

A personal statement of empirical, ethical and philosophical orientation to a research area (1000) words. Participants will justify a research ‘stance’ showing due regard for the range of research styles, their strengths and weaknesses.

The subject which demands primacy in this research is that the nature of the topic is difficult to quantify and, arguably, loses much of its significance should quantification be attempted. Thus it appears to be more meaningful to seek to understand the nature of the subject within its own context through conversations and interactions with the research respondents directly. For example, in looking at the term ‘knowledge acquisition’ in relation to small businesses we may be able to say that it occurs, but it would be harder and more problematic to suggest how that might occur, to what degree and in what form.

These questions, however, are those this enquiry seeks to answer to some degree. Much of the accepted epistemological and ontological positioning to research *per se* indicates that it is the question that should drive the methodology, rather than arriving with a methodology to use and then finding a question to suit the method; indeed, this is seen as a prerequisite in understanding the nature of research itself (Godfrey & Parsons, 2007). In undertaking research into areas in which quantification is undesirable, qualitative methods such as a grounded approach, discourse analysis or cognitive mapping (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002) are approaches which may inform this study. The use of interviews to gather narratives, stories and anecdotal evidence will form the basis for the thematic analysis.

Given the ability of narratives to provide both depth and contextual meaning to research in the social sciences, it seems appropriate that this methodology is used to discern the extent, nature and significance, of an esoteric concept such as conceptual learning and knowledge-transfer in the respondents. Previous pilot studies (Watts, 2007) using a similar methodology in this research area, have produced results that are encouraging; the research method appears to be justified as it serves to illuminate the research area and provides sufficient data for analysis. Fillis (2006) argues that

biographical approaches to researching small-businesses have enabled researchers to emulate the non-linear practice of entrepreneurial behaviour. Hill & Wright (2001) also noted that when conducting management research, researchers are often entrenched in 'large firm' positivist mindsets and thus focus primarily on survey methods, rather than the context of the information gathered.

In an earlier paper (Watts, 2007), I utilised arguments from Llewellyn (1999) and Shamir et al (2005) in which they acknowledge the strength of interpreted narrative accounts to deliver support for a projection:

“Llewellyn (1999) and Shamir et al (2005) have both considered the usefulness and uses of narratives within management and leadership research. Llewellyn, in drawing on a background in management accounting sees 'projection', or the practise of strategic argument-making, as the primary usefulness of narratives; the narrative 'metastory' (sic) is used to "...depict interview quotes from a certain perspective, embedding them in the theoretical stance of the paper...". Llewellyn, like West (1996) however, notes the ability of narratives to provide contextual information otherwise unavailable. Shamir et al, in similar vein, propose that the themes held within stories, 'proto-stories', are more powerful than whole biographies as they potentially reach a wider audience". (Watts, 2007)

In doing so, the weaknesses also become apparent. In interpreting or using the data in this way, the researcher is at risk of introducing a degree of bias that could be considered too great for the results to be meaningful. Therefore the question of how to interpret the data in a clear and consistent manner, recognizing the risks of bias whilst doing so, is key to the validity of the final argument.

It can be seen that this research will present only one version of a 'truth' (Bridges, 1999) and that the processes of interpretation should be transparent enough for the analysis to be repeated. Whilst the concept of absolute truth is discarded by Bridges as an unobtainable '*monolithic concept*' (and therefore presumably not worthy of further

consideration), for the vast majority of the people in the world it could be suggested that truth is, indeed, an absolute to the individual. My position on this issue is that on an individual scale of one person, truth as a concept is most certainly possible, definable and absolute. In a similar fashion, it could be argued (Watts, 2006). that when two or more people consider the meaning of truth that absolutism becomes impossible, as perspectives and experiences differ.

However, this shouldn't negate the original premise and an individuals' right to be clear about what is truth to them and it is also worth considering that the assertion of truth in an article is not only probable, but preferable. For example, when writing a research paper experience leads us to believe that it is not merely a recording of facts; the researcher is expected to draw intelligent conclusion – interpretation – from the array of data collected; interpretive constructionism is not only permitted, but positively advocated. Yet, without interpretation and the subsequent allowance for researcher-influenced error, the raw data becomes meaningless. It is the result of interpretation of the data that engages response from others, leading to the belief that assertions of truth within an article are a prerequisite to conclusions without which the article loses tenability. Pirsig (1991, p54-56) in his moralist exploration agreed:

“What many were trying to do, evidently, was get out of all these metaphysical quarrels by condemning all theory, by agreeing not to even talk about such theoretical reductionist things...That was scientifically safe – and scientifically useless.”

Thus, in accepting that the value of narrative research is its ability to illuminate themes in dialogue and contextualise events, similar acceptance must be given to the introduction of bias to the interpretation and presentation of the narrative. Whilst the interpretation in the research will seek to be accurate, reasoned, transparent and replicable, my ontological background will undoubtedly affect the ‘truth’ and the truth presented will far from absolute.