment about the phenomenology. Neville (1989) supports the idea that sometimes the artist needs to rationally evaluate the work, using both the conscious and unconscious:

> The mythology of the artist or creative thinker tends to overlook the significance of verification....When Jung took to painting as a means of dealing with his inner conflict after his break with Freud, he found himself tempted to view his productions as great art, because to him the process of painting them in emotional intensity felt like great art. Fortunately he was clever enough to recognise what was happening to him – a phenomenon which he called ‘inflation by the anima’....Only conscious and unconscious
working in cooperation can produce a truly worthwhile 'creative' product. That cooperation involves the conscious mind's ability to evaluate (Neville, 1989, p.179).

Verification is useful for the Subtextual Phenomenologist because the feedback from others allows one to determine not only, as Neville points out, if the audience has been moved by "great art", but also if the research object has been recognised intersubjectively. Did the audience relate to the play in the same way as me? If not, what did emerge for them? And have I missed something? Or have they? Performing the play invites such analysis. It aids one’s critical reflection of the research.

7. Summary of Subtextual Phenomenology

I created Subtextual Phenomenology as a way of doing Husserl’s authentic phenomenology. It sets out a series of steps for the artist and researcher to do first-person research on personal experience. Although artists have always done this to a degree, art only becomes academic research when it can be articulated and defended methodologically. It is the validity of the argument that determines the rigor of the research. This methodology sets out a logical, epistemological context for intuitive research, along with a consistently aligned theoretical framework. It can be coupled with any art form, as art can always showcase the phenomenological essence of an inquiry, be it through image or sound or movement.

This paper has presented Subtextual Phenomenology. Informed by its theoretical perspective of Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology, we have seen that this methodology is generated through first-person, conscious and unconscious experience (lifeworld & transcendental), not just language. It is not hermeneutic research in the way that most existent phen menology is language-centred and rationally interpretive. It focuses on the sub-text, the meaning behind the superficiality of language. It is defined by its methods, which initially evolved to address the specific research topic of Directing, but which adapt to investigatory questions for business, education and social inquiry. The phenomenological essences present themselves through the transcendental stages of the research, through the practitioner’s dreams and meditations They crystallise with the practitioner’s epiphany. Then arts practice provides the researcher with a showcase for the research phenomenon. Language becomes a means of communicating this phenomenon, after the event, and making explicit that which has been implicit. It is used to synthesise fragments of phenomena that have surfaced during the transcendental phase. It articulates the aspects of the inquiry that are intersubjective. These emerging phenomena are intersubjective in that they are common and eternal images for humanity. And epistemologically, this methodology accommodates the objectivist assumption that those images have been there all along, waiting to be discovered, and are therefore intersubjective and recognisable to humankind, regardless of culture.

8. It’s time: Implications for future research

When Husserl wrote about Transcendental Phenomenology in the context of twentieth century modernism, his contemporaries thought him crazy. Most pointedly, his student, Martin Heidegger wrote unkindly of the master in a letter to Karl Jaspers, “Husserl has come entirely unglued – if, that is, he ever was ‘glued’…” (Hopkins, 1999). It was a time intolerant of research that was not measurable and repeatable. Even psychological research worked with quantifiable data, and ignored essential questions that could not be addressed numerologically.

But now in this post-postmodern era, we explore the impressionistic spheres that are best reflected in art and known spiritually and transcendentally. In eastern cultures, art and religion and ceremony have always blended. Western culture has traditionally separated them, yet to greater or lesser degrees, we still just know things, in our bones. An inability to quantify intuitive consciousness does not make it less powerful. It is time to take with us the best of modernism and move with conviction towards other ways of knowing; other ways of using the conscious and unconscious, the rational and the intuitive, in whole brain research. It is time to hear what Husserl was saying, glued or no, a century ago:

Subjectivism can only be overcome by the most all-embracing and consistent subjectivism (the transcendental). In this (latter) form it is at the same time objectivism (of a deeper sort)…” (Husserl, 1927, p.34).

Subtextual Phenomenology presents an approach to the ‘deeper’ objectivism to which Husserl refers. The most ‘all-embracing’ subjectivism of first-person research data may reveal, through transcendence, a deep intersubjectivism which is recognised through the collective unconscious as a
universal, phenomenological object. This object, the research metaphor, can tell a story about the inquiry, and we can retell it again through art. And now, if we choose, we can justify the academic rigor therein and call it research.

9. Key terms and definitions

This list has been adapted from an earlier publication (Vallack, 2009b)

- **apophantic domain** used in Phenomenology, this term refers to that of the senses and propositions. In contrast to this is the ontological domain that of life-world things - relationships, business, politics.

- **a priori** eternal and timeless structure. Constructed in the mind and not based on experience. Not empirical.

- **Essence** element. A mandatory feature, fundamental to a given phenomenon. In Transcendental Phenomenology, I use this word as a simile for universal object.

- **Existential Phenomenology** (arguably) originating from the work of Heidegger, it fixes on an ontological, psychological phenomenology, as opposed to Husserl's philosophical and epistemological phenomenology, that is, Transcendental Phenomenology. The author argues that Existential Phenomenology alone produces only life-world *themes*, not the universal *objects* of true phenomenological reduction.

- **Intuition** Knowledge which is not based on perception, memory or introspection. A hunch. A sixth-sense.

- **Intuit essences** to allow the essential features of a phenomenon to just occur, as opposed to consciously trying to work it out.

- **Lifeworld** the everyday world. Not the transcendental or apophantic domain.

- **Phenomenology** A methodology and a philosophy based on the work of Edmund Husserl. It's about getting to the core of an inquiry. The results are often images and metaphors rather than descriptions. In popular use, it is informed by an epistemology of either objectivism or constructivism. Pure phenomenology, such as that cited in this paper, embraces Husserl's notion of the transcendental object, and is objectivist. Phenomenology is a process of inquiry through which universal objects are presented.

- **Radical** Fundamental. Subtextual Phenomenology is radical in that it is informed by the essential and original phenomenology of Edmund Husserl.

10. Epilogue - The Power of image

The unconscious presents us with images – in dreams, in art, in visualisations. Whereas modernism favoured impersonal, thoughtful descriptions of lifeworld events, this postmodern era now invites us to engage other levels of consciousness. Here is another view of Subtextual Phenomenology:

Events are known from the contexts of the individuals.
They are seen from different perspectives

Although the event is the same, each individual will recall it from a different perspective

Each one will have a preferred focus
Each will recall varying moments in time

The perspectives and moments of recall will be as many as there are individual participants

But on reflection, there is an intersubjectivity,
...an essence of the phenomenon, that all who have experienced the event, just know.

The a priori phenomenon of hunting, for example, is known innately to all, even though each has experienced it from a different perspective and may recall it through varied impressions.

Photographs taken by the author, in Tanzania, 2010.

References


Abstract: This paper discusses an innovative focus group approach used to study an Information Systems Development (ISD) environment. The research had to cope with the application of a broad framework, untested in practice, seeking to elicit potentially highly sensitive opinions and judgments in a highly pressurised, time-restricted environment. The researchers’ design of the case research is discussed, in particular the use of focus groups. Through a description of how these were conducted some of the novel aspects of the data collection technique used to address the specific issues mentioned above are illustrated. This is followed by an exploration of various frameworks proposed in the literature for evaluation of focus groups in particular, and interpretive research in general. Future work proposed includes the evaluation of this research using a set of 7 criteria proposed in the literature based on critical interpretive epistemology.

Keywords: focus group, information systems development, evaluation criteria

1. Introduction

The research team in this study was tasked with assessing the agility of a proprietary method in a globally distributed systems development organisation. Rather than trying to assess agility by establishing the compliance of implementation with the defined method, we examined each implementation using a conceptually well-established agile assessment framework (see Conboy 2009). The assessment objectives were (i) to establish the agility afforded by the proprietary method as implemented in the organisation (‘method-in-action’), and (ii) to identify major issues with the adoption and generate recommendations to address these.

This assessment was highly complex. Significant time restrictions were in place. A previously untested, broad, multi-faceted framework, consisting of highly complex and multidimensional constructs was to be used. There were no accompanying set of prescriptive questions, and the researchers had to address the potential for poor judgement, unsupported anecdotal statements, and statements arising from ulterior motives. The study also involved potentially sensitive and controversial data, and data was difficult to collect in some cases where ISD team members were geographically dispersed.

All of these issues required careful consideration when designing the focus groups approach for this research. Thus, the objectives of this paper are to describe the research approach used and discuss how it could be evaluated in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. In the following sections, the objective of this research is discussed and focus group theory is outlined, including a discussion of its use in various fields. We then describe the key elements of the ISD study we conducted, to demonstrate the complex nature of the study, and elaborate the focus group fieldwork conducted with a summary of the modifications to the focus group approach used in collecting data. This is followed by an evaluation of this modified data collection technique using evaluation criteria specifically proposed for focus groups, and reflection on possible improvements. We then discuss the need for a more holistic evaluation using other potential evaluation criteria which address the whole research method, including focus groups, in a comprehensive and rigorous manner. Finally, future work, including the application of such a broad research evaluation framework, and conclusions are discussed.

2. Research objectives

There are many reasons for specifically relaying experiences of focus group research in Information Systems (IS) and for evaluating their effectiveness in this discipline. As discussed below, focus groups have not been used extensively in IS research, despite apparent suitability. They are advocated for descriptive, explanatory and exploratory studies, leverage common concrete situations
and groups which are common in work teams in general, and can provide deep and specific insights into complex sociological situations such as teams. They also allow investigation of ambiguous or multi-dimensional topics and a large quantity of data to be collected even where time or researcher access is limited.

As well as all the advantages of the approach, the literature also recognises potential drawbacks. These include difficulties in directing topics for discussion while not imposing the researchers interpretation on the group, effects of group dynamics on the data collected and the lack of prescription in how the technique should be applied. While the literature contains some general ‘rules of thumb’ (Morgan 1997), such direction remains quite ambiguous and ill-defined compared to other techniques such as surveys (Kidd and Parshall 2000). For example, Morgan (1997) suggests that when conducting focus groups, the researcher “should use a relatively structured format with high moderator input”. This in itself is quite a loose prescription, but the true ambiguity is revealed when Morgan suggests that “this guideline will vary depending on how exploratory, descriptive or explanatory the research objective”.

In the current study, several significant modifications were made to the focus group technique described in the literature. These were designed to increase the efficiency of the method given the broad set of specific topics to be covered and the severe time restrictions. Modifications included describing each sub-topic to be addressed on an A1 poster stuck to the walls of the room, and collecting data primarily through notes written by members and stuck to these posters. This allowed the capture of inputs from multiple participants simultaneously and in a nominally anonymous manner. These modifications are discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Given the limited use of focus groups in IS research, the vagueness of details on its implementation in a specific context, the significant potential weaknesses in the method and the modifications to reported usage in this study, the researchers felt an evaluation of the technique was warranted. This paper describes such an evaluation, where the method as here implemented is reviewed with respect to criteria defined in the focus group literature. It is then argued that evaluation of the focus group data collection technique alone is insufficient where there is an impact on other areas of the research method, such as analysis. Therefore, alternate evaluation criteria are discussed and proposed for further work.

To illustrate the conceptual basis of the paper, the general focus group literature is reviewed in the next section before we introduce the specific extended focus group approach we employed in our ISD study and the evaluation of it.

3. Focus group research

Focus group research emerged from work performed by Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Merton and colleagues at Columbia University in the early 1940s. It is defined as a "research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan 1997) and involves a group of participants and one or more moderators. The core theoretical elements of focus groups include topical focus, group interactions, in-depth data and a ‘humanistic’ character (Stewart, Shamdasani et al. 2007).

The focus element derives from participants of the group having a ‘particular concrete situation’ in common (Merton and Kendall 1946) but is also affected by the moderators direction of the groups discussions. In the present study, all participants shared common membership of an ISD project team. In terms of group interaction, small group dynamics can greatly affect the data collected and can lead to increased depth and reflection over individual interviews. In this case, since the topic being investigated related to the team as well as individuals, the group aspect of the technique is considered important in increasing the depth of data collected, as discussions stimulated reflection and helped surface opinions and other inputs that might otherwise not have been forthcoming. Finally, the technique supports an emphatic and open interaction with participants, where discovery of meaning is valued over measurement.

There are many advantages and disadvantages of the technique highlighted in the literature. Focus groups allow the researcher to obtain substantially more data from a group in a short amount of time than one-to-one interviews (Morgan 1997). Insights and less accessible data can emerge which may not otherwise come to the surface (Morgan, 1997). This is especially true where participants may not
know much about the research topic and require a group discussion to stimulate them to make a contribution, or what is referred to as “introspective retrospection” (Merton and Kendall 1946). In addition, Bloor, Frankland et al (2001) suggest that focus groups allow participants to “articulate those normally unarticulated normative assumptions”. Other researchers (Kitzinger 1994; Kidd and Parshall 2000) draw attention to the importance of this differentiator of focus groups from other forms of collective or focused interviews.

Ideally, group interaction will lead to “collaborative construction” but it can lead to effects such as conformity of views as dominant characters or roles in a group cause others to ‘tow the line’ (Morgan 1997). Small group dynamics come into play, which can stymie minority or controversial opinions. Conversely, the group setting can lead to polarisation into one or more sub-groups or ‘factions’ (Sim 1998; Barbour 2007). Opinions expressed may reflect those of a particular group context rather than an aggregation of the opinions of the individuals (Stewart, Shamdasani et al. 2007). Additionally, more ‘subtle’ input that might emerge in a less ‘public’ context can be missed. While the moderator has less control over a group and less access to individual opinions, the setting of the topic of focus by the researcher can also influence the range and depth of input gathered and may not reflect topics considered important or interesting to participants (Merton and Kendall 1946). Focus groups do not allow observation of groups in more ‘natural’ contexts and are primarily restricted to discussions rather than other forms of interaction (Morgan 1997). Data collected is confined to participants' opinions and reportage of experiences and therefore is highly subjective (Wilkinson 1998).

Focus groups are suitable for exploratory, descriptive and explanatory research but, as implied by the definition above, is particularly suited where the researcher wants to focus on specific topics while leveraging group interaction. The method has also been advocated for “formative evaluation, for programme improvement” (Patton 1990) which matches the use in this study (Hines 2000). Focus groups could be considered to lie between dyadic interviews and direct observation: while allowing the researcher to direct attention to specific topics as allowed by interviews, they also facilitate group discussion as per observation. A significant benefit of focus groups is the ability to get a lot of data from a group in a short amount of time (Morgan 1997; Stewart, Shamdasani et al. 2007).

Despite being a valid data collection approach, and extensively used in other disciplines such as marketing and health service research, an examination of the IS literature shows that focus groups as a method of research are under-utilised in the field, with very few IS studies adopting the approach to date (Sobreperez 2008), and none specifically within the domain of ISD as far as we are aware. Where focus groups have been used in IS studies, they are usually in contexts where focus group studies are more widely used such as health (Eysenbach 2000; Koppel, Metlay et al. 2005) and marketing (Pitt, Watson et al. 1995). Some other research in IS has used focus groups but only as a minor supplementary data collection technique (Reich and Benbasat 2000). More indirectly related to IS, related fields such as Library and Information Science have reportedly used Focus Groups extensively (Kerslake and Goulding 1996).

In the following section we discuss the use of two conceptual frameworks in the study of the agility of ISD teams. This is followed by a description of the case research conducted in a company using these frameworks before discussion of how the quality of such research can be evaluated.

4. Extended focus group approach in an ISD study

Here we describe the research approach adopted for this study, and how the focus groups were conducted in the field.

4.1 The ISD study: Assessing agile development methods

In assessing ISD methods, measuring compliance to defined practices is common. However, this fails to take account of contextual factors specific to a work context. The novel approach used in this research considers the true contribution of each method practice to agility itself, rather than compliance to a defined agile method. For this we used a ‘conceptual framework’ for agility which defines the underlying aspects of an agile team such as creativity and simplicity. Therefore, the agile methods in use could be assessed effectively regardless of the particular practices each project did or did not implement, or indeed how the project implemented each practice. This approach allowed effective comparison of the three projects using three different agile implementations – in effect
allowing us compare ‘apples and oranges’. Therefore the assessment involved answering the three following questions illustrated in Figure 1: High level research design for each project.

