Researching Spirituality and Meaning in the Workplace

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Abstract: In this paper we begin to address the topic of researching spirituality in the workplace. The notion of spirituality at work has been an increasing focus of attention in the academic literature over the last 10 years or so, with several special editions of journals being dedicated to the topic. However, we find at least two areas of this work so far to be problematic. One aspect relates to the apparent ambiguity relating to the term ‘spirituality’ in itself and, especially, in comparison to the use of the word ‘religion’. Another aspect refers to the motives and drivers behind the study of workplace spirituality and the search for ‘higher meaning’. In essence, we find the predominant objectives behind the research to be highly instrumental. Sometimes this seems to be deliberately espoused but sometimes it is more hidden. This paper attempts a preliminary critical review of the field with a special emphasis on the issues it raises for the researcher. In particular, we seek to show how the way in which ‘spirituality’ is conceived and constructed directly affects decisions related to methodological choice and (ultimately) to research design itself. We close the paper by reflecting on the importance of the topic and yet the dangers inherent in appearing to trivialise its nature.

Keywords: organisations; spirituality; critical management; meaning and work; religion; research methods; protestant ethic; essential self; methodology

1. Background

There has been an increase of focus within organisations on matters of ‘meaning’ and purpose. For instance, Companies such as AT & T, Apple Computers and DuPont are including a new question in their search for vision “What is our higher purpose?” (Channon 1992) We intend, initially, to investigate this question, be it a “slogan” or a heartfelt plea, and in doing so attempt to unpack the many different interpretations within the literature as to what a higher purpose might be, and more importantly, to whose benefit and gain?

Writers and academics; have explored a variety of avenues in regard to ‘meaning’. One such avenue is the notion of “spirituality”. Special issues of journals have been devoted to thinking about spirituality within an organisational context and many books have addressed similar themes (most recently at the time of writing ‘The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work by Alain De Botton 2009). This paper aims to discuss the academic and methodological problems encountered when researching meaning and spirituality in organisation and critically examine some of the current spirituality research, most pertinently Smith and Rayment’s 2007 SMP fitness framework. Not only do we consider the methods of research used by most research to be unlikely to gain any ‘truth’ or sufficient insight into spirituality, we also consider the research as methodologically weak concerning ontological and epistemological assumptions. Additionally, we examine attempts to force the concept into a ‘definition’ and explore other possibilities of treating the concept as ‘undefined’.

The paper will first explore the many permutations of thought behind the notion of spirituality (the “s” word) through a general discussion of theorists and then a more detailed look at Smith and Rayment’s SMP Framework (2007). Then it will go on to discuss the variety of uses within the field of the “word” (or definition) in two sections; as an ontological assumption (naming what we believe exists) and then exploring epistemological assumptions within a methodology and method context. In this paper we will discuss existing research and then use that to question our own underlying thinking regarding organisational spirituality; does it belong in the workplace? – Or/and is it unavoidable?

2. The “S” word

The Spirituality, Leadership and Management Network (2003) explain that human capital is the most important asset of a business. ‘Human capital’ being:

‘Human knowledge, human skills and human spirit as well.’

And: ‘…..To nurture and value the human spirit is an integral part of leadership’.
Spirituality is seen in the majority of mainstream literature as a way to find meaning in their work, a meaning that extends further than economic gain. In response to 10s of millions of world citizens that are hungering for: ‘transmaterial mind-expanding, soul-enriching and heart centred values’ spirituality offers the opportunity for employees to bring their ‘whole selves to work’ (Moxley, in Neal 1999). If this spirituality is allowed to be expressed (Lips-Wiersma and Mills 2002) on an individual level, Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) identify enhanced creativity, increased honesty and trust within an organisation and increased commitment. Whereas Neal, Lichtenstein and Banner (1999) propose that spirituality and the trust in the control inherent in life itself will allow people to loosen their grip on reality in order to let new wisdom in and for societal transformation and paradigm shift to occur. This position is further built upon by a consideration of Jungian psychology and the archetypal depths and power of the collective unconscious, and the therapeutic potency of images, myths and symbols.

Turning back to the benefits of spirituality for the individual, Konz and Ryan in their spiritual analysis of the mission statements of Jesuit Universities (1999) say:

‘Spirituality grounds people in their work and allows them to connect with the transcendent in all they do’

Furthermore Barnet (1985) talks of a model of personal growth where:

‘A Career becomes a path to personal enlightenment leading through the mastery of material skills to spiritual growth and self-knowledge.’

The journey or path of an individual is referred to a great deal within spirituality literature, for example, liberating human spirit and creativity: ‘via meditation, prayer and guided imagery, shamanic journeying and various yogic paths’ (Csikszenmihalyi 1990). These paths and journeys are deeply personal to the individual and problems occur when there are conflicts of interest when an organisation will try to implement a ‘workplace spirituality’ in order to feel the benefits outlined by Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) for example.

There are also many issues regarding spirituality at an individual level. Palmer (1994), for example, speaks of the trend for many managers to be ‘functional atheists’ – the belief that ‘ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me, I cannot expect God’s help. I alone am the one who must make things happen.’ Conversely, there is also the problematic, constricting and, dare we say, dangerous side of spirituality, whereby it is not so much about the reliance of an individual on nothing but themselves but the effect of spirituality at work on a person within an organisation.

