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From a Rational Managerialist to a Reflective Practitioner

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Abstract

This development paper is a reflection on a DBA journey: the starting point and context; DBA motivation; philosophy and reflections. It is informed by a DBA Study that seeks to inform the development of SME business programmes offered by business schools underpinned by the current gaps in the relevance to SMEs of these programmes.

An initial intent to apply a Rational Managerialist rules-based research approach evolved into a qualitative, hermeneutic study undertaken through a reflexive practitioner lens.

We ask the question "why?" and explore how we can inform our research by reflecting on, our nature of being, experience and the emotive search for a philosophical label. We reflect on how we can derive confidence and authority in philosophical frameworks and how in doing so we can seek to unsettle our view of the world and start to answer our question "why"?

Introduction

This development paper is a reflection on a DBA journey: the starting point and context; DBA motivation; Philosophy and reflections.

We are the question "why?" and explore how we can inform our research by reflecting on, our nature of being, experience, how we can derive confidence and authority in philosophical frameworks and how in doing so we can seek to unsettle our view of the world.

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This paper is born from a DBA study that seeks to inform the Development of SME business programmes offered by Business Schools underpinned by the current gaps in the relevance to SMEs of these programmes.

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Philosophy

"Subjectivist research is always at least partly about the researcher; the researcher is not separate from the research. By adopting a subjectivist position the notions of the possibility of a neutral engagement with data and the emergence of a transcendental truth are explicitly rejected. Whatever emerges from the research is inevitably tainted by the researcher's a priori understandings. This is often a major concern for (researchers) who can't easily see how they can show the worth of subjectivist research in organisational and business studies, a field dominated by positivism" (Couch, et al. 2016)

From our experience (long serving business practitioners and researchers), the initial approach is often that, which is known and familiar. Here, we have a business practitioner, undertaking DBA research that seeks to inform business practice from a rules-based rational managerial perspective; a familiar, attractive and dominant space. There are no shocks that unsettle thinking or direction of travel; the philosophy, order, method and journey is safe…

… now he unsettles this. The motivation starts with the question "why?" instead of "what?"; it introduces intrinsic reflections on subjectivist philosophical considerations. It is a less familiar path;

Our researcher shares some insights;

> … I feel confusion and less certainty; two reasons; first, when I reflect on philosophical texts; I see some of myself and can find interesting features that could inform my study in most of them. Then, the language used and the context in which they are often presented. As Gergen says, one word can mean different things to different people (1992). Take the word "pragmatism"; In my life and business, I look at situations pragmatically every day, however, pragmatism in a philosophical context is different and unfamiliar.

What does then subjectivist research represent? Does unfamiliarity translate into harder, more complex, more difficult to do and less acceptable research? In part, for us, it represents, the researcher and their a priori understandings and nature of being; a researcher's assumptions arise from many influences; their lives, social circumstances, personal experiences; all of which, sit at the heart of subjectivist research.

So, how can subjectivist business research be designed so the journey and emergent insights add value to the receivers? Reflecting on Couch et al.'s (2016) observations; "In our experience, a non-academic organisation will listen to a consensus based authoritative piece of research as closely as they will to a "truth" based on questionnaires. Our task as researchers is to be faithful to our own convictions, to understand and pay due homage to academic traditions, and to claim no more than we think justified. If we get our research question, philosophy, methodology and conclusions sensibly aligned, we make that result as

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likely as we can. To do that, we must start with our own motivations" and ask not "what are we doing?" but with "why are we doing it?".

As Johnson and Duberley (2000) and Crotty (1998) all advocate; to achieve this, it is necessary to ensure that the research question, philosophy, methods and conclusions form part of aligned and consistent argument. For accessibility, researchers should be clear about what they are doing and express these in everyday terms Couch (2007).

To do this, we consider the work of Cole et al. (2011), and also suggest that the researcher's reflexivity on the motivations that are driving their research decisions should be looked at; this, to facilitate a strong grasp on the research and then used to provide the golden thread that runs throughout the study.

Reflexivity - why "why?" is important

The research interest here has arisen from professional, personal experience and subjective views of the world but until the "why?" of the research is clear, convincing authoritative research may not be possible.

"Why?" is the domain of the reflexive researcher (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Cole et al 2011), and is achieved through reflecting through the researcher's lens on the purpose and the possible philosophical and methodological paths. This, so an understanding of the position of the research and the motivation driving it, is clear. The researcher's aim is to reflect on and challenge their world view and be ready to be surprised by what emerges from this.

There are of course many possible answers to the "why?" question and questions, such as, 'Where does my affinity lie?", and "Why do I think this?".

As Johnson and Duberley (2003) observe, "… management research cannot be carried out in some intellectual space which is autonomous from the researcher's own habitus. Indeed, it would seem that epistemic reflexivity must relate to how a researcher's own social location affected the forms and outcomes of research as well as entailing acceptance of the conviction that there will always be more than one valid account of any research".