**Figure 1: High level research design**

The defined method was established through analysis of the documentation and training materials provided by Pennysoft describing the various practices. Then a set of interviews with team leaders from each of the projects established the method-in-action [4]. Research has shown that work methods are never implemented exactly as defined, varying by project, team and organizational context [5]. Agile methods generally acknowledge this explicitly, citing the ‘tailoring’ of methods to ensure effectiveness in specific situations. Therefore, it is not good enough to assume the practices have been implemented in a textbook manner – it’s essential to understand where implementations are similar and where they differ from the documented method and across projects.

The method-in-action for each of the three projects studied were found to be quite different. Different sets of practices were used, and each of these were used differently. Each project method was examined in terms of the following which derive from the method-in-action framework [4]:

- **Development context:** The nature of the business and technical project drivers, stakeholders, project history, criticality, complexity and so forth.
- **Team context:** Characteristics of the project team including size, diversity, experience, skills, geographical distribution and motivation.
- **Rational and political roles:** The role of the ISD method on a particular project, both in terms of explicit and rational use (reduce cost, increase quality, etc) and political use, such as team reputation, showcasing fast development ability, etc.

Once the method-in-action was established, the third phase involved a half-day focus group session with each team to establish how each practice supported or inhibited agility.

Agility in work is not a new concept, and originated long before software development was established as an industry. From a foundation of organizational agility, and with reference to agile software development, the core contributory concepts of agility have been identified [6]. Creativity, proaction, reaction, learning, cost, quality and simplicity are the foundations of agility and were used to study how the work methods used in these projects affected team and organizational agility. The agile concepts we used derive from the following definition of agility [6]:

> The continual readiness of an ISD method to rapidly or inherently create change, proactively or reactively embrace change, and learn from change while contributing to perceived customer value (economy, quality and simplicity), through its collective components and relationships with its environment.
In the focus group sessions, described further below, each agile practice employed by each project was evaluated for the following:

- Their agility in terms of creativity, proaction, reaction and learning from change
- Their perceived customer value of cost, quality and simplicity

Using these concepts allowed characterization of each project method in a consistent manner, regardless of the details of how they had implemented agile. Table 2 below gives a description of each concept to guide how they can be considered in relation to each ISD practice.

**Table 1: Agile concepts used in the agility assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>The ability to create inventions or solve problems using an original, novel, or unconventional approach. This involves creativity among all stakeholders, sharing of ideas and knowledge and continuous improvement in the team and processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proaction</td>
<td>Taking steps in advance of change, which pre-empt the change, or acting in anticipation of future problems, needs, or changes. This requires early identification, estimation and prioritization of risks and planning for contingencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction</td>
<td>Responding to situations, or changes that have taken place, including communication of changes requested and rapid interpretation and empowered response to such changes and their impacts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Knowledge or skill acquired or modification of a behavioral tendency by experience (as exposure to conditioning). This requires both dissemination and absorption of knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>The total cost of the solution including time spent by stakeholders, skill and experience levels required by the team, capital and operational costs and lost opportunity costs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>The quality of the solution in terms of delivery (bugs), the business value delivered, and even the quality of the experience for various stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplicity</td>
<td>Maximizing the work not done by ensuring the processes, tools and metrics are easy to use, all solution features implemented are needed and used and the design is as simple as possible to deliver current functionality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agility analysis involved a half-day focus group session with each team to establish how each practice supported or inhibited agility. Focus groups were selected as the primary data collection technique for the current study due to their efficiency in gathering a lot of data from a group of informants and their ability to improve the range and depth of input. However, to address some of the shortcomings mentioned in the previous section, Several novel extensions were made to the method. Participants were encouraged to provide input in the form of written notes as well as through recording and analysis of group discussions. Therefore, the discussions allowed group (and sub-group) exploration of the topics before participants gave written input, but the post-its also facilitated individual input without discussion. The discussion was also highly focused, covering each agile practice in turn. Input was solicited for each practice covered to avoid ‘gaps’ where certain topics would not have input. Therefore, the less defined, ‘non-directive’ moderator strategy often advocated for focus groups was not followed. Additionally, participants were not randomly selected from a homogenous population as normal; for practical reasons they included several roles (which could be considered to have opposing interests, priorities and motivations) and were selected by the participants rather than randomly. Further details of the novel aspects to these focus groups are described in the next.

### 4.2 Conducting focus groups in Pennysoft

Here we describe the context of the data collection followed by the technique used across three ISD teams. This includes modifications to the focus group approach such as the use of ISD method practices on posters to act as an interview guide, the use of written input by participants as the primary data input method, and the ‘self-coding’ of such input by attaching the notes to the appropriate poster under a particular agile concept.

Pennysoft (referring to the case study organization which is not identified for confidentiality reasons) is a global financial services firm with approximately 45,000 employees worldwide. Up to 10,000 of these are IT personnel developing systems to support the business, distributed across multiple sites in the US, Europe and India. A formal ‘waterfall’ development method has been used extensively across the company for several years. A newly developed proprietary method incorporating many principles and practices from agile methods such as Scrum is currently being piloted in several sites. Three such trial projects located in an Irish office were studied as part of this research between July
and September 2009. All were part of distributed teams, but with the majority of analysis, development and test based in Ireland. One was a ‘green field’ project with some US members and a small, inexperienced team of five. The other two were larger (10-20) with US and India based members and were part of larger enterprise wide programs.

A single, 3 hour focus group was then held for each project, with a representative sample of half or more of the team selected by project management. In one case, two participants based in India used a videoconference link and contributed written input using instant messaging. From 3 to 6 researchers filled the roles of moderators, note takers, discussion facilitators and logistical support, and several audio recorders were placed about the room. Each session began with an overview of the research project objectives and the format of the group session. This was followed by an introduction to the agile conceptual framework, including description and examples of how a practice might impinge on creativity, quality and other aspects that affect agility. Then 5-10 minutes was spent on considering each practice in turn (a total of about 2 hours). This was followed by 30 minutes for further discussion of emerging topics, ambiguities and so on. At the end of each session, informants were invited to submit any further, possibly confidential, input directly to the researchers outside the focus group setting.

Before the group session, each development practice as used in the project was described briefly as a set of bullet points on an A1 poster, all of which were hung on the walls of the meeting room. The posters also included a column for each agile concept (see Figure 2) where participants could stick post-it notes with their input on how that concept was affected by the practice concerned. Additionally, two A1 posters were displayed describing the agility constructs. Pens and post-it notes were made available around the room. During the session, the moderator moved from practice to practice, describing each briefly to refresh informants memories and inviting updates or corrections about the practice in verbal or written form. The moderator then encouraged discussion between informants and invited written input. Researchers also captured verbal input from discussions and added these to the posters using a different coloured post-it.

![Figure 2: Poster sample with post-it note contributions](image-url)

Periodically, the importance of specific, concrete examples was emphasised in preference to abstract opinions and feelings. As informants stuck post-its to the posters the researchers selected particularly vague or particularly interesting examples and read them out to the group. Immediately following each
focus group the post-it notes were coded to record the practice and concept to which they applied and the content was typed up into data tables for use in the analysis. Group discussions, which took place during the session, were later transcribed from the audio recordings. The initial analysis was allocated to four researchers with each working on a set of practices, sometimes jointly. Due to time and resource constraints, formal coding and other data analysis techniques were not used. Following the analysis each section was reviewed by at least two academic reviewers and one industrial reviewer (all of whom had also been involved in the focus groups) with extensive discussions and revisions leading to a comprehensive report for the company.

Table 2 below summarises the specific extensions and modifications made to the focus group method as described in the literature.

**Table 2: Novel extensions to focus group data collection technique**

| Captured Written Participant Input | Written input was regarded as the primary data input method, rather than group discussions as usual in focus groups |
| Self-Coding of Participant Input | Participants decided what practice, and which agility concept, with which they would associate each written post-it by placing it appropriately on the wall posters. |
| Substantial Anonymity of Written Input | Written input was substantially anonymous – there was no identification on the post notes, though it would be possible through hand-writing etc for participants to determine the author of a note if they tried. |
| Concurrent Independent Input by Participants | Participants were free to write notes on practices not currently the focus of the group – at times participants were considered and giving input on a range of different practices at the same time. |
| Reduced Capture of Group Discussions | Usually in a focus group there is one discussion underway at any time, and it can therefore be captured in full by the researchers. In this case, there were several concurrent discussions by subsets of participants – some but not all such discussion was captured. |
| Possible increase in ‘thoughtful’ interpretation by participants | Rather than discussions providing the data for the research, where initial thoughts and preconceptions might be captured, the written input could be regarded as the output or conclusion of such discussion. It therefore may include consideration of others opinions and a more thoughtful & considered input. |
| Loss of attribution & other context in written input | The post-its did not identify the individual, role, time written, discussion under way or other contextual data which would be available for normal focus group data. |
| Restricted time/space for writing low inference descriptors | Written input was restricted due to: the short time given each topic limited space on post-its relatively slow speed to write rather than speak input Therefore, opportunity to give illustrations and examples was limited. |
| Highly Structured interview guide based on Method-In–Action analysis. | The sessions were based on a set of practices pre-determined by the researchers through document reviews of the defined method and interviews with the project manager for each team. |
| Highly directed topics to minimise gaps in data | There was a conscious effort to ensure each practice received a minimum level of input – this may have reduced time spent on more important topics (as judged by participants) and placed too much emphasis on topics not considered significant. |
| Heterogenous participants with different team roles/status | Focus group literature calls for randomly selected, homogenous participants to arrive at deep insights into particular topics. Although the concrete situation (the project) was common to all participants, significant heterogeneity was evident based on the diverse team roles involved. Also, participants were determined by project management and were not randomly selected. |

5. Evaluating focus group research

There is extensive literature on the design and moderation of focus group research (Merton, Fiske et al. 1990; Kitzinger 1994; Morgan 1997; Barbour 2007; Stewart, Shamdasani et al. 2007; Krueger and Casey 2009). However, there are few criteria defined for evaluating such research designs. Nor can these researchers find examples of the evaluation of focus groups as a data collection technique. In this section we first consider two sets of evaluation criteria for focus groups, and report an evaluation of the current study using one of the criteria sets. Then we discuss other potential evaluation frameworks proposed for interpretive research in general which, it is argued, provide a more holistic view of the quality of the research as a whole, rather than the specific focus group technique used for data collection.
5.1 Focus group evaluation criteria

The first framework, proposed by Sim (1998), proposes three critical constraints to focus group research as follows:

Table 3: Focus group research evaluation criteria (Sim 1998)

| Issues on consensus and dissent | Participant discussion and “argumentative interactions” (Kitzinger 1994) are central to focus groups (Sim 1998). Yet research into group dynamics indicate that apparent consensus may merely reflect dominant personalities, or majority views and may not be shared by less articulate subjects, or participants in the minority. Similarly, dissent and polarisation into factions may have more to do with group dynamics than with the actual views held. Getting participants to write down their views in advance, a technique used in this study, may help in reducing such effects (Albrecht, Johnson et al. 1993). |
| Strength of Opinion | The emphasis and time spent discussing certain viewpoints in a group setting do not necessarily represent the true strength of feeling of the participants. Therefore, using focus groups to gauge strength of opinion cannot be considered valid. They cannot be considered a verbal form of such surveys (Asbury 1995) quoted in (Sim 1998). |
| Generalisation | Generalisation is a common objective in positivist quantitative research, and normally takes the form of empirical generalisation allowing findings from the study of a representative sample to be extrapolated to the population with a certain degree of statistical confidence. But generalisation in qualitative research is more problematic since findings are normally situated in a certain context. However, theoretical generalisation is still possible whereby findings can be “transferred” from one context to another which has a similar context (Sim 1998). |

An alternative set of four criteria is proposed by Merton, Fiske et al. (1990). These are range, specificity, depth and personal context, and each is described briefly below:

Table 4: Focus group research evaluation criteria (Merton, Fiske et al. 1990))

| Range | It is recommended that a broad range of topics be discussed, possibly including some not foreseen by the researchers. This approach is supported through “nondirective” moderation of the group (Merton and Kendall 1946) and ensures participant input reflects what is important or interesting to the participant rather than to the researcher. Directed research questions and prompts invariably reflect the “framework” of the researcher and may imply certain interpretations and suggestions. |
| Specificity | Capturing input in terms of experiences and perspectives rather than just opinions is advocated by Merton and Kendall (1946). This helps prevent discussion drifting to generalities and reflects Yin’s (1994) call to focus on “low-inference descriptors”. However, this advice has been contested in the literature with the argument that the participants may be best placed to interpret events or experiences and that this approach may actually reduce researcher bias (Hines 2000). An improved technique is to elicit both specific input but also the participants interpretation or opinion. |
| Depth | This relates to the extent of self-revelatory input gained from participants, rather than merely descriptive input. It is important that a “feeling context” is established to elicit input which provides more insight than statements describing what happened or was experienced. This can be easier where participants are intimately involved in the topic as in this study. |
| Personal Context | The personal and social context can be associated with the role played by the individual, such as project manager or developer, their skill and experience and their affinity with the team. Additional individual circumstance may also play a part, such as previous experiences with agile practices and with other project stakeholders (Morgan 1997). Although there are contrary views (Krueger and Casey 2009), most literature (Merton, Fiske et al. 1990; Kitzinger 1994; Sim 1998) calls for homogenous groups selected randomly from a population. Although different roles and experiences will bring different insights to a group discussion, one of the strengths of a homogenous group is that the differences and convergences can be more easily identified and can lead to deep insights (Sim 1998). |

Both these evaluation frameworks are derived from focus group literature and relate directly to the design and conducting of focus groups as a data collection technique. The following section describes the application of one of these to the study conducted in Pennysoft.

5.2 Evaluation of the extended focus group approach

We evaluated the extended focus group approach using the criteria of Merton, Fiske et al. (1990), selecting this based on its prominence in the literature and more extensive operationalisation details provided.
Range – It is recommended that a broad range of topics be discussed, possibly including some not foreseen by the researchers. In the current study, one of the moderators had worked in the organisation previously, had conducted the dyadic interviews and was very familiar with the various projects, methods and participants. The previous senior position of this researcher in the organisation may have led to a certain directed effect in participants, and comments or questions may have inadvertently carried more weight than appropriate.

Planning for focus groups normally include preparation of an interview guide, which contains typical questions, areas for inquiry and hypothesis (Merton and Kendall 1946). However, given the importance of free flowing discussion in a focus group, such guides must be used carefully – the researcher should be familiar with the domain of inquiry and be attentive to both the explicit and implied content of the discussion. This allows them avoid re-covering topics already discussed or inadvertently cutting short a member by switching topic at an inappropriate time. In this case the guide was expressed as a set of ISD practices as used by the particular group in their project, along with the conceptual agile framework. Each practice was addressed in turn with strong delineation as the discussion moved from one to the next. However, the agile concepts were addressed all together for each practice and allowed free flowing discussion. Due to the written input method used, participants were also free to write down input to practices not currently the focus of the moderators and rest of the group. The researchers feel that this structure allowed sufficient flexibility for individuals and sub-groups to address topics as they saw fit, while ensuring all practices used by the team were given minimum attention and input.

A common criticism of focus group research is that conversations between participants are largely ignored both in reportage and analysis (Wilkinson 1998). Although several extended discussions were transcribed and included in the analysis, undoubtedly the main data collection mechanism considered was the written input. Therefore, more careful attention to group discussions could significantly improve the range of data collected, and its depth.

Specificity – Capturing input in terms of experiences and perspectives rather than just opinions is advocated by Merton and Kendall (1946). In this study, the moderators actively encouraged the use of specific examples by participants in illustrating their opinions, and even articulated examples from other projects to encourage description of specific instances. This approach supports “retrospective introspection” (Merton and Kendall 1946) which increases the specificity of input. However, the use of post-its with limited writing space and constraints on time most likely restricted the contribution of specific input and may, indeed, have biased written responses towards the more abstract and subjective.

