

“An examination of the ethical context of social research in relation to the personal statement, framework and research proposal.”

Is the research method appropriate to the research subject?

The research aims to provide insight into the ways in which small-business owner/managers learn their roles by exploring ten individuals' biographies to determine whether a commonality of experiences or circumstances is evidenced. In order to do so, terminology introduced by Salomon & Perkins (1989) and Pascual-Leone & Irwin (1994) is used to distinguish between two different types of learning that provides the focus for this study: 'infralogical' learning refers to learning that is incremental or deductive, being similar enough to past experiences that previous learning can be modified to accommodate the new situation. 'Logological' learning, on the other hand, is learning that occurs from brand-new or 'discontinuous' events, outside the individuals normative experiences.

The research questions, therefore, consider the nature and significance of differences in learning styles in owner/managers and the implications of these findings in terms of knowledge-transfer:

- What is the nature of learning and development within the context of a small-business?
- What is the significance of the distinction between inferred learning from similar previous experience (infralogical learning) and original learning from new experiences (logological learning) within a small-business?
- What is the importance of this distinction in relation to knowledge-transfer in the small-business setting?

One of the primary influences in deciding how to answer the research questions was an acknowledgement that the majority of epistemological and ontological positioning to research, suggests that it is the question that should drive the methodology, rather than the other way around; often this is seen as a prerequisite in understanding the nature of research itself (Godfrey & Parsons, 2007). Therefore, having arrived at the point where the research questions have been formed, we must ask what method of research would provide the best answer. However, what constitutes the 'best answer' is also a pertinent question and one that must be answered beforehand. For example, are the answers we are seeking likely to be useful, or should we look at answering the question with a view to retaining the participant's original meaning as far as possible? Would a blend of the two be preferable or even possible? It is these questions that reflect the ethical stance of the researcher and, ultimately, the validity of the research.

It is significant that the three research questions all require interpretation of conceptual structures or understandings as well as empirical evidence. A broadly Kantian stance (Scruton, 1982; Grayeff, 1970; Morton, 1997) then is preferable in regard to understanding how best the data might be analysed, rather than one that relies purely on Hume's experiential preferences (Hume, 1975) or Leibniz's pure reason (Scruton, 1982) as addressing a conceptualisation of knowledge. In this then

we can say the concepts raised within the research need to be grounded through the experiences of the respondents, following Kant's assertion that "...neither experience or reason alone are enough to provide knowledge..." (Scruton, 1982).

However, grounding the concepts can be achieved using quantitative methods as well as qualitative methods, particularly in considering instances of particular phenomena of interest such as logological learning. A multi-method approach including this kind of method would help triangulation of results and may add credibility to the research overall, however the primary data required is evidence of learning and the understandings of the respondents of their experiences of learning. Therefore qualitative interviews that allow both researcher and subject to respond in a manner promoting maximum flexibility in the range and scope of response, are at considerable advantage over methods that might otherwise restrict answers (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002).

Similarly, care should be taken in deciding the method of analysis as this too can restrict or distort the result. Grounded theory alone is seen, in this instance, as not providing an appropriate level of interpretation for the research needs. Whilst the tasks of considering categories of data, conceptualising links between data and seeking further depth to existing data are all expected to be used, the line between retaining the original context and redrawing the data to provide new theory is a fine one. It is felt that, whilst useful in many ways, grounded theory's primary downfall is its ability to remove the data from its original context and meaning (Dey, 1999). A broader, less rigid structure will be used to determine themes and categories and efforts will be made to ensure *proto-stories* (Shamir et al, 2005) are used in their original meaning within the *meta-story* (Llewellyn, 1999) by checking with the respondent(s). This verification process ensures a higher degree of reliability in the research and therefore fulfils part of the ethical criteria required of research of this nature.

In terms of usefulness, this research does not intend to provide statistical inference of any kind. The nature of the project is to determine occurrences and distinctions within a very limited sample and it is recognised that, without limiting future studies, this study is unlikely to be immediately useful to the greater population of managers or educators. With this in mind, it is seen that the questions this research seeks to answer lend themselves to social-constructionism rather than positivism (Jankowicz, 2000: p112-122) and a narrative approach rather than grounded theory.

Is the research method ethically justifiable?

Ethical difficulties with this methodology include the areas of (a) relationship between researcher and respondent (Dominice, 2000: p30-33) and (b) interview techniques that could be interpreted / mis-interpreted as psychoanalytic in nature. The first area concerns the disposition and depth of the interviewer/respondent relationship in terms of understanding the power dynamic as well as maintaining objectivity. Whilst the interviewer is concerned with building the relationship to a state in which the respondent trusts the researcher, care must be taken to ensure the interview is not 'led' by the need of the researcher rather than the needs of the research itself. The second area is equally of concern as the narrative methodology involves use of personal reflection and analysis, which could be seen *by the respondent* as psychoanalytic. With this in mind, thought should be given to any unintended distress

caused to respondents and appropriate measures made available should they wish to take advantage of them (CCCU, 2008). The researcher can be expected to ensure the respondent understands fully the nature of the research and its desired outcomes. Within this expectation is implicit the understanding by the researcher when the interview has exceeded its topic and when it should be brought back into focus. This effort of remaining in focus may affect the results, but should also ensure fair consideration of the emotional health of the respondent.

One of the main difficulties in using interpretive methods is in keeping an objectivity that ensures the research, if repeated, will provide similar results. Clearly, the act of interpretation is subjective and relies on the individual researcher to determine what is important and how it is portrayed. This subjectivity can be minimised by using more than one respondent, as gaining multiple viewpoints serves to provide some distance between researcher and subject. Whilst also addressing the issue of triangulation, this is not the main purpose of multiple-respondent interviews. Strauss & Corbin (1998, p44) suggest it also helps define differences in people's perceptions in order to accommodate the variances into the overall results.

What measures will be in place to safeguard respondent data?

All information provided by respondents will be 'anonymised' and treated in strict confidence, which means that no information will be used without the individual's express permission. All contact and identification details will be held separately to digital recordings and transcripts, in a locked cabinet and all recordings and transcripts will be held on a 128 bit NTFS encrypted PC sited behind hardware and software firewalls. Transcripts will be given a generic coding such as "Mr X, Freight Forwarder" or "Mrs Y, Retail Sales" rendering identification impossible; at no time will a real identity be used within the study.

Interviews will be recorded on digital media and then transcribed after which the script will be returned to the respondent to allow them to check for accuracy. Alterations can be made at this point – including the removal of information that they subsequently do not want shared. Respondents will be able to withdraw from the project at any time, without giving a reason, should they wish to do so.

Each respondent will receive instructions prior to the interview that set guidelines for conduct during the interview. For example, respondents may have areas in which they do not feel comfortable sharing and they should feel able to ask to move on to another subject. These instructions will be reiterated at the start of each interview. Although respondents will be asked to sign a consent form to take part in the research they are able to withdraw at any point including before, during or after the interview, after reading the transcription or before publication of any results.

Upon completion of the Ed.D programme, personal details and interview recordings will be destroyed, although non-identifiable transcripts may be used in future studies.