As Cole et al (2011) observes, "… the aim is that as a minimum, as researching practitioners we can hope to become more consciously reflexive. That is, as researchers we can see the importance in noticing and criticising our own pre-understandings and to examine the impact of these on how we engage with the social world of management. This form of self-comprehension requires, as Johnson and Duberley (2000) argue, researchers to "challenge their epistemological pre-understandings" (pp.5) and to explore "alternative possible commitments".

Couch et al (2016) agrees, "… it's not just exploring what's there, in the researcher's mind, but it is also about challenging oneself and testing one's understanding against other positions and views".

We share some insights here;

> Rational Managerialism has been described by Locke and Spender (2011) as the expressions of a special group embedded ruthlessly and systematically in organisations.

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A clear option at the start of my DBA journey, given SMEs, where decisions are taken without complete knowledge or information, are my subject focus. This was my philosophy with, as Diefenback (2013) observes, a strong belief in the value of professional managers and the concepts and methods they use, linked to hierarchical structures and organisations.

I sought, however, encouraged by my mentors, to consider different philosophical positions, to challenge my thinking against different views, and to identify where I might have affinity or otherwise in the context of my research. This was an uncomfortable experience but in persevering with it, it became a fascinating and rewarding journey of reflexion, not just around the research focus but around understanding my motivation and my thinking as a researcher.

Working with Crotty's (1998) models, my philosophical position and approach moved into unfamiliar territory; from rational managerialist to reflective practitioner; from positivist to interpretivist; from a quantitative and qualitative mixed methods approach, to being qualitative in a hermeneutic tradition using interviews instead of questionnaires.

Whilst Crotty was an early academic guardian for me, I found his visual presentations channelled my thinking in a definitive way that was uncomfortable. My experience of business models has shown me that thinking and learning does not run on linear lines in this way. I was, however, encourage by Crotty (1998) who also observes, it is not where one's research starts or finishes, it is about having a strong thread running through the research that brings the story to life.

To illustrate, I share my considerations around Critical Realism. Throughout my working life I have always critically analysed situations in a pragmatic way. I agree with Trigg (1980), that things that cannot be observed or measured can still be real, and also with Bhaskar (1978), who says that critical realism allows for critique through observation. He goes on to say that while some things cannot be observed they can be shown to be real by retroductive argument. In my study, my aim is to combine my own core beliefs whilst seeking to identify the real intransitive essence of casual powers that trigger action so I have some affinity with this position.

Reed (1997) provides a different radical managerialism perspective and suggests the critical realist asks what consciously motivates behaviour and how can this be skilfully and opaquely manipulated. This suggests that individuals can manipulate situations, leading to individuals doing things they would not naturally do as a result; not a view I have affinity with.

Another example; my interest in post-modernism and the consideration that encourages different views, assessing each of these and their relative strengths in order to move away from order, DeCock (1998). I find affinity with and Clegg's (1990) view that this explicitly recognises the ever-increasing speed of change in social, economic and technical fields, although, I question whether or not this takes account of some forms of extremism as is seen by the current world swing away from conventional politics. Berg's (1989) post-modernist view that the truth or falseness of a statement does not matter if it could be acceptable, saleable or valid to a large audience, is interesting,

although from a practical business perspective, I question the sustainability of actions arising from its application in practice or the suggestion that language is all there is.

Cole et al (2014), encourages researchers, "…critically and reflexively to evaluate how philosophical issues and their own emotions and feeling about the research affect the relationship between data and theory, the overall design of research, the visibility of this and hence the authenticity and trustworthiness of research outcomes." To do this, they suggest it is, "… worth looking at development and personal interaction of the researcher … to encourage reflexivity and …visibility of this…"

For me, I found Hermeneutic philosophical features aligned most with my intent. As Alvesson and Deetzt note, " … recognising the interpretative nature of research means no data, except possibly those on trivial matters, are viewed as unaffected by the construction of the researcher…" (2000 pp. 113); and for me, as McAuley observes,"…the researcher is not looking at the subject alone; there is also the position of the interpreter as the scene unfolds, and in the process of interpretation" (2004 pp.194). Earlier in 1985, McAuley considers that a Hermeneutic position embraces intervention by the researcher leading to the subsequent facilitation of change if practical aspects from research are to be realised. One of the most valuable and relevant reflections is that of recognising that I cannot ignore my own experience and deep-rooted opinions; these, as noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), form part of my considerations when developing my research questions and interpreting my research material.

In summary …

Reflecting on my motivations for the research and asking "why?", has influenced not only what I do, and how I do it but also, the considerations this has had on my observations and conclusions. There is more to do to develop this paper and provide more in-depth insights into this journey from a Radical Managerialist researcher to a Reflective Practitioner. As Couch et al (2016) observes, it is the thought process driven by the motivations to conduct the research that is fundamental to subjectivist research. This is not optional.

We acknowledge that there is no one way to approach research. Here we are seeking to provide some insights into reflexive research. We advocate starting with the "why?" and letting that inform and guide the journey.

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