Depth – Achieving depth of input requires an emotionally and politically ‘safe’ environment for participants. Sensitive issues may not emerge in a group that is not sympathetic. Such ‘safety’ was achieved in some part by using written notes as the primary method of accepting input from participants – such notes were nominally anonymous. However, since each participant posted their notes, in their own handwriting, on the wall posters it could not be considered entirely secure in this respect. The emphasis put on specificity and detailed examples from the stimulus situation also helped in achieving depth.

Personal Context – The personal and social context of participants is an important factor in interpreting input. In the current study, a representative sample of members from across the ISD teams were selected – these differed in roles, skills, and experience among other factors. However, all had intimate knowledge and experience of the project and the practices used and were homogenous in that respect. Since the study was evaluating the agility of the team as a whole rather than a certain role within the team, it was felt this was the most appropriate way to constitute the groups. However, participants were selected by the project manager of each team and a certain bias may have been introduced in terms of representation.

In considering the effect of personal context on the research method, it is clear that this is particularly important in the data analysis stage. To facilitate this, quotations and other input should to be attributed accurately to individual group members (Sim 1998). This facilitates effective coding and pattern detection during data analysis (Kidd and Parshall 2000). In this study, a significant opportunity for improvement is to devise a mechanism to allow attribution of both written and verbal input.
However, this must be integrated with an approach that also provides broader context to the input – which places each written contribution in terms of the questions or discussion which prompted it. Although the placing of post-its at certain places on each poster provides some such context, this cannot be considered entirely reliable.

5.3 Evaluation criteria for qualitative research

Although the evaluation described above allowed us to draw several improvements of the approach we have used, the evaluation criteria employed are akin to “rules of thumb” for conducting focus groups. This is because there is no theoretical or conceptual grounding of these criteria – they are not based on any evaluation criteria more widely used in qualitative research. In addition, they are proposed for evaluating the focus group aspects of research rather than the overall research method. As such, their ability to establish the impacts of such data collection on the quality of research is limited. Therefore such criteria are not sufficient to appraise the efficiency and effectiveness of the overall approach. Further evaluation with respect to quality criteria well-grounded and commonly used in qualitative research will help address these shortcomings and highlight other aspects of the approach that can be improved. In this subsection we provide a review of several potential evaluation criteria.

In terms of the evaluation of more general interpretive research, validity and reliability are two most important facets of the quality of qualitative inquiry (Yin 1994, Silverman and Marvasti 2008). Hammersley (1990) provides two straightforward definitions of validity and reliability respectively: “by validity, I mean truth: interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (p. 57); and “reliability refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions” (p. 67). A more detailed and complex set of criteria have been argued for (Miles and Huberman 1994; Yin 1994), which further deconstruct validity and reliability. It is important to acknowledge at the outset, however, that particular philosophical underpinnings or theoretical orientations and resulting methodological commitments for qualitative inquiry will suggest different criteria for judging validity and reliability (Patton 2002). Furthermore, as the popularity of interpretive research in IS has increased, a debate has developed as to how to evaluate its quality. Here we provide an summary review of the major contributions to this debate to provide context for the selection of evaluation criteria the authors believe most suitable to assess the extended focus group data collection method used in our research.

Interpretive research in IS has gained considerably in popularity since 1991 when it constituted a very small proportion of published IS research (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991; Walsham 2006). Early interpretive research used quality criteria borrowed from the well-established positivist tradition which broadly assesses validity and reliability at various levels of granularity and specificity. Texts on qualitative and case study research offered operationalised versions of these (Miles and Huberman 1994; Yin 1994) and were adopted by interpretive researchers (Johnson, Buehring et al. 2006). However, there has been an increasingly active debate in the literature over the appropriateness of such criteria, based as they are in positivist philosophical assumptions (Johnson, Buehring et al. 2006). By failing to guide research design and execution appropriately, and in undermining the perceived quality of such research, the pervasiveness of these well-established but not-universally optimal criteria are seen to limit the effectiveness of interpretive research.

Recognition of this weakness has led to three distinct responses in the literature. One argues that the epistemological underpinnings of interpretive research argues against the use of established, standardised or imposed criteria at all (Bochner 2000). The application of criteria is seen as constraining the freedom and limiting possibilities of the research, and indeed resisting the change which characterises the progressive nature of research itself. The use of “personal standards” is instead advocated to ensure quality of research. This approach to judging research is reflected in the view of interpretivism as a ‘craft’ (Seale 1999) and criteria to evaluate it as restricting the freedom and creativity of the researcher to operate in the “new rubric of poetic social science” (Bochner 2000).

A second response, and seemingly the most popular in the literature, is that of extending existing criteria for validity and reliability by sub-categorisation. Several works have contributed variously alternative, complementary and overlapping proposals. These result in validity being extended from the three most popular forms of construct, internal and external validity to increasingly specific forms
such as ‘successor’, catalytic’, ‘voluptuous’ and ‘ironic’ (Altheide and Johnson 1994) . Similarly, reliability can be disaggregated into more specific concepts such as ‘quixotic’, ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronic’ (Kirk and Miller 1986).

A third approach to creating evaluation criteria for interpretive research is to propose alternates which are not based explicitly on validity and reliability. In a recent paper Geoff Walsham, an authority on interpretive methods in IS research, excludes any mention of the words validity or reliability when describing how the quality of such methods should be evaluated (Walsham 2006). Instead he refers to two alternate schemes which propose variously the use of authenticity, plausibility and criticality (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993) or the seven principles based on anthropology, phenomenology and hermeneutics which have gained prominence in recent years (Klein and Myers 1999). However, there remains considerable ambiguity in how these should be applied, with one study (Cepeda and Martin 2005) looking at the quality of case studies applying the seven principles in addition to, rather than instead of, Yin’s (Yin 1994) tests for validity and reliability. Regardless, K&M are frequently cited by IS researchers to justify or validate their research approaches (e.g., Pan et al. 2006, Dhillon and Torkzadeh 2006, Bjørn and Ngwenyama 2009).

A lack of satisfactory conclusions or universally accepted criteria for judging interpretive research indicates that this debate may continue for some time to come (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Johnson, Buehring et al. 2006). Although the two sets of evaluation criteria for focus groups proposed (Sim 1998; Merton, Fiske et al. 1990) confront specific aspects of that data collection technique, they do not consider the wider interplay between data collection, analysis, research design and other factors impinging on the quality of the research. The authors therefore favor a framework addressing the complete research method. Given that the epistemological nature of the research is critical interpretive, criteria with a basis in positivism were not considered as relevant as those explicitly grounded in interpretivism. The most comprehensive and established evaluation framework specific to critical interpretive research is therefore chosen (Klein and Myers 1999). The seven principles described in the framework also include descriptions of and references to various studies which are assessed by the authors using one or more of the principles. However, a search of the literature has not revealed any previous studies involving the formal operationalisation of all of the principles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5: Interpretive research evaluation criteria (Klein and Myers 1999)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. The Fundamental Principle of the Hermeneutic Circle</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This principle suggests that all human understanding is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole that they form. This principle of human understanding is fundamental to all the other principles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. The Principle of Contextualization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires critical reflection of the social and historical background of the research setting, so that the intended audience can see how the current situation under investigation emerged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. The Principle of Interaction Between the Researchers and the Subjects</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires critical reflection on how the research materials (or “data”) were socially constructed through the interaction between the researchers and participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. The Principle of Abstraction and Generalization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires relating the idiographic details revealed by the data interpretation through the application of principles one and two to theoretical, general concepts that describe the nature of human understanding and social action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. The Principle of Dialogical Reasoning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires sensitivity to possible contradictions between the theoretical preconceptions guiding the research design and actual findings (“the story which the data tell”) with subsequent cycles of revision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. The Principle of Multiple Interpretations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires sensitivity to possible differences in interpretations among the participants as are typically expressed in multiple narratives or stories of the same sequence of events under study. Similar to multiple witness accounts even if all tell it as they saw it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. The Principle of Suspicion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires sensitivity to possible “biases” and systematic “distortions” in the narratives collected from the participants.</td>
</tr>
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6. Conclusion

Given the severe time and resource restrictions, and the extensive scope and lack of prescription of the research task, the focus group approach was highly successful in gathering large amounts of data from each ISD team. The use of written, semi-anonymous input and a highly structured format created specifically for each team, together with multiple researchers with deep knowledge of the
projects were critical. However, the several novel extensions to the focus group data collection technique described here justifies a comprehensive evaluation of the research method. In this paper the authors discuss several evaluation frameworks found in both focus group and qualitative research literature. We outline the current debate concerning the evaluation of focus groups specifically, and interpretive research in general. In proposing the use of a comprehensive evaluation framework which addresses the whole research method rather than specifically focus groups as the data collection method, the authors recognize such a framework should not be based on assumptions of positivist epistemology. Although not widely applied in the literature, the 7 principles proposed by K&M, being founded on hermeneutics, phenomenology and anthropology, are designed specifically for the evaluation of critically interpretive research. Future work will include the operationalisation of these 7 principles as a set of self-reflective questions, and the application of these to the research described in this paper. It is expected that this work will lead to a set of guidelines for the use of focus groups as a useful data collection technique for IS researchers, and a new framework for the evaluation of interpretive IS research more generally.

References


Kitzinger, J. (1994). "The methodology of Focus Groups: the importance of interaction between research participants." Sociology of Health & Illness 16(1).


Identification and Motivation of Participants for Luxury Consumer Surveys Through Viral Participant Acquisition

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Abstract: Luxury consumer behaviour is still a relatively new area of research, one that relies largely on paid surveys and especially on student samples. However, it is questionable whether moderately paid surveys really can attract wealthy heirs or busy managers or if students can imagine themselves in the role of experienced luxury consumers. In addition, many researchers hesitate to target luxury consumers. One reason is the ongoing discussion in the literature as to what constitutes a luxury consumer and as to how luxury consumers can be distinguished from non-luxury consumers and ultimately, how to identify them for empirical studies. What is more, this particular target group is notoriously hard to access and difficult to persuade to participate in any survey. Despite these problems, no article could be found in the literature, which addressed either the identification or the motivation of respondents for luxury consumer surveys (LCS). Therefore, the objective of this paper is to categorize and to discuss the means of identification and motivation of participants for LCS. Based on a literature analysis of existing LCS, the paper presents a categorization of the major research objectives, target groups, and identification methods for LCS. Subsequently, it provides an overview of common methods of participant motivation and discusses their suitability for LCS, which suggests thinking about some non-monetary incentives that could convince luxury consumers to participate in a survey in their own interest. As this idea coincides with the notion of viral marketing, it seems promising to adapt this concept for viral participant acquisition (VPA). Consequently, the paper presents a case study detailing the implementation of VPA on a recent LCS and concludes with the lessons learned.

Keywords: luxury products, luxury brands, luxury consumers, survey participant acquisition, survey response, viral marketing

1. Introduction: Catching a mysterious target group

Although there is a growing base of literature on the marketing of luxury products, it still contains only a relatively small amount of large-scale luxury consumer surveys (LCS). Many researchers hesitate to target luxury consumers for two fundamental reasons. First of all, there is still no recognized definition in business literature as to what constitutes a luxury consumer, leading to confusion as to how they can be distinguished from non-luxury consumers and ultimately, how to identify them for empirical studies.

Besides this, another challenge is to access and to motivate luxury consumers to participate in a survey. While there are well-funded researchers who try to attract adequate participants with monetary incentives, many researchers lack the financial resources for paid surveys or have to supervise student projects, which also suffer from limited access and funding. This explains why a big part of LCS relies on relatively easy-to-reach student samples. However, the specific characteristics of luxury consumers including their high income, their lack of time and their luxury connoisseurship suggest that samples made up of paid survey workers or students might not be representative of that particular target group. For instance, it is questionable whether moderately paid surveys really attract wealthy heirs or busy managers, or if students, who are appropriate in many other areas of research, are really able to assume the role of experienced luxury consumers.

Despite these problems, no article could be found in the literature, which addressed either the identification or the motivation of respondents for LCS. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to categorize and to discuss the means of identification and motivation of participants for LCS based on an analysis of existing LCS.

The resulting framework suggests thinking about some non-monetary incentives that could convince luxury consumers to participate in a survey in their own interest. As this idea coincides with the notion of viral marketing, it seems promising to adapt this concept for viral participant acquisition (VPA). Consequently, another objective of this paper is to test VPA on a recent LCS and to provide some lessons learned.
The paper is organised into another four sections. Based on a definition of luxury products and brands and a literature analysis of existing LCS, section 2 presents a categorization of the major research objectives, target groups, and identification methods for LCS. It further introduces the luxury consumption and the luxury affection scales, which allow for the identification of any LCS target group. Section 3 presents an overview of common methods of participant motivation and discusses their suitability for LCS, which leads to the idea of adapting the concept of viral marketing for participant acquisition. Consequently, section 4 presents a case study detailing the implementation of VPA on a recent LCS. Finally, the article concludes with the lessons learned.

2. Identification of participants for luxury consumer surveys

2.1 The definition of luxury products and brands

In management literature it is accepted to distinguish necessary or ordinary products from luxury products by their essential characteristics. Accordingly, luxury products are characterised by their price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness, and symbolic meaning.

As they are highly associated with their core products, common definitions of luxury brands refer to specific associations with their products. The essential characteristics of luxury brands therefore correspond largely with those of luxury products. Consequently, their definition can be derived from that of luxury products as follows: Luxury brands are regarded as images in the minds of consumers that comprise associations about a high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinarity and a high degree of further non-functional associations (c.f. Heine 2010).

Although luxury products and brands require a relatively high rating for all the essential characteristics, a wide range of possible ratings still exists within the luxury segment. The luxuriousness increases alongside an increasing level of at least one of these characteristics. Not surprisingly, the luxury level is one of the major means of differentiation for luxury manufacturers. Accordingly, Dubois and Duquesne (1993, p. 38) suggest distinguishing between accessible luxury products, which are affordable for most people at least from time-to-time and exceptional luxury products, which are affordable only for wealthy people.

LCS refers to any consumer survey on luxury products and brands as defined above. For the purpose of this article, the existing LCS that could be found in the international scientific literature were analysed. This analysis demonstrates that a variety of target groups need to be distinguished depending on research objectives. Therefore, the article proceeds to present the major research objectives of LCS.

2.2 Research objectives of luxury consumer surveys

As illustrated in figure 1, the research objectives can be placed into two main categories: studies focusing on luxury (brands, products or product categories) and studies focusing rather on its consumers. The first group splits again into image analyses and studies of consumer perceptions about the luxury brand identity. According to the concept of brand identity by Esch (2008, p. 91), research can concentrate either on rational or emotional perceptions. Studies about the rational component focus on essential and accessory characteristics of luxury (e.g. Christodoulides et al. 2009; Vickers and Renand 2003; Vigneron and Johnson 2004), which can lead to consumer-oriented definitions of luxury brands (e.g. Dubois et al. 2001). Studies about the emotional component concentrate on symbolic brand characteristics (e.g. Dubois and Czellar 2002) or specifically on the luxury brand personality (c.f. Heine 2009). Besides this, there are studies analysing the image of luxury (e.g. Matthiesen and Phau 2005 for Hugo Boss in Australia and Wong and Zaichkowsky 1999 for 40 luxury brands in Hong Kong). The studies about luxury consumer behaviour focus on the characteristics of luxury consumers, their consumption preferences and on environmental influences affecting luxury consumption. Studies about luxury consumer characteristics cover their purchasing motives (e.g. Tsai 2005), attitudes (e.g. Dubois et al. 2005), values (e.g. Dubois and Duquesne 1993; Heine and Trommsdorff 2010a; Sukhdial et al. 1995) and demographics (e.g. Dubois and Laurent 1993). Results of these studies serve as a basis for the segmentation of luxury consumers (e.g. Dubois et al. 2005). In addition, there are studies focusing on luxury consumer preferences (e.g. Nia and Zaichkowsky 2000 about country-of-origin preferences) and studies about environmental influences on luxury consumption incorporating the impact of reference groups (e.g. Wiedmann et al. 2007), culture (e.g. Casaburi 2010) and situational factors (e.g. Dubois and Laurent 1996).
These research objectives of LCS correspond with different requirements for their target group. Therefore, the next paragraph outlines the major LCS target groups with reference to these research objectives.

2.3 The target groups of luxury consumer surveys

Figure 1 illustrates the major target groups of LCS. They can be differentiated by consumer characteristics including their brand/product knowledge, attitudes towards luxury and level of luxury product consumption and by the brand/product category (general or specific).

First of all, the analysis of existing LCS demonstrates that their target groups extend even to the general population of a particular cultural group or region. In addition, the analysis suggests that it is actually enough for a large part of LCS to target luxury insiders, who can be defined as respondents with some knowledge about luxury brands, products or product categories.

Luxury insiders consist of luxury and non-luxury consumers. Despite confusions over the definition and identification of luxury consumers, most researchers agree that a basic definition of luxury consumers must rely at least on their luxury consumption. Accordingly, a luxury consumer can be characterised as any person who has acquired several luxury products as defined above within the last few years, which implies that this person also has some knowledge of the luxury segment or at least about specific luxury brands, products or product categories. However, because “access to luxury is no longer a dichotomous state, but a matter of degree” (Dubois and Laurent 1995, p. 69), it is not enough to differentiate only between non-luxury consumers (the excluded), who consume none or very few luxury products and luxury consumers, who comprise a hard to compare spectrum from once-in-a-while to day-to-day luxury consumers. Therefore, they are differentiated by their level of luxury consumption into three major segments including the excursionists, (regular) luxury consumers, and heavy luxury consumers.

In addition, these target groups can also be further differentiated by their attitudes towards luxury into genuine and sceptical segments. This allows the general segment of luxury consumers to be complemented with the sub segment of genuine luxury consumers, which corresponds with the typical notion of a luxury consumer as a person who has some knowledge about the luxury segment, positive attitudes towards luxury brands and products and likes consuming them at present and in the future. In contrast to this, sceptical insiders or consumers have rather negative attitudes towards luxury brands and products. Sceptical consumers might receive luxury products as gifts, buy them out of habit or for reasons other than the common motives of luxury consumption. Accordingly, non-luxury consumers split into the distant non-luxury consumers (named according to Dubois, Czellar, and Laurent 2005, p. 120), who are skeptical towards luxury products and also do not aspire to consume them, and potential luxury consumers (or aspirers), who have positive attitudes and aspire to consume luxury products when they can afford them later in life.

For many studies it is essential to also differentiate the target groups according to their attitudes, which is demonstrated by the study of Dubois and Duquesne (1993, p. 38). They investigated the specific value preferences of luxury consumers by comparing general luxury and non-luxury consumers, who were identified only by their level of consumption. Hence, they ignored on the one hand that luxury consumption does not necessarily rely on values and that values on the other hand may also explain future luxury consumption as they refer to future goals in life. Therefore, their sample of luxury consumers was contaminated by sceptical luxury consumers who actually do not want or even dislike luxury products and their comparison group of non-luxury consumers was...
contaminated with potential luxury consumers such as students who aspire to consume luxury products when they can afford them later in life. The resulting bias of the results could have been prevented with a comparison between distant non-luxury consumers and genuine luxury consumers (c.f. Heine and Trommsdorff 2010a, p. 11).

Figure 1: Relationships between research objectives and target groups of luxury consumer surveys

Figure 1 illustrates adequate target groups for the major research objectives. For instance, image analyses cover the widest scope of target groups ranging from the general population (e.g. the population of Germany) to niche segments (e.g. luxury consumers in Berlin). Studies about luxury brand identity require at least luxury insiders, who have some knowledge about the object of investigation. Not surprisingly, studies on luxury consumer behaviour usually require actual luxury consumers or even genuine luxury consumers and sometimes also (distant) non-luxury consumers as a comparison group. Studies on future luxury consumer preferences usually also cover potential luxury consumers. Based on this, the subsequent paragraph describes the methods for the identification of these LCS target groups.

2.4 Identification of target groups for luxury consumer surveys

2.4.1 Overview about the identification methods

Based on the analysis of existing LCS, three major methods of participant identification can be differentiated, which include the following:

- **Approximation:** According to this method, LCS target groups are identified by variables correlated with luxury consumption such as income or wealth, membership of certain organizations, education or profession (e.g. students as potential luxury consumers; c.f. Neese and Hult 1996, p. 49).

- **Luxury Consumption Scale:** The basic definition of luxury consumers suggests identifying them by their actual luxury consumption. For this purpose, respondents can be asked to select items from a catalogue of luxury brands or products that they have consumed within a given time period (e.g. with brands by Dubois and Laurent 1993, p. 59; Prendergast and Wong 2003, p. 160; Nia and Zaichkowsky 2000, p. 488 and with products by Dubois and Duquesne 1993, p. 39). Such catalogues of luxury brands or products can be referred to as luxury consumption scales. They vary in their scope of product categories ranging from even just a single product or product category (e.g. Neese and Hult 1996, p. 49) or a small set of products (Sukhdial et al 1995, p. 12; Tsai 440; Vickers and Renand 2003, p. 468) to a comprehensive selection representing the whole luxury segment.
Luxury Affection Scale: Participants of LCS can also be identified by a Likert Scale covering cognitive (knowledge-related), affective (attitudes-related) and connotative (consumption-related) statements. As the affective statements constitute the major enhancement when compared to the consumption scale, it can be referred to as luxury affection scale.

Because of their relevance, the luxury product consumption and affection scales will be discussed in detail in the subsequent paragraphs.

2.4.2 The luxury consumption scale

The most recognised approach for the identification of general luxury consumers originates from Dubois and Duquesne (1993, p. 38 et seq.), who compiled a catalogue of the major luxury product categories. As it is far more revealing if someone buys an expensive car than a bottle of champagne, it is differentiated between accessible and exceptional luxury products. However, this product catalogue does not fit today’s market conditions anymore in terms of price levels and product categories. Therefore, it was up-dated for the purpose of a recent LCS (c.f. Heine and Trommsdorff 2010a, p. 10).

As a prerequisite, an adequate categorization of luxury product categories was developed based on an analysis of existing categorizations in business and scientific literature (e.g. Allérès 2003, p. 86; Britt 2006, p. 2; Catarède 2003, p. 60; Giraud et al. 1995, p.6; McKinsey 1990, p. 15). Figure 2 presents the resulting categorization.

As a prerequisite, an adequate categorization of luxury product categories was developed based on an analysis of existing categorizations in business and scientific literature (e.g. Allérès 2003, p. 86; Britt 2006, p. 2; Catarède 2003, p. 60; Giraud et al. 1995, p.6; McKinsey 1990, p. 15). Figure 2 presents the resulting categorization.

Figure 2: Categorization of luxury product categories

Based on the categorization of luxury product categories, the original luxury consumption scale was adapted and extended. As shown in figure 3, the basic consumption scale concentrates on products, but could be easily complemented with services as well. According to Dubois and Duquesne (1993, p. 39) a non-luxury consumer is defined as a person who has neither consumed an accessible nor an exceptional luxury product. A luxury consumer is defined as any person who has bought or received at least three accessible luxury products within the last two years and two exceptional luxury products within the last three years.

2.4.3 The luxury affection scale

The development of a luxury affection scale was based on the conceptual groundwork, existing literature (e.g. Dubois and Laurent 2005, p. 117; Heine and Trommsdorff 2010a, p. 11) and a recent LCS (Heine and Trommsdorff 2010b), which also serves as a basis for the case study on VPA in section 3.

The scale consists of eight items covering cognitive, affective and connotative statements. Figure 4 displays these statements including their German originals in cursive characters. All together, 3,037 respondents rated these statements on a Seven-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to
“strongly agree”. The elimination of inconsistent data sets led to a net sample of n=2,681. Compared to the general public, this convenient sample includes a larger proportion of young people (65% are below 30), women (56%) and people with a high level of education (about 85% passed at least their A-levels). A factor analysis of all statements using principal components analysis and varimax rotation led to a single-factor solution with an explained variance of 73%. The scale has a decent reliability with a Cronbachs Alpha of .948 and item-scale-correlations for each statement of at least .762 (negative statements were reverse-scored).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessible Luxury Products</th>
<th>Exceptional Luxury Products</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Please indicate which of the following products from a luxury brand you bought or received over the course of the last two years.</td>
<td>(2) Please indicate which of the following products from a luxury brand you bought or received over the course of the last three years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ A scarf or tie worth more than 50€</td>
<td>□ A piece of clothing worth more than 500€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Another piece of clothing of a luxury brand for 100€-500€</td>
<td>□ At least one more piece of clothing of a luxury brand worth more than 500€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ At least one more piece of clothing of a luxury brand for 100€-500€</td>
<td>□ An article of jewellery worth more than 500€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ A leather good worth more than 200€</td>
<td>□ A watch worth more than 5,000€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ High-end shoes worth more than 100€</td>
<td>□ A mobile phone worth more than 2,000€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Cosmetics or perfume worth more than 40€</td>
<td>□ Hi-fi stereo or video equipment worth more than 2,500€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ An article of jewellery for 100€-500€</td>
<td>□ A piece of furniture worth more than 5,000€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ A watch for 400€-500€</td>
<td>□ Silverware worth more than 500€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ A pen or lighter worth more than 100€</td>
<td>□ Porcelain worth more than 1,500€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ A bottle of champagne or wine worth more than 30€</td>
<td>□ An Automobile worth more than 60,000€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ None of the above products</td>
<td>□ A sailing or motor yacht worth more than 300,000€</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ None of the above products</td>
<td>□ None of the above products</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: The luxury consumption scale source: based on Dubois and Duquesne 1993, p. 39

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Item-Scale Correlations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>I know many luxury brands. <em>Ich kenne viele Luxusmarken.</em></td>
<td>.816</td>
<td>.762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I DON’T know much about luxury brands and their products. <em>Ich weiß NICHT viel über Luxusmarken und -produkte.</em></td>
<td>.833</td>
<td>.782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>I am interested in products from luxury brands. <em>Ich interessiere mich für Luxusmarken und -produkte.</em></td>
<td>.895</td>
<td>.858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel attracted by luxury brands and products. <em>Ich fühle mich zu Luxusmarken und -produkten hingezogen.</em></td>
<td>.897</td>
<td>.858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I DON’T like luxury brands and products. <em>Ich mag Luxusmarken und -produkte NICHT.</em></td>
<td>.855</td>
<td>.806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is important to me to consume products from luxury brands (in future). <em>Es ist mir wichtig, Produkte von Luxusmarken (in Zukunft) zu besitzen.</em></td>
<td>.841</td>
<td>.788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connotative</td>
<td>I regularly consume products from luxury brands. <em>Ich kaufe regelmäßig Produkte von Luxusmarken.</em></td>
<td>.826</td>
<td>.772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I want to consume products from luxury brands (also in the future). <em>Ich beabsichtige (auch) in Zukunft Produkte von Luxusmarken zu konsumieren.</em></td>
<td>.883</td>
<td>.842</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: The luxury consumption scale

2.4.4 Applicability of the identification methods

The selection and adaptation of an identification method depends on the LCS target group, which is illustrated in figure 5. Approximation is common for the identification of (potential) luxury and non-luxury consumers, but could also be used for the identification of luxury insiders. The luxury consumption scale is usually employed for the identification of luxury and non-luxury consumers, but could be adapted for potential luxury consumers by asking for purchase intentions and for brand/product-specific luxury consumers by changing the scope of the product catalogue. The luxury
affection scale is the only method for the identification of genuine and sceptical luxury consumers and can be adapted for the identification of any of the other LCS target groups. For instance, general luxury insiders could be identified by using only the cognitive statements and potential luxury consumers could be identified by adapting or deleting the connotative statement about present luxury consumption. In addition, the scale could also be easily adapted to specific categories such as luxury fashion or cars.

Compared to the luxury scales, **approximation** requires less effort and is therefore a popular, but still inaccurate method. Many studies rely on big earners or students to represent (potential) luxury consumers. Dubois and Duquesne (1993) found out that luxury consumption is explained to a large extent by value preferences, which implies that many big earners do not belong to the segment of luxury consumers. Vigneron and Johnson (2004, p. 492) try to justify the suitability of student samples for LCS by their popularity. However, there is evidence that “students are not typical consumers and [should not] be used as surrogates for real consumers” (Christodoulides et al. 2009, p. 399; c.f. James and Sonner 2001), which seems even more evident for the specific target group of luxury consumers. As many students have neither interest nor experience in luxury consumption and might never become luxury consumers, it is obviously inappropriate to target them by the approximation method to represent (potential) luxury consumers. However, the differentiation of research objectives and target groups of LCS provides **several opportunities to employ students** for these surveys. Indeed, many LCS require only luxury insiders, who can also be identified by the luxury affection scale within the student segment. In addition, the scales can even be used to identify actual luxury consumers within that group.

![Figure 5: Relationships between target groups and identification methods (source: literature analysis)](image)

After the identification of respondents, the next challenge is to motivate them to participate in a LCS. This will be discussed in the next paragraph with a focus on its core target group of luxury consumers.

### 3. Motivation of participants for luxury consumer surveys

#### 3.1 Methods of participant motivation

The primary objective of these methods is to **increase the survey response rate**. According to the **hierarchy-of-effects model** by Helgeson, Voss, and Terpening (2002, p. 309) this requires researchers to motivate potential respondents to pass five essential phases including the (1) **attention** for the survey, (2) **intention** of survey participation, (3) **completion** of the survey, (4) **return** of the completed questionnaire (which is not critical for online surveys) and (5) **interest in the results**, which can influence future survey-response behaviour. Another objective of participant motivation is to increase the **data quality** by reducing the selection, measurement and non-response errors that can cause
biased samples and results. The selection error occurs if some members of the target population are less likely to be included in the sample than others and can lead to differences in the characteristics (and answers) between the respondents and the target population. The measurement error (inaccurate answers) and the non-response error (missing answers from possibly dissenting non-respondents) can be caused by the measurement instrument (e.g. unclear questions) and its impact on the respondents (e.g. on their understanding of the questions and their motivation; c.f. Dillman 2007, p. 11).

As a basis for the discussion of motivation strategies for luxury consumers, the common practice of participant motivation was explored with an analysis of A-level marketing journals, which covered all articles (255 in total) that were published in the Journal of Marketing, the Journal of Consumer Research and the Journal of Marketing Research between June 2008 and September 2009. All together, 91% of the articles include empirical studies (2.6 on average and 602 in total), which rely to a greater extent (61%) on student samples. About one in ten studies (12%) relies on non-reactive methods so that participant motivation is of no consideration. Only a small proportion of the studies (8%) contains explicit information about the participant acquisition and motivation, which suggests that this is still not seen as an essential aspect of research methodology. However, this analysis allows for the development of a categorization of common methods of participant motivation, which is illustrated in figure 6. First of all, they can be distinguished into intrinsic and extrinsic motivating methods. Intrinsic motivating methods include awakening curiosity and interest of potential respondents in the subject, creating questionnaires that allow them to have fun or be entertained or give them the opportunity to be heard and to express their opinion.

Extrinsic motivating methods can be further differentiated into promising incentives (i.e. positive consequence) and threatening with negative consequences. The latter includes for instance threatening students with negative consequences for their studies. The use of any form of monetary or non-monetary incentive was mentioned in more than half of the surveys (54%). About one third of the surveys (35%) rely on monetary incentives, which comprise product samples or gifts (used by 7% of all surveys and often include sweets or small utility products), money and vouchers (used by 21% of the surveys) and the chance to win a prize in a lottery (used by 7% of the surveys). The level of monetary rewards depends on the university and ranges mainly from 2 to 10 US$. Non-monetary incentives cover an appraisal for help, additional university credits, information about the study results and possibilities to increase the respondents’ prestige, which includes mentioning them as experts in any publication about the study. A large part of student-based surveys (41%) rely on additional credits. Even if it might actually be more common in practice, providing study results was mentioned in only 5% of the surveys. In very few cases respondents receive personalized study results or even an invitation to a seminar about the study results.

Figure 6: Common methods of participant motivation
3.2 Motivation strategies for luxury consumers

Even if not mentioned explicitly, the analysis suggests that most LCS rely at least implicitly on the respondents' willingness to help the researcher, which makes it the reference for the evaluation of all other methods. This strategy builds on the theory of cognitive dissonance, which constitutes that people participate in a survey in order to avoid the state of discomfort that would be caused by their non-compliance with the social norm of supporting someone who asked for help (c.f. Furse and Stewart 1984, p. 81 et seqq.). This implies that the response rate can be increased with an explicit appeal for help in the survey invitation. The data quality benefits from cooperative respondents who are likely to answer the questionnaire accurately. Therefore, Sukhdial et al. (1995, p. 12) use this strategy as a quality criterion for their study: "beyond an appeal to help the researchers, respondents were not offered any other incentive to complete the surveys." An effective way to inspire respondents' willingness to help is any form of personal contact, which includes survey invitations by phone or possibly even in person (c.f. Nia and Zaichkowsky 2000, p.488; Prendergast and Wong 2003, p. 160; Matthiesen and Phau 2005, p. 320; Vickers and Renand 2003, p. 468; Wong and Zaichkowsky 1999, p. 313).

On a first glance, monetary incentives seem promising for the acquisition of luxury consumers for empirical studies. Indeed, they are common for LCS (e.g. Neese and Hult 1996, p. 50) and especially for commercial surveys. This strategy builds on the social exchange theory, which constitutes that potential respondents choose whether to participate in a survey based on a comparison of its expected costs and benefits (c.f. Dillman 1978, p. 12 et seq.). Accordingly, the motivation for survey participation should be stimulated by decreasing its costs such as the required time and by increasing its benefits for instance with monetary incentives. While they generally have a positive impact on the response rate (c.f. Groves, Presser, and Dipko 2004, p. 4), there is much evidence to suggest that they can also decrease people's motivation. For instance, most people would help their neighbours to carry a sofa up the stairs if they were asked for a favour, but not if they were offered a little lump sum of 50 Cent. Accordingly, the study of Deci (1971, p. 107 et seqq.) demonstrates that monetary incentives can cause the feeling of external control, divert (also originally intrinsic motivated) participants from their original motivations and make them reconsider the costs and benefits of their survey participation. As monetary incentives are usually quite moderate, the resulting cost-benefit ratio is considered as unattractive by many potential respondents and especially by wealthy luxury consumers. Therefore, monetary incentives might discourage especially luxury consumers from participating in a survey and therefore decrease the response rate. In addition, they might attract only a particular (lower) segment of the target population and even some role-playing survey work professionals, which can increase the selection and non-response errors. Even if real luxury consumers still participate, monetary incentives might motivate them to improve their cost-benefit ratio by answering not as accurately, but as quickly as possible. This is supported by Gistri and Pace (2010, p. 8) who complained that many respondents focused especially on the motivational incentives, which increased the measurement error and even made a big part of their data set unusable. However, the level of monetary incentives that would really motivate luxury consumers simply outstrips the budget of most researchers.

Another tempting approach to increase the response rate might be to enforce students to answer a questionnaire. Because of their negative impact on the intrinsic motivation and ultimately on the data quality (c.f. Deci 1971, p. 106), threatening with negative consequences should be reincorporated through promising positive consequences such as additional university credits (e.g. Neese and Hult 1996, p. 49). Kemp (1998, p. 594) complemented this approach with monetary incentives for his students not to participate in his study, but to find adequate participants (c.f. Christodoulide et al. 2009, p. 399; Tsai 2005, p. 440), which helps to prevent the negative impact of monetary incentives on actual respondents. Moreover, this demonstrates that LCS could benefit by relying not on the often non-existing purchase experience of students, but rather on their social network. According to this idea, student-accelerated snowball sampling integrates the acquisition of non-student respondents as practical work in student seminars. For instance, students were instructed in a seminar on luxury consumer behaviour to recruit heavy luxury consumers mainly from their circle of acquaintances (Heine 2009, p. 28). By selecting a very mixed group of students, it is likely to obtain a sample that covers a broad variety of personality types. Besides this, this approach can enhance the motivation of potential respondents as it allows them to help not just an unfamiliar researcher, but also someone they know. The resulting sample covered an arrogant and awe-inspiring football manager, who would have never spent his time on a scientific survey for any another reason than accommodating his daughter’s wish, who was friends with one of the students. This shows that another benefit of this
approach is to provide access to luxury consumer segments which are difficult-to-reach or even inaccessible with a more direct approach. Although students are motivated by course credits, the acquisition of the actual respondents also relies on the appraisal for help in the end. However, studies about the value preferences of luxury consumers indicate that helping someone is usually not their maxim in life (Heine and Trommsdorff 2010a, p. 13). These insights and the disadvantages of monetary incentives suggest thinking about some intrinsic motivating strategies that focus on the attractiveness of the measurement process and on other non-monetary incentives that could convince luxury consumers to participate in a survey in the best case scenario because they simply like it and because it is in their own interest. As this idea coincides with the notion of viral marketing, it seems promising to adapt this concept for Viral Participant Acquisition (VPA). Therefore, the next section introduces the concept of viral marketing and presents a case study about the implementation of VPA.

4. Viral participant acquisition

4.1 Characteristics of viral marketing

Jurvetson (2000) first coined the term of viral marketing in 1997 and defined it as “network-enhanced word of mouth”. It aims to animate potential consumers to propagate a product to their acquaintances on the Internet and to employ their resources such as their personal network, time and communication equipment. Successful viral marketing campaigns spread information exponentially between people. This requires the creation of a teaser, which attracts initial attention from the target group and offers them a real benefit, which encourages them to participate in the campaign and even to tell others about it in their own interest. People participate in viral marketing campaigns for fun or because of curiosity and interest, but also because of extrinsic motivations, which include cultivating contacts, making someone a little present or enhancing their prestige and social self-image (c.f. Langner 2007, p. 27).

4.2 Overview about the survey

The objective of this study was to analyse traits and dimensions of the luxury brand personality. The online questionnaire was organized as follows: After an introduction, respondents were asked about their awareness of and affection for different luxury fashion brands and to complete the luxury affection scale. In the main section, they had to rate on a seven-point Likert scale several brands on about 50 personality traits. In addition, they were asked to rank their value priorities and to indicate some common demographic information. The target group of this study was luxury insiders.

4.3 The implementation of viral participant acquisition

Principle I: Attract the Attention of the Target Group with an eye-catching Teaser

According to the hierarchy-of-effects model by Helgeson, Voss, and Terpening (2002, p. 309), the first step of VPA is to awaken the target group’s attention and interest in the topic. For a teaser to become viral, it is usually effective to use some emotional and especially humorous or even provocative content (Phelps et al. 2004, p. 338). Accordingly, a set of seven teasers was developed (see figure 7). Adequate images can be found in any online library for royalty-free pictures (such as pixelio.de). The teasers contain an introduction to the topic with a stimulating question or quote and an invite to the “The Great Luxury Study” (originally in German). However, they have a very different style in order to attract various personality types and to meet the tastes of the major luxury consumer segments, which were identified in an earlier study and cover traditional, status-oriented and non-conform consumers (c.f. Heine and Trommsdorff 2010a, p. 13). VPA builds on various online communication channels. First of all, survey invitations were emailed to potential respondents containing a motivating text, a teaser and of course a link to the questionnaire. In addition, these invitations were placed in forums, newsgroups and social networking platforms.

Principle II: Create a Benefit that makes People willing to participate in their own Interest

According to the social exchange theory, the success of a viral participant acquisition campaign relies on the target groups’ evaluation of its cost-benefit ratio. Besides decreasing their costs such as the required efforts to access the questionnaire, the focus of this step is to increase their benefits, which should be attractive enough to motivate potential respondents to pass through all further phases of the hierarchy-of-effects model. For this purpose, an entertaining questionnaire design was developed.
by using brand logos and inspiring, varying and also Flash-animated questions, which should encourage the intrinsic motivation of respondents. On top of this, respondents received a detailed personalized evaluation directly at the end of the questionnaire as a non-monetary incentive, which should encourage also their extrinsic motivation. Online survey software usually offers a great choice of question types, but only a few possibilities to display survey results to the respondents (as this is still not common). However, existing functions still allows the creation of personalized evaluations, which should offer an adequate balance between scientific-based results and entertainment. The evaluation section starts with an overview about the research objectives and relevant results of previous studies. The next screen displays a personalized value profile in a radar chart according to Schwartz (2006, p. 2) and some further explanations. The subsequent screen introduces the concept of luxury brand personality followed by a personal profile of brand personality preferences, which provides respondents with some guidance for their next shopping trips. Entertaining features include a statement about their personal predisposition to suffer from a serious luxury addiction and an amusing description of their specific luxury consumer type with about 500 potential combinations.

**Figure 7: Teasers for viral participant acquisition**

---

[1 Panic Room](Image)

[2 Glacier Goggles](Image)

[3 More & More](Image)

[4 Chicken Science](Image)

[5 Pink Shower](Image)

[6 Wise Man](Image)

[7 Scream](Image)
Principle III: Trigger a Network Virus by Motivating Respondents to even recruit Others

According to the idea of viral marketing, respondents should be employed to also support participant acquisition in exchange for the opportunity to satisfy any social need such as prestige. As a prerequisite, the overall benefit must meet or even exceed the expectations of the respondents. Based on this, the key task of this step is to reduce their costs such as time and effort for sharing the benefit with others. Therefore, survey invitations were promoted by email and Internet postings, which can be easily shared and discussed with other people. In addition, the questionnaire was complemented with a recommendation form, which allowed respondents to select a teaser, to add some personal greetings and to invite their friends to the study. The respondents and their email addresses appeared as the originators of these invitations. This practice also has a positive impact on the response rate because people tend to open emails from friends, but often ignore messages from unknown senders (Phelps et al. 2004, p. 338).

4.4 Evaluation of viral participant acquisition for luxury consumer surveys

The impact of VPA on the response rate was tested with an initial mailing to a sample of 1,011 university alumni. It was sent out in 16 different versions covering four combinations with or without personal evaluation and (seven different) teasers. The mailing software registered a delivery failure rate of about 6% (61 recipients) and a rate of opened emails of about 41% (389 people opened the email). The response rate is defined as the ratio of the number of completed questionnaires and opened emails, which amounts in total to 38% (149 completed questionnaires).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Email Version</th>
<th>Opened emails</th>
<th>Completed questionnaires</th>
<th>Response rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Non-target group</td>
<td>Target group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without evaluation</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with evaluation</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without teaser</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with teaser</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no teaser and no evaluation</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaser and no evaluation</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no teaser and evaluation</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaser and evaluation</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: The Impact of VPA on the response rate

As shown in figure 8, the response rate for mailings including a teaser is 40% (120 completed questionnaires), while it is just 33% (29) for mailings without a teaser. In addition, it is 34% (66) for study invitations that did not promise an evaluation as compared to 42% (83) for mailings promising an evaluation. Since the sample has to be cleaned from non-target group respondents, the adequate net response rate refers to the ratio of completed questionnaires from the target group of luxury insiders and opened emails while delivering some surprising insights: The reference value is a net response rate of 9% for standard emails without either a teaser or an evaluation. With the help of teasers, it nearly doubles to 17%. However, for email versions including an evaluation, the teaser...
makes only a relatively small difference of about 3% (from 26% to 29%). Compared to the standard version, providing an evaluation triples the response rate to 26% or even 29% if also combined with a teaser. The impact of VPA partly evens out for the general sample since teasers and evaluations have a negative impact on the response rate of non-target group recipients. While there is a response rate of 24% for the standard version, it decreases to 18% for mailings with teasers and to only 7% when combined with promising an evaluation. The social exchange theory helps to explain these seemingly paradoxical results: Offering non-luxury insiders a luxury style counselling might divert them from their original motivation of “helping someone” to “receiving an incentive”, which they could perceive as an uninteresting lump sum. On the contrary, luxury insiders are much more interested in the topic and therefore might perceive personalized evaluations as a more valuable benefit. However, standard emails also led to reasonable response rates, which show that the willingness to help is also still a major reason for luxury consumers to participate in scientific surveys. Accordingly, the appeal to help should not be substituted, but complemented with VPA. Besides that, the net response rate varies depending on the teaser. For example, it ranges from only 12% for the “Panic Room” to 31% for the “Wise Man” teaser. These figures reveal that teasers can even cause a negative effect on the response rate. However, teasers with a relatively low response rate should not be necessarily eliminated as they might help to prevent narrow sampling by attracting a broader range of personality types. Moreover, there is also some evidence that VPA triggers some word-of-mouth, as about one in seven respondents recommended the study to at least one friend and almost 40% of them subsequently completed the questionnaire. All together, these results demonstrate that VPA has a positive impact on the overall response rate and an even stronger impact on the response rate of the actual target group of luxury insiders, which makes it especially suitable for LCS. VPA actually has the potential to trigger the respondents’ intrinsic motivation by its creative survey design and their extrinsic motivation for instance by providing them with opportunities to help someone, to gain prestige in their social network and to receive personalized evaluations. In contrast to most other extrinsic motivating methods and especially to monetary incentives, personalized evaluations allow the objectives of researchers and respondents to be complementary. Respondents are motivated to answer the questionnaire accurately as they would like to receive meaningful evaluations. This suggests that VPA also has a positive impact on the data quality. On the contrary, VPA might still cause selection and non-response errors as it relies on the self-selection of respondents. However, these errors also occur with monetary incentives, but are reduced by incorporating a variety of motivation methods and a mixed set of teasers, which attracts a big variety of personality types.

5. Conclusions

The conceptual part of the paper contributes a categorization of research objectives, target groups and identification methods of LCS, which has led to some major implications: It clarified that it is actually acceptable for many LCS to target luxury insiders, the prerequisite being some knowledge about luxury, but no extensive consumption experience. Although it demonstrated that it’s inappropriate to infer a relatively high level of (future) luxury consumption from the occupational category of students, it proposed two strategies for the use of students for LCS. Besides the possibility to improve student samples with reasonable effort by using the luxury scales to identify luxury insiders or consumers within that group, this also includes the use of their network by student-accelerated snowball sampling. In addition, the paper also contributes a discussion of the means of participant motivations for LCS, suggesting that (moderate) monetary incentives are mostly neither effective nor necessary for LCS as there are promising non-monetary incentives and intrinsic-motivating methods. This led to the idea of viral participant acquisition, which aims to create an inner desire for luxury consumers to participate in a survey and even to convince their acquaintances to participate as well. However, this requires researchers to not only think about what respondents could do for them, but also about what they could do for the respondents in exchange for their participation. The case study illustrates the implementation and benefits of VPA and provides some guidance and inspiration to exploit the varied opportunities of the Web X.0 for future LCS.

References


Seizing the Opportunity: Using Availability Samples in Policy Programs for Creating Relevance in Broader Contexts

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Abstract: There is a growing interest within research in management studies to regard ‘organizational practice’ as a highly relevant field of empirical observation. Planned change projects turn out to be promising platforms for theorizing about practice, theory testing, and the innovation and improvement of organizational practices. However, natural contexts can also seriously limit the possibility to transfer the outcomes to broader contexts. Both external and construct validity are evidently a matter of serious concern in this kind of research. Field researchers are placed for difficult assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of their data set. What is the richness and added value of the data, what are the flaws that limit their value for other contexts, and what can be done to reduce the potential threats to external and construct validity? The present paper offers a practical roadmap that leads field researchers through a number of basic design considerations. The steps in the roadmap are illustrated by examples from a large-scale strategic development program for SMEs in the Euregion Meuse-Rhine.

Keywords: field research, external validity, induction, statistical generalization, theoretical generalization

1. Introduction

There is a growing concern about organizational practice as a field of research. ‘Outdoor research’ offers the promise to get close to practice and practitioners. In this way it offers the opportunity to contribute to the improvement and innovation of practices (Romme and Damen 2007, Van Aken 2004), and theorizing about practice (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). Furthermore, this research might be regarded as one of the key answers to the urgent call to make research in the fields of management and organization more relevant for both practice and practitioners (Hambrick 1994, Lawler et al. 1985, Van Aken 2004). The encouragement is a two-way effort: not only researchers are stimulated to regard practice as a field of empirical study, but practitioners are stimulated also to reflect on their work, and carry out inquiries in their own fields of practice (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). The key motive in both perspectives is to make local knowledge useful for other contexts (Van Aken 2004).

In this study we discuss a specific strand of ‘outdoor research’. We refer to the strategy in which researchers nestle their research in ‘naturally occurring’ change and policy programs, or organizational experiments (Lawler 1977). This strategy offers a broad window of opportunities for doing research that is both relevant for theory as for practice (Lawler et al. 1985). The full range of social science methods can be applied in this ‘outdoor research’: rigorous quantitative and qualitative observation, and a mixture of both. However, we can not conceive that these kinds of settings also carry serious limitations for academic research since the stakeholders in these change processes determine to a large extent the degrees of freedom for the researchers. This can seriously limit the possibilities to create the necessary conditions for solid research. The limitations of samples originating from change and policy programs concern both external validity and construct validity. External validity is threatened because actors that participate in these programs have mostly passed a process of selection (Denrell and Kovács 2008) or self-selection (Harris 2001), which can result in a selection bias (Heckman 1979). Problems regarding construct validity can arise because researchers might be strongly restricted in their choice of measurement instruments, and consequently, can give less certain guarantees that the instruments used are indeed informing us about the attribute they are supposed to measure.

The samples originating from policy programs are often opportunity (or convenience) samples. As such, researchers that want to use these samples are in a dilemma. Do they give priority to the added value and richness of their material or do they give priority to the methodological expectations hold by
their peers? A key challenge for researchers working in this area is to make it plausible to their peers, that their conclusions are valid or informative for wider contexts (Thompson and Perry 2004).

There is a huge literature on sampling, external validity, and construct validity (e.g., Campbell and Fiske 1959, Cronbach and Meehl 1955, Denrell and Kovacs 2008, Heckman 1979). However, there still remains a wide gap between the abstract and fragmented views from these studies, and the complexity of a dynamic field work setting. Researchers that want to make use of data collected by means of a policy program are in need of an overview that can be used to make an iterative assessment about what is desirable, and what is possible with their data. As such, the aim of this study is to offer a practical roadmap that guides field researchers through a sequence of design considerations to evaluate their data and to make a justification of the use of this data in academic research. This roadmap consists of three sequential steps: (1) a first assessment of the data, (2) a choice about the contribution, and (3) a plan of action to upgrade the data. In this vein, this paper aims to contribute to the methodological literature about ‘doing research outdoors’ (Bryman 1988). The paper is based on experiences in a large-scale strategic development program (‘Strategic Innovation’) in which more than 700 Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) participated.

2. Policy program ‘Strategic Innovation’: An overview

To illustrate the roadmap, we will use examples of the policy program ‘Strategic Innovation’. ‘Strategic Innovation’ was launched in the Euregion Meuse-and-Rhine by regional governments in cooperation with the Interreg Fund of the European Commission, and aimed to support SMEs in that region to strengthen their innovation capacity. The program was targeted towards 650 firms. The design of the intervention program was based on a pilot project in which 14 SMEs participated. The developed method is an integration of well-known intervention methods, like search conference, survey feedback, cognitive mapping, SWOT analysis, and action planning. The main active ingredient of the method was a series of two small group sessions with staff, and in some cases external stakeholders (suppliers or customers). The positive reactions from the entrepreneurs on the pilot program made the regional policymakers decide for a large-scale rollout of the program. The large-scale implied the outsourcing of the field work to business/management consultants of private firms. The outsourcing of the field work had the consequence that the program team had to find ways to instruct, monitor, and coach the consultants. The decision was made to follow two additional routes to comply with these different goals. First, protocols were developed to meticulously instruct the consultants how to carry out the interventions. Second, an effective information system was set up, serving three functions: as learning tool in the workshops, as quality management indicator of the work of the consultants, and the building of a database for scientific research. The program has been completed according to plan in July 2008. By now the regional governments in The Netherlands and Belgium have decided for two new follow-up projects involving respectively 300 and 250 SMEs. This decision opens the possibility to use these samples for replication. The research strategy was to build an extensive database fed with qualitative and quantitative information, both by the consultants, and the participants: reports from interviews and meetings, surveys, SWOT-analyses, action plans and so on. All texts have been embedded in software for handling qualitative data (NVivo) and quantitative data (SPSS).

3. The roadmap

Typical mainstream research follows a sequence of steps (Kumar, 2005): First, a problem statement is proposed and formulated. Next, the research design is conceptualized. These two steps are based on a literature review. After that, instruments for data collection are constructed and a sample is selected and collected. Then, the research method is set out and data is processed and tested. Finally, results are presented. Many textbooks are available on how to progress through these steps (e.g., Creswell 2003, Kumar 2005). However, in data that is the result of a policy program, this rarely is the case. The stakeholders of the program determine to a large extend the data collection. Nonetheless, these data can provide rich information, since they are often collected in a meaningful context. Therefore, it would be regretful to sweep them away on the grounds that they do not follow the mainstream research logic.

As such, this study introduces a roadmap to evaluate data collected through a policy program. This roadmap will guide researchers and contains three sequential steps. The first step is making an assessment about the potential strengths and weaknesses of the data, both regarding robustness and meaning. The researcher need to take advantage of the data’s strengths and must try to eliminate the data’s weaknesses. The second step comprehends making a choice regarding the contribution of the study to theory and practice. What is the researcher’s objective? This choice has implications for the
third step of the roadmap, which involves making a plan of actions to upgrade the data, and reducing the threats to external and construct validity. When the researcher has followed these three steps, he/she has made a thorough evaluation of the data, and as such, he/she can make a justification of the use of the data in academic research. Below, each step will be explained and illustrated when necessary with examples of the policy program ‘Strategic Innovation’.

3.1 STEP 1: Assessment of the data set

In mainstream research the research design can predominantly be considered as a derivative from the interests and aims of the researchers. That means that the *aims* of the research, either regarding theory building, theory testing or practical application define the point of departure. The subsequent design of the study is meant to determine what kind of data would fit those aims. However, in the context of policy programs, discussed in this paper, the choices for researchers tend to be far more limited. Either data are already available, or the possibilities for data gathering are strongly restricted by influential stakeholders in the program. The consequence is that the *opportunities* offered by the data constitute the point of departure in this kind of research. The researcher has to find out what the strong and weak points in the data set are, how the possibilities of the data set can be further enlarged, and how the external validity can be strengthened. The design of the study cannot be formulated in a linear way, but requires iteration between the possibilities of the data set and wishes of the researcher. This assessment must be carried out with a critical eye and vivid imagination, because in ‘natural’ projects, data sets do not only have hidden flaws, but also hidden opportunities. The following checklist can be used as a guide through this first assessment process of the data. As we already mentioned, the answers on these questions are influenced by the researcher’s wishes and objectives about the data set:

- Do the data offer the opportunity to provide new insights?
- What are the qualities of the data in terms of validity and reliability?
- What are the qualities (advantages and shortcomings) of the sample(s)?
- What are the options for repairing, completing or upgrading the data?

Taking ‘Strategic Innovation’ as an example, we made the following assessment. The data set of ‘Strategic Innovation’ indicated that the data offered rich opportunities for cross-sectional research into the interrelationships of a broad range of variables of high academic interests, such as: innovation climate, strategic conversation, organizational characteristics and customer interaction (e.g., Slater and Mhor 2006; Deshpandé and Farley 2004, Liedtka and Rosenblum 1996). Second, methodological strengths and weaknesses were analysed in this process. The strengths of the data set regarded the *broad variety* of qualitative and quantitative sources. Data is collected through surveys, and reports from interviews and group sessions. Data is also collected from *more than one source*, making them more reliable (e.g., surveys are completed by different individuals within the company). A possible shortcoming of the sample was that the acquisition procedures in the program could create a *(self-)* selection bias. Also *construct validity* was considered as a serious problem in the data set, because no validated procedures were available, or could made to fit into the intervention program. Furthermore, the ‘Strategic Innovation’ data set has some options to repair, complete or upgrade the data. Because the identity of the firms is known, there are possibilities to add relevant data of *secondary sources*. For example, there is the possibility to add objective and financial data. At last, the decision of policy-makers to continue the program for new groups of firms, opened the chance to *replicate* the analyses.

3.2 STEP 2: Basic choices

While the assessment of the data set advances and the researchers become well informed about the potentials and the flaws of their data, they become ready to make a basic choice on the perspective of their inquiry. The perspectives are based on different strategies the researcher can choose to pursue generalizability. The first perspective is deductive and aims to inform us about social groups and categories by making inferences from samples from those groups and categories. It is the perspective of statistical generalization. The second perspective also follows deductive logic but uses theory as a path to generalization (Blair and Zinkhan 2006). Theories serve to produce propositions that can be tested by making empirical observations. Once the theory is tested, it can be applied to new situations. One refers in this respect to theoretical generalization (Yin 1989). The third perspective is mainly based upon induction. Observations from the field are interpreted, coded and integrated in order to construct new conceptual frames that serve to understand, or change that field. This
perspective refers to theory-building. The choice of the perspective also influences the criteria by which the sample needs to be evaluated (step 1). When the researcher for example wishes to make statements about the population, it is required that the sample is random, whether when the researcher wishes to build theory, sample criteria are different (e.g., broad variety of cases).

3.2.1 Statistical generalization

Statistical generalization is a first perspective researchers can choose. In statistical generalization inferences are made about a universe (or ‘population’) based on empirical data about a sample from that universe. Researchers working along this line have statistical procedures and formulas available that enable them to do judgements about the level of confidence regarding the generalizations. These confidence levels depend mostly on the size and internal variations, both in the universe and in the sample (Yin 1989). This perspective fits in the missions of disciplines that are focused to inform about characteristics and trends in populations, like labour economics, election research, and epidemiology. The ‘sacred’ principle of this generalization strategy is the use of randomized samples, meaning that chance determines which members of the universe are assigned to a sample (Cook and Campbell 1979). Randomization purports to eliminate all possible rival explanations of final effects (‘rival hypotheses’) “without specifying whatever they are” (Yin 1989 p. 8; Yin 2003 in Sørensen, Mattsson, and Sundbo 2010).

However, in many areas of social research this principle of using randomized samples is difficult to realize. In the case of opportunity (or availability, convenience) samples the data-selection is driven by circumstances or by decisions made in the past. The result can be that certain types of respondents can be either over- or underrepresented (Winship and Mare 1992). In that case the risk exists that the sample can give a seriously distorted picture of the universe. At that stage the sample has to be regarded as a non-randomized sample. The implication is that the certainty that the control of the infinitive number of unspecified biases (or: ‘rival hypotheses’) is lost. As such, researchers that want to make inferences about a population based on a sample created through a policy program are forced to take measures to reduce the threats of external validity. This can be done by a systematic search for potential biases, and by taking corrective action. Economists have built statistical selection bias models to detect potential bias, test their impact and to adjust the data to the requirements of their statistical analyses (Heckman 1979, Kalton 1983, Winship and Mare 1992). In order to detect the bias, researchers first need to analyze the process by which respondents have been selected, or are ‘self-selected’. In the case of ‘Strategic Innovation’, participating firms are selected in two ways: directly on a one-by-one basis by external consultants, who approached their local networks, and collectively, by representative organizations (such as professional associations). A thing to bear in mind is whether these different approaching strategies cause any differences. One should be aware that the statistical modelling strategies serve to ‘restore’ the image of the universe that is based on the sample. When researchers pursue other aims in their analysis, for example analyzing co-variance, other strategies might be more effective to reduce the threat to external validity.

3.2.2 Theoretical generalization

The second perspective researchers can choose for their inquiry is theoretical generalization. Researchers taking the perspective of theoretical generalization are not predominantly interested in the characteristics of the universe, rather than in the interrelationship between variables. They are searching for co-variance, and not for means, and other characteristics of the universe. The basic strategy is the falsification of rival hypotheses (Cook and Campbell 1979). The point of departure for this perspective is a previous developed theory. Empirical observations are used to test the theory, by the acceptance or rejection of propositions that are derived from that theory. Before propositions can be accepted, researchers have to inspect whether other variables might have been responsible for the established effect of co-variance. These ‘rival hypotheses’ might have an origin in the way theoretical constructs are measured, or might be the result of the way the sample is built up. The researchers have the responsibility to trace possible error, and to disarm these threats. The critical question deals with the propensity that the established relationship (co-variance) can be rightfully attributed to the dependent variable, and not to rival explanations.

With regard to sample requirements, literature suggests that academic research tends to study phenomena that are largely resistant to sampling bias (Blair and Zinkhan 2006). Relationships between variables remain relatively accurate even if the sample is disproportionate (Blair and Zinkhan 2006). The basic condition is that the sample is diverse enough. As such, opportunity samples or
samples coming from policy program can be used when researchers choose for theoretical generalization. However, it is neither wise to use too narrow opportunity samples, because they tend to eliminate extraneous variation. Thereby, it is still necessary to search for potential biases in opportunity samples, and this starts in the same way as in the case of statistical generalization. Once these biases are identified, the analysis takes a different turn. The essential test regards the way these biases moderate the relationships of the variables under study, and not the differences between the characteristics of the sample and the universe.

3.2.3 Theory-building and -testing by inductive strategies

A third perspective researchers might choose for their inquiry is theory building. Empirical research data can be used for theory-building by following an inductive route. Researchers can use amply structured and systematic procedures for that purpose. One might place the grounded theory procedures in that category (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This approach leads the researcher through a sequence of coding steps, in which one iterates continuously between observations (data) and the emerging theory. In a similar vein, Eisenhardt (1989) offers a roadmap for theory-building from case studies. Both approaches are confined to theory development. In theory-building, generalization to larger populations is not part of the game. For the followers of grounded theory, inductive analysis is indeed the end of the game, because their aim is to specify the conditions concerning a specific phenomenon. Statements about new situations require new observations (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Eisenhardt (1989) is more positivistic and regards the empiric testing as the logical continuation of the scientific process. Induction helps to produce theory, deductive logic serves testing of that theory.

Theory-builders use mostly purposeful or theoretical sampling procedures to gather their data. These samples are primarily selected because of their conceptual informativeness, that is a high potential to yield rich information (Miles and Huberman 1994). Policy programs can offer rich opportunities to learn about specific phenomena which are closely related to either the target group, the content or the context of the program. In this vein the data from ‘Strategic Innovation’ have been used to theorize about large-scale organizational change (Sluismans et al. 2008). In that sense, samples originating from policy programs may be also considered as purposeful samples, and hence, can be useful for theory-building purposes. However, one should be aware that researchers can make also mistakes in selecting samples for their theorizing. Selection bias can occur when the researcher, consciously or unconsciously, selects cases that will confirm already existing theories, conjunctures or prejudices. At last, it should be underlined that the rich data gathered by explorative, and qualitative strategies can also play an important role in the testing of theoretical inferences. Yin (1989) suggests that previous developed theory can be used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of a case study in order to establish analytical generalization. In the inductive mode, qualitative data can be a powerful tool in the hunt for potential ‘rival hypotheses’, both regarding external and construct validity in later quantitative analyses. In a deductive mode, they can strengthen the researcher’s claims for the validity of the conclusions when mutual confirmation of results can be established. In this triangulation strategy hypothesized relationships are tested by a variety of measures (Neuendorf 2002). The basic idea is that the strengths and weaknesses of the various methods tend to balance out, and when these methods lead to similar outcomes they can strongly support specific hypotheses (Neuendorf 2002).

3.3 STEP 3: Disarming validity threats: practical approaches

The two previous steps of the roadmap determine the actions the researchers need to undertake to upgrade the data set which originates from policy programs. The assessment of the data set is meant to work out as a SWOT-analysis, helping to define the opportunities the researcher can catch, and threats (s)he has to avoid by using the data’s strengths and compensating their weaknesses. The actions the researchers need to take also depend on the perspective they choose for their inquiry. There are four general strategies that can be followed to upgrade the data set: (1) additional data gathering, (2) data conversion, (3) external control, and (4) internal control. In this paragraph we illustrate how these approaches can contribute to the validity of studies, using ‘Strategic Innovation’ as an example. Figure 1 provides examples of each strategy to upgrade the data set.

3.3.1 Additional data gathering

Several strategies exist to collect additional data for a given data set. A first strategy encompasses that extra information is accumulated for the same respondents (or other units of analysis). This is
possible by turning to secondary data (e.g., objective financial measures) or by doing a follow-up research (e.g. asking additional questions). This strategy however only works when the researcher knows the identity of the respondents (such that information can be linked together). A second strategy is to replicate the analysis on a different set of respondents. Do certain findings hold true in this new sample? A disadvantage here is that this is very time and resource consuming. A final strategy to gather additional data, is to compare the data with data of a comparable group of respondents. This group does not receive a ‘treatment’ and as such can provide insight of the existence of certain phenomena without a policy intervention. In this sense, it is a control group.

Regarding the used example ‘Strategic Innovation’, additional data has been gathered in a number of ways. First, a multiple case study among the 14 participating firms of the first project has been carried out. Second, two new program releases made it possible to replicate the analyses with different SMEs, and to add a small number of additional questions. Yin (1989) regards replication as a strategy to establish analytical generalization. Third, a survey among a local federation of entrepreneurs, meant to interest them in participation in the program was used to create a control group of 109 non-participants. Furthermore, a series of follow-up interviews with entrepreneurs has been started. At last, the intention is to link the data from the Belgian SMEs with objective financial data that are available in the database of the National Bank. These additional data make it possible to test ‘rival hypotheses’ concerning the sample (see examples a and b in Figure 1), and to strengthen construct validity. The follow-up interviews, for example will hopefully indicate whether the action plans made by the firms have actually been enacted. Furthermore, the linking with objective financial data will evidently strengthen the validity of the performance measures used in the questionnaires, which are consequently self-reported data.

3.3.2 Data conversion

Data conversion has been borrowed from the information sciences and refers to the conversion of the format of the data. In social sciences most usual is the conversion from qualitative (or ‘text’) data into quantitative data, in other words: ‘content analysis’. In the program ‘Strategic Innovation’ there was a huge amount of text material available: interview reports, group session reports, SWOT-analyses, and action plans. This material has been coded according to standard procedures (Neuendorf 2002, Strauss and Corbin 1990). After the conversion, this data could be linked to the survey data, and ensures construct validity of part of the measures (see examples c and d in Figure 1). However, data can also be converted in the opposite direction. This can be useful when researchers are confronted with unexpected statistical relationships (or: lack of these relationships) between variables in their quantitative analysis. Going back to qualitative material in the files of individual cases can help to theorize about the explanation of such findings. The use of software for qualitative analysis (e.g., NVivo) can be instrumental in this respect. Regarding the used example ‘Strategic Innovation’, the reports of the company (in which the firm’s outline, past strategic changes, SWOT analysis and action plan to advance the company’s operations is reported) were used to analyse the social responsible behaviour of these firms (Arnoldi 2009).

3.3.3 External control

External control is the approach in which a comparison with external data is used to hunt for plausible ‘rival hypotheses’. Questions that need to be answered in this respect are: do the findings hold up in other samples, are the findings congruent with previous research, do the findings fit with what literature states? One of the most followed approaches in this respect is to compare the composition of the sample with other representations of the universe, in order to see whether certain subgroups might be either over- or underrepresented. In the program ‘Strategic Innovation’ a control group of non-participants (see 3.3.1) was created, which could be used to replicate survey outcomes, and to check potential self-selection bias (see example a in Figure 1). One can also search for other similar data sets and samples and compare for example demographic characteristics (see examples e and f in Figure 1).

3.3.4 Internal control

Internal control also serves to hunt down potential threats to validity (‘rival hypotheses’), and to disarm them by secondary analysis. Internal control regards the data which is available within the given data. Concerning the policy program ‘Strategic Innovation’, the survey data was used to check for self-selection bias (see examples g and h in Figure 1). In a similar way the moderating effect of firm size
on established associations between variables could be disaffirmed (see examples i and j in Figure 1). Furthermore, relating data from different sources can help to strengthen construct validity, as is shown in 3.3.2 (see example d in Figure 1).

**‘STRATEGIC INNOVATION’ SAMPLES USED IN THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLES:**

| Sample 1 | Sample of the policy program in the Euregion Meuse-Rhine (2004-2008): N=650 SMEs; without missing values N=486 SMEs. |
| Sample 2 | A replication sample of the policy program in the province of Limburg (The Netherlands) and the Flemish part of Belgium (2008-2011): N=198 SMEs |
| Sample 3 | A control sample of non-participants: N=109 SMEs. These SMEs filled in the same questionnaire as the SMEs in sample 1 en 2, but did not receive any ‘treatment’.

**APPROACH 1: ADDITIONAL DATA GATHERING**

The hypothesis is that SMEs that participate in the project are not different than the ones that decide not to participate. A rival hypothesis could be that the innovation climate of the participating SMEs is biased, thus that they are more innovation-minded. The survey of ‘Strategic Innovation’ contains a number of items that inquire about the firm’s attitude regarding innovation, referred to as ‘innovation climate’.

**Example a.** We compared the mean innovation climate score in Sample 1 with Sample 3 (control group). We found that the mean scores in both groups did not significantly differ.

The confirmation of a relationship in several samples is another test to check for ‘rival hypotheses’.

**Example b.** The hypothesis is that there is a relationship between the extent of cross-functional cooperation within the firm (referred to as ‘horizontal connectivity’) and the degree strategic issues are alive in the discourses of management and staff (referred to as ‘strategic conversation’). A regression analysis on Sample 1 (without missing values) reveals that ‘horizontal connectivity’ shows a linear positive relationship to ‘strategic conversation’. R² is 0.33 and unstandardized beta is 0.69, with a significance level of 0.001. This association holds in Sample 3 (control group) (R² = 0.33, beta = 0.56, significance of 0.000) as well as in Sample 2 (the replication sample), which can be said to be a sample of firms that participated in a post-crisis era (R² = 0.37, beta = 0.68, significance of 0.000). This ‘robustness check’ makes rival hypotheses unlikely.

**APPROACH 2: DATA CONVERSION**

Qualitative data can be coupled to quantitative data resulting in rich stories.

**Example c:** An explorative study has been carried out regarding the Social Responsibility Policies of SMEs (Arnoldi, 2009). Qualitative analysis software (NVivo) was used to identify firms that carried out initiatives in this field. Next, a statistical analysis of the quantitative data served to draw the organizational profiles of these firms.

The route can also be the other way around: from quantitative to qualitative data.

**Example d:** Company X in Sample 2 scores high on proactive market orientated behaviour measured by the survey (3.6 on a score of 5). We can draw the same conclusions when we take a look at the report of the SWOT-analysis. One of the strengths of company X is: “we work closely with our clients and try to think along with them to recognize solutions or needs the clients did not yet think of”. Company Y provides another example: it scores very low on strategic conversation measured by the survey (2.1 on a score of 5). Zooming in on their reported weaknesses during the SWOT-analysis corroborates this: one of the weaknesses of company Y is: “we have no clear strategy for the future”.

**APPROACH 3: EXTERNAL CONTROL**

Concerning over- or underrepresentation of certain subgroups, a comparison can be made with the universe.

**Example e:** In our program we used data of 1317 SMEs from the Amadeus business register from the region Meuse-and-Rhine to compare the sample profile. This comparison indicated for example that micro-firms, and wholesale and retail firms were more strongly represented in our samples (1 and 2), while medium-sized firms were underrepresented.
A comparison can also be made with samples of research papers focusing on the same particular subgroups.

**Example f:** Sample 2 was used to investigate market orientation within family firms (Beck et al. 2010). For this reason the sample was compared with the samples of two other family firm studies in the same region. This revealed that the ‘Strategic Innovation’ sample was similar in age and size. Only regarding sector, there were small differences. The family firms in the ‘Strategic Innovation’ sample tended to be less active in services, retail, and wholesale. To limit possible biases, sector, age and size are used as control variables in the regression analysis.

**APPROACH 4: INTERNAL CONTROL**

A rival explanation that could be formulated for the data from ‘Strategic Innovation’, regards the problem of sample (self-) selection. The participating SMEs might be more strategy- and innovation-oriented than their non-participating peers. The survey of ‘Strategic Innovation’ contains a number of items that enquire about the degree strategic issues are alive in the discourses of management and staff (referred to as ‘strategic conversation’).

**Example g:** The first control regards the rival hypothesis that it is likely that SMEs with a high score on strategic conversation, are more inclined to participate because of their preference for strategic debate. However, in Sample 1 (without missing values) this variable follows a normal distribution (both low and high scores occur), with a mean of 2.96 (standard deviation = 0.60). Hence, mean strategic conversation is relatively low.

**Example h:** Another solution to check this bias is to control the motivation to participate, which is asked only in Sample 2, the replication sample. The conclusion is that motives to participate are diverse.

Furthermore, it could be that a third variable has an influence on the observed relationship.

**Example i:** Assume that size has an effect on the established association (for example larger organizations cooperate more in order to know what is going on in other units, or larger organizations are ‘growing too big’ such that cooperation decreases). In Sample 1 (without missing values) Pearson correlation between size and horizontal connectivity is however only -0.19, and between size and ‘strategic conversation’ r = 0.004.

**Example j:** Finally, controlling for an interaction effect of size and ‘horizontal connectivity’ in regressions in Sample 1 (without missing values) and Sample 2 respectively, results in a non-significant interaction term, denoting that when controlled for size, ‘horizontal connectivity’ is positively related to ‘strategic conversation’.

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**Figure 1:** Falsification of rival hypotheses

4. Conclusion

The awakening interest among researchers for organizational practice and practitioners must be welcomed as an answer to the serious call for making research more relevant both to theory and practice (Bell et al. 2006, Lawler et al. 1985, Vermeulen 2007). Mainstream researchers should no longer ignore the real world of practitioners in organizations as a field of study. This paper strongly supports the urgent call to researchers in the field of business studies to get off our veranda’s to get a good deal closer to the actual work (Johnson et al. 2003, Van Aken 2004). However, once researchers decide to leave their veranda’s (Johnson et al. 2003) and to nestle their research in a natural environment of planned change, they are confronted with a double challenge: (1) to make optimal use of the rich opportunities, and (2) taking the right measures to attack the many methodological problems that can arise from ‘outdoor research’. We argue that these problem are not to be played down, but have to be tackled openly. The threat to validity is one of these problems, that has to be addressed openly. In this effort research should not be discouraged by the excess of limitations and warnings from the methodological mainstream literature. In this paper it is suggested to start from the opportunities offered by the available data and continue to systematically build a case for the relevance of the results for wider contexts. However, the basic condition for making trustful
interferences from these data is a ceaseless effort to falsify rival hypotheses. That is our game. The contribution of this paper is to draw a roadmap that guides field researchers through this difficult process of matching what is desirable and possible. Based on the choice they make concerning the research perspective (statistical generalization, theoretical generalization or theory-building and -testing), this roadmap can be a tool to evaluate their data. It starts with an assessment of potential weaknesses and strengths of the data, regarding robustness and meaning. This can be done by taking into consideration 4 basic questions: (1) do the data offer the opportunity to provide new insights? (2) what are the qualities of the data in terms of validity and reliability? (3) what are the qualities (advantages and shortcomings) of the sample(s)? And (4) what are the options for repairing, completing or upgrading the data? The next step in the roadmap involves making a basic choice regarding the contribution of the study to theory and practice. What is the aim the researcher strives for? Statistical generalization, theoretical generalization or theory building/theory testing? Each of these aims poses different requirements regarding validity. When the goal is to build theory for example, one could use a purposeful sample, while statistical generalization requires the data to be generalizable towards a wider context. Finally, one needs to take actions to upgrade the data in accordance with the chosen research strategy, in order to reduce threats to external and construct validity. One should bear in mind that actions such as additional data gathering, external and internal control serve mostly the external validity, while data conversion helps in improving construct validity.

However, this paper only touched an instrumental aspect of ‘outdoor research’. The real challenge is the ‘practice-turn’ itself: the awareness that in many fields of management and organization, practice is ahead of theory. Phenomena, methods, and strategies are invented or discovered in the field (Daft and Levin 1990, Lawler et al. 1985). Researchers should be ready to capture the relevance of these inventions and discoveries and make them available for broader contexts. This means in a technical sense, that researchers have to advance their skills and tools to deal with the threats they can expect to encounter. Methodologists might support those working out there in the field by improving the skills and tools that can be used to deal with the threats of ‘outdoor research’.

References
Taking Stock of Research Methods in Strategy-as-Practice

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Abstract: Strategy-as-practice research provides understanding of a complex phenomenon in language rich and holistic process terms, rather than statistically significant but limited variance terms. It requires mapping individual and organisational activities in the process of strategizing. This article assesses four research issues in strategy-as-practice research and their impact in advancing this field: challenges in bounding the scope of the research question, issues with the unit of analysis, difficulties in defining the dependent variable of outcomes and finally the challenge in specifying a particular level of analysis, all of which present complexities in the design of data collection. We suggest two broad alternative approaches that have the potential to push the frontiers of methodology to greater rigour in strategy as practice research. First, quantification methods that can capture practice can be a valuable tool, a paradigm that has been ignored in much of strategy-as-practice research. Second, better process data may be revealed by organizations that voluntarily initiates a consultation process with a researcher as it benefits by doing so, so we suggest that clinical research methods, that include such intervention, provide better understanding of the phenomena of strategizing. We make a case for why these methods must be considered for acceptability in strategy-as-practice research.

Keywords: strategy-as-practice, research methods, strategy research, clinical research, review

1. Introduction

Research methods are an 'intricate set of ontological and epistemological assumptions that a researcher brings to his or her work' (Prasad 1997 quoted in Mir and Watson 2000). Strategy-as-practice research subsumes a plurality of interests and research methods mainly with the lens of sociology (Jarzabkowski 2004; Whittington 2007). It draws upon sociological and philosophical developments related to practice theory, such as the well known works of Bourdieu, de Certeau, Giddens, Schatzki, Sztompka and others (see Jarzabkowski 2004 for an overview). Johnson et al. (2007) believe that the pragmatist tradition of philosophy, in highlighting the importance of the practical, is winning attention (Egginton and Sandbothe 2004 quoted in Johnson et al. 2007) in recent years. Basically, strategy-as-practice simply requires one to "go out and look" so as to find ways to capture such activity as it occurs, so that it can be examined closely and understood, similar to a 'direct research' approach proposed by Mintzberg (1979). Epistemologically, most strategy-as-practice studies have taken different positions, ranging from post-positivist to interpretive (Johnson et al. 2007). Strategy-as-practice research provides understanding of a complex phenomenon in language rich and holistic process terms, rather than statistically significant but limited variance terms. The orientation towards ‘action research’ complicates research conclusions due to the close proximity between the observer and the observed (Johnson et al. 2007). This article assesses four major research issues in strategy-as-practice research and their impact in advancing this field.

2. Scope of the research question

The first issue is the broader scope of strategy-as-practice research – studies of the strategizing process must go beyond the organisation (Whittington 2003, Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009) as it is influenced by policy makers, competitors, consultants and business schools as well as organisational members adapting practices from other organisations whose strategies they analyse, critique, enact, develop or change (Whittington 2003). Also strategic practice could be bottom-up or emerging from middle managers, consultant, senior executives, intrapreneurs and even members outside the organization, thus encompassing a plurality of actors. Johnson et al. (2007) explain that there is a move from the relatively unitary perspectives that have characterised strategy research in terms of levels of analysis, explanatory variables and theoretical perspectives, to greater plurality. Hendry and Seidl (2003) admit that strategy, as an activity, is not well defined, with the result that the empirical net is cast impracticably wide.

3. Unit of analysis

The scope of the research question directly impacts the second issue – ambiguity in the unit of analysis in strategy-as-practice research. The unit of analysis refers to the precise object of the
research, the entity about which one is trying to draw conclusions. Thus the focal unit of analysis could be very narrow (e.g. individual strategy retreats, workshops, managers, meetings, discourses, conversations etc.) or it could be broader (strategic decisions, strategic issues etc.). Hendry and Seidl (2003) have introduced the notion of ‘strategic episodes’ where an episode is a sequence of events with a structured beginning and ending during which normal communicative practices are suspended and alternative communicative practices are explored. Similarly, analysing strategy off-sites and away-days as rituals could also provide interesting units of analysis (Bourque and Johnson 2008). In strategy-as-practice research, the unit of analysis has ranged from strategic episodes such as strategic planning meetings, to implemented strategic decisions over a limited period of time – such as an acquisition, to the evolution of the firm’s strategy over a long period of time – such as international expansion. To decide what is and what is not included under the entity of strategizing, is an open-ended task. The emerging consensus in strategy-as-practice research is to look at ‘a practice’ as a unit of analysis but lack of clarity on what constitutes ‘a practice’ may lead to such research being labelled a ‘study of everything’. Johnson et al. (2007) quote Wildavsky (1973) that if strategizing is everything, including any activity that might contribute to the orientation of the organization, then maybe it’s nothing. Since such an approach is extremely ambiguous, the emphasis on activity suggests a unit of analysis being defined in micro terms. Chia and Mackay (2007) argue that it is the theoretical unit of analysis that must be revised. Instead of individuals and organizations and their processes, activities and practices, they argue that it is practices and the transmitted regularities associated with them that draw the attention of strategy-as-practice researchers. 

Even recognising only one unit of analysis in a study may pose challenges according to Johnson et al. (2007). Langley (1999) studied the role of formal analysis in strategic decision making and was confronted with the difficulty of identifying the two main units of analysis: what constituted ‘an analysis’ and a ‘strategic decision’, and how could these be clearly identified from other analysis-like instances or other decisions, and hence she had to draw up a set of criteria for the study. Hence, apart from deciding on the logical unit of analysis, bounding the unit of analysis operationally is also a challenge (Johnson et al. 2007). Two possibilities arise here. One is to adopt positivist perspectives that can provide a clear and well bounded unit of analysis. This would mean drawing up a list of exclusion criteria to bound the operational unit of analysis. The issue with such positivist approaches is that they typically tend to take a reductionist direction, because of the efforts to isolate focus on narrowly defined objects and eliminating any ambiguity. Therefore this deprives us of the opportunity of capturing the richness of the whole process. The second approach is to adopt interpretive or ethnographic approaches. These approaches, while certainly offering to capture the richness, may end up leaving the unit of analysis ambiguous. Johnson et al. (2007) cite Van Maanen (1995: 139) in representing the essence of this tradeoff, ‘to be determinate, we must be indeterminate’: the research itself must reflect the ambiguity present in the empirical situation. A middle range tactic is advocated by Johnson et al. (1999) wherein one may explicitly admit the possibility of variation in the study and incorporate it within the research design. This basically means that the researcher will have to provide an explicit report of the extent to which several issues are interrelated.

4. Dependent variable

The third issue in strategy-as-practice research is the choice of the dependent variable or the outcome of strategizing process. The study of ‘outcomes’ (performance) has traditionally been a dominant theme in strategy research. There has also been an increasing attention called towards better focus on outcomes within strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). However outcomes in strategy-as-practice research cannot be firm level performance alone, as is common in strategy research, as the strategizing process also directly impacts the individuals, groups, institutions and practice communities involved – each of whom may be seeking different types of outcomes. Thus the ‘straightjacket’ of performance measurement prevalent in the traditional strategic management literature is deliberately avoided by strategy-as-practice, given the focus on multiple levels.

For instance, Ambrosini et al. (2007) have looked at the outcomes from micro-level activities in strategy-as-practice. Organizational performance is considered at a disaggregated level with a plurality of dependent variables. The strategy-as-practice perspective argues for explaining the performance of people as they interact and enact institutional and organizational practices. Such disaggregated dependent variables include levels at the individual, group, tools, systems, episodes as well as the contribution that these variables make towards strategic outcomes (Johnson et al. 2007). However the notion of outcomes is still not fully mature, and appears to be closer to the concept of praxis.
Some of the outcome related questions that are currently discussed by strategy-as-practice researchers in the strategy-as-practice website (accessed on 9-May-2009) are: What outcomes may be consequential to the firm at all levels of an organization? (see Jarzabkowski et al. 2007)? How could we study outcomes at a more micro level without losing focus of wider social factors within which such outcomes emerge? What other outcomes could there be in addition to those listed in Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009)?

5. Level of analysis

This leads to the fourth issue in strategy-as-practice research – specifying the level of analysis. While articles are increasingly developing the theoretical level of strategy-as-practice research, comparatively little has been written on the methodological level with the exception of Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003). They explain that the growing need for researchers to be close to the phenomena of study, to concentrate on context and detail, and simultaneously to be broad in their scope of study, attending to many parts of the organization, clearly creates conflict. Johnson et al. (2007) explain that strategy-as-practice may be concerned with more plural levels of analysis, and importantly, the relationship between them. “It not only goes beneath organization-level processes to investigate what goes on inside organizations; it also goes above these processes to interrogate how the practices and tools originate from a wider business environment outside the firm” (Molloy and Whittington, 2005 quoted in Johnson et.al. 2007). Hence both contexts and the people who enact them are of interest to strategy-as-practice researchers. This is difficult as such research must cover multiple levels of analysis to be adequately holistic in scope and sufficiently nuanced in insight. The linkage of level of analysis through to strategic outcomes is an important component of practice research, as the ultimate need is to be able to link the outcomes of strategising activities by various practitioners within the firm, to more macro organisational, institutional and, possibly, even broader social contexts and outcomes (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). Outcomes of studies are likely to depend on the analytical focus and unit of analysis. Based on current strategy-as-practice research, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) distinguish between personal/individual, group, strategising process and organisational as well as institutional outcomes. How strategists’ actions construct particular outcomes; as well as how differences in what strategists do can be explained through variations in the outcomes that are observed.

6. Data collection

Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003:197) argue that ‘today’s large, multinational, and highly diversified organizational settings require complementary methods providing more breadth and flexibility’. They suggest three particularly promising approaches (interactive discussion groups, self-reports, and practitioner-led research) that fit the increasingly disparate research paradigms now being used to understand strategizing and other management issues. Interestingly, they also stress the importance of working with organizational members as research partners rather than passive informants. At one level the solution appears to be about innovation of methods, but if we pursue to its logical conclusion the argument that issues of depth, breadth, relevance and diversity are inter-linked, then it becomes apparent that we actually need to re-conceive the way we conduct research. Johnson et al. (2007) also call attention to the physical artefacts or objects in strategy as practice as such, such a power point presentations, flip-charts, other texts, photographs. Even the physical arrangement of participants at a strategy offsite meeting and their body language could be highly useful for understanding strategizing. Strategy-as-practice research provides rich scope in including the ‘respondent’ as a research partner, rather than only as a subject of research, as the respondent is often an experienced strategist who has a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena and the organisation’s domain than the researcher. An in-depth knowledge of practice may be acquired only through participation, even by becoming a practitioner (Johnson, et al. 2007). Some academics are also strategy consultants, but their knowledge may again be unconscious. A potentially valuable approach suggested is to find a ‘master’ and become an ‘apprentice’. Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003) focus in particular on the importance of working with organizational members as research partners rather than passive informants. Johnson et al. (2007) also cite a work by Stronz (2005) who videotaped naturally occurring strategy implementation meetings over a period of several months. Based on the video data and an ‘action science framework’, she then chose excerpts from the meetings to present to the implementation team members and further interview them. This captured both strategizing as it happened, as well as the recall value of interviewees as they reviewed their reactions. Such research can benefit by designing effective methods to capture this nuanced understanding. However one must be aware of the pitfalls of such action research approaches that
may cause issues of methodology acceptance. Three risks are well known – the risk of contamination (where the researcher ends up influencing the phenomena), risk of going native (researcher getting socialised and hence failing to maintain an external perspective) and the risk of political alignment (researcher getting used as a tool by some faction). While research methods currently used in strategy-as-practice are largely borrowed from ethnography and anthropology, where the researcher is trained to avoid these three risks, practice studies need to ensure sensitivity to these risks as well. The literature on process consultation such as Schein (1995, 1999) or on making sense of the organizational ‘mess’ as advocated by Ackoff (1981, 1999) provide valuable directions in this regard. Such literature provides researchers with practical tips and highlights appropriate techniques on data gathering that can minimise biases due to these risks. For instance, Ackoff (1999) explains that the person who should prepare the reports on organizational status should be chosen to have an optimal number of years of experience in the organization to reduce biases and yet know the context sufficiently, Schein (1995) distinguishes between pure, diagnostic, action-oriented and confrontative modes of inquiry with members of the organization that corresponds to different levels of intervention. Such an approach provides support for active sense making processes from intra and inter-individual perspectives. We believe that there is scope for better process data being revealed by an organization that voluntarily initiates a consultation process with the researcher as it directly benefits by doing so as described in Schein (1999).

7. Quantification and variance theorizing

Apart from descriptive contributions from rich qualitative datasets, or process theorizing drawn out of understanding of phenomena based on temporal evolution, a third but relatively unexplored possibility is that of middle range theories that link strategic practices to some form of outcome. The outcomes relevant for micro-strategy may remain at a micro or meso level. Eisenhardt's (1989) study of decision making strategies and its relation primarily to decision speed and corporate performance is held up as an exemplar. The systematic way of replicating findings across eight cases provides a strong basis for a credible theory, providing analytical generalizability. Johnson et al. (2007) also explain that there is room for other nomothetically driven work that relates practices to their context. While it is argued that qualitative data is essential to understand the ‘doing’ of strategy, Johnson et.al. (2007) allow a role for quantification primarily towards summarizing and categorizing observations. They also warn about the dangers of quantification that hide the detailed understanding acquired about the actual “doing” of strategy. Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003) argue that that ‘deep’ data gathering around the unique characteristics of organizations, rather than their generic attributes, is needed. At the same time, however, there is a need for research designs that give priority to breadth. In a globalizing world, strategizing research must reflect large-scale strategizing activities in several places simultaneously.

We suggest that it is possible to draw inspiration from works in domains like software engineering that seek to link practices to performance. For instance, Cusumano, MacCormack, Kemerer and Crandall (2003) have reported the wide range of software development practices and the differences in practices and performance levels around the world. Their article reports descriptive results from a global survey of completed software projects that show international differences in the adoption of software development practices. Similarly, Cusumano and Kemerer (1990) did a comprehensive literature review that analyzes existing comparisons of Japanese and U.S. practice in software development and summarize the major proposed differences in performance. Similar studies could be attempted about strategizing practices in organizations across the world - promising insights into strategizing processes as the field matures and as practices are more or less identifiable in a relatively standard manner.

On similar lines, Whittington and Cailluet (2008: 243) highlight quantitative research possibilities “strategic planning remains a pervasive and influential phenomenon in the world, perhaps more so than earlier. Since 1996, Bain & Co's survey of management tools has regularly reported strategic planning being used by around 80 per cent of its responding companies, and in 2007 (as in many years before) found it the most popular tool of all, with an eleven-year record of 88 per cent of companies using it. Accenture describes the rise of the ‘the Chief Strategy Officer’, with supporting departments, in large multinational companies around the world. Job advertisement analysis shows a significant increase in the number of formal strategy roles in the United Kingdom during the 1990s, with a major increase in the public sector especially.” They argue that if strategic planning is taking
new forms and entering new domains it deserves scholarly attention (Whittington and Cailluet 2008: 243).

8. Methodological innovations

Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl (2007) consider it necessary to consider the methodological implications of different theoretical approaches. However, little empirical work conducted in the strategy-as-practice perspective has developed innovative methodology specific to the perspective, with the exception of anthropological (e.g. Johnson et al., 2007) and ethnomethodological (Samra-Fredericks, 2003) approaches. There is therefore an opportunity for methodological innovations in the area of strategy as practice. One inspired direction that we were suggested to explore was in Schein (1995, 1999, 2004). Schein (2004) used clinical research to study organizational culture, where the data comes voluntarily from the members of the organization because either they initiated the process and had something to gain by revealing themselves, or if the researcher/consultant initiated the project and if they had something to gain from cooperating with him/her. The clinical model makes two explicit fundamental assumptions – one that it is not possible to study a human system without intervening in it, and two one can fully understand a human system by trying to change it. In this regard, clinical research and ethnography differ sharply as ethnography generally aims to leave the system as intact as possible. Schein (1995) makes a clear distinction between formal data driven action research on the one hand and client driven clinical inquiry on the other hand. Action research as defined by researchers involves the client in the data gathering but is driven by the researcher’s agenda. Action research as defined by the clinician involves the helper consultant in the client’s inquiry process and the process is driven by the client’s needs. What makes the clinical method more powerful than other methods, is that if the researcher/consultant is helping the organization, they have the licence to ask all kinds of questions, hang around and observe almost in an ethnographic fashion, all this with due consideration of the risks involved of going native, contamination and political alignment as may be addressed from the extensive literature on ethnographic methods or anthropology. Another profitable direction to obtain such data is highlighted by Bednar (2000), who examines constructive dialogue as a means of gaining access to the existing but unreleased individual and group competencies. Bednar (2000) mirrors Schein (1999) in recommending an interventional approach that regards individual perspectives while focussing on situations, and engages the actors in reflecting on their experience when problem-solving is involved. Strategy-as-practice may like to consider a clinical research approach as it is in alignment with what strategy consultants do.

9. Implications for research

The notion of strategizing spans a wide scope that goes beyond the organization boundaries and what constitutes strategizing remaining undefined, at several levels, the challenges in research design are numerous. Connecting micro level activities to macro level outcomes is a key challenge going forward in strategy-as-practice research. Large, multinational and diversified organizations require complementary methods providing more breadth and flexibility. While descriptive and process studies are the dominant paradigm in strategy-as-practice research, we suggest that quantitative studies is one much ignored approach that may provide greater insights. Using practitioners who are repositories of tacit knowledge more actively in research may provide significant benefits. Therefore another approach that we propose is that of clinical methods, inspired from process consultation techniques of Schein (1998). This potential approach has the promise to balance several tradeoffs in the field between richness of data and the traditional challenges in ethnography. Strategy-as-practice research has untapped scope for creative researchers to innovate on research methodology and possibly even to reconceptualise how research itself is conducted.

10. Conclusions

Although it has its beginnings in the late 1990’s, the strategy-as-practice field is yet to come of age, and the track record of its presence at the Academy of Management suggests that it is still viewed as a nascent body seeking to establish itself. While there could be several challenges to its grounds for legitimacy, research methodology is one enormous point that deserves attention. This article has explained the four challenges in strategy-as-practice research. First, defining the scope of the research question is an issue given that the definition of strategy itself is not unambiguous and strategizing can happen in many ways in and even outside an organization. Second, the theoretical

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1 The strategy-as-practice group had not gained its foothold at the Academy of Management as late as 2010, although 2011 seems to be more promising with a new interest group being formed.
unit of analysis of individuals and organizations and their processes, activities and practices must be revised. Third, the notion of performance measurement prevalent in the traditional strategic management literature is purposely avoided by strategy-as-practice, instead organizational performance is considered at a disaggregated level with a plurality of dependent variables. Fourth, the level of analysis merits attention as strategizing activity spans individual, group, organization, institutional and practice community levels.

Beyond enumerating these challenges, we have also proposed new avenues that can further the frontiers of strategy-as-practice research, particularly on the methodological front. After summarizing the tradeoffs in data collection, we propose a relook at quantification or variance theorizing as a potential methodology for studying practice at a macro level. We derive inspiration from fields such as software engineering, where macro level studies of practices have provided valuable insights. Another exciting possibility is clinical research whose established methods have the promise to provide the right level of access and richness to strategy-as-practice studies.

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