We might draw attention to issues of excessive commitment to work that could result in employees ignoring the negative effects on their health, family and community. McCormick (1994), talks of the dilemma when ‘spiritual’ ideas cause managers to feel and express compassion when the organisation calls for hard-hearted decision-making based solely on monetary criteria. In addition to this idea, Steingard and Fitzgibbons (1995) comment that global capitalism as a discourse is without meaning due to its ecologically unstable nature and so this conflict of roles, experienced by McCormick’s manager, seems an inevitable experience due to the negative environmental factors of business. In agreement is George (2002) who calls for “a paradigm shift in thinking for some leaders and stakeholders” for organisations to embrace “spirituality”. Perhaps overriding all discussions of workplace “spirituality” are Mitroff and Denton (1999) who propose that organisations who practise spirituality in order to achieve better results actually undermine both its practice and its ultimate benefit. Forray and Stork (2003) consider the subtext of spirituality by using the fictional device of the telling of two parables. Parable one sees a manager in line with ‘New Age Corporate Spiritualism’ (Nadesan, 1999) where the individual feels ‘a sense of purpose and meaning in work’ and the person’s work ‘wasn’t about what he actually did, but rather that he saw what he did as contributing to the larger community.’ In parable two, however, the story is kept the same yet the annotations are changed from illustrating how parts of the story showed spirituality and meaningful work to show instead how the individual was aligned with the ideological framework of terrorism, in this case Al Quaeda. In doing this, Forray and Stork show the problematic nature of a concept that is ‘extra-rational’ – where there is any commitment to spirit, reason is silenced:

“Any devotion to ‘that which is unseen’ masks the very material and negative consequences of those aims as they become manifest in our everyday lives.” (Forray and Stork 2003)
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Forray and Stork’s paper shows up an important issue within the spirituality at work discourse, as, like other managerialist discourses, ‘it cloaks its possibilities in the rhetoric of organisational goodness.’ (Forray and Stork 2003)

A warning is also issued by Boyle and Healy (2003) against organisations overly relying on the use of spiritual work as way of helping paramedics to cope in adverse situations:

“By encouraging workers to be more ‘spiritual’ and engage in individual spiritual work as an extension of emotional labour, an organization may disown its responsibility to provide adequate support systems for emotionally exhausted workers” (Boyle and Healy 2003)

Brown (2003) succinctly summarises that at its best, spirituality can provide direction, connectedness and wholeness and, at its worst, it is the latest management fad (with sinister undertones) which, when unmasked, is likely to prove ineffective and ephemeral. However, as most of the literature is not backed up empirically it is hard to know which outcome is more likely. This paper aims to discuss the potential for empirical research on meaning and spirituality, the negative aspects, the sensitivity issues and the question regarding whether or why it should be studied at all.

3. Fear of the “S” word

“Spirituality in the Workplace is about individuals and organisations seeing work as a spiritual path, as an opportunity to contribute to society in a meaningful way” (Smith and Rayment 2007)

“[I]t can be most characteristically described as the inner experience of the individual when he senses a ‘beyond’, especially as evidenced by the effect of this experience on his behaviour when he actively attempts to harmonize his life with the ‘beyond’” (Clark 1958)

The majority of mainstream literature shows a plethora of definitions varying in ambiguity as to what may be defined as spiritual activity/behaviour within organisation. As seen above, Smith and Rayment (2007) apply a definition that should be embedded within organisation and management: a “spirituality” that should be included within an individual’s work-life and working environment. Clark (1958) was cited in a paper by McCormick (1994), as a definition of what “spirituality” might be. However, this definition was originally intended for a description of what one might mean when considering the term ‘religion’. This demonstrates the ambiguity and, indeed, the variety of spirituality definitions, leading to a concern of a lack of clarity within the field. Brown (2003) criticises the use of the term “Organizational Spirituality” as being ‘opaque’ due to the multitudinous definitions in the literature. Additionally, within this discussion of terms and language, the definition of “spirituality” as an organisational concept might be substituted by, for example; religion, (i.e. the reverse of how Clark’s definition has been used above), morality or ethics? However, the issue of multiple definitions, addressed and critiqued by Brown (2003), should not necessarily be seen as a negative point within the field, as variety does not necessarily mean a lack of progress, a point which we shall discuss in more detail later on.

4. Spiritual beings

The consideration of spirituality as a resource or tool by Smith and Rayment (2007) and, for example, like Ashmos and Duchon (2000) that should be encouraged, has been criticised by Bell and Taylor as not taking into consideration the political nature of organisation and the subsequent power issues in relation to this (Bell and Taylor 2003).

Bell and Taylor (2003) consider spirituality at work to be based upon, or at least derived from, Weber’s “Protestant Ethic”, translated as:

“..The concept of religious vocation or calling into a secular context... work was portrayed as a means of gaining salvation and workers were expected to act selflessly for a greater good.” (Quoted in Bell and Taylor 2003)

A pertinent change happened in the last half of the 20th century, where the principles of Protestantism changed for the majority of the working masses. Work at this point was stripped of its meaning (Berger 1964). The value of hard work for the glory of God and subsequent preservation of the soul,
not to mention the moral, social and ethical self-improvement the modern-day notion of spirituality is said to provide, for many, disappeared.

Bell and Taylor (2003) draw upon the similarities of Weber's "Protestant Ethic" and the discourse of workplace spirituality by citing Fox (1994), who says that "all work can be spiritual". Novak (1996) remarks that "capitalism is a source of vocation" and La Bier (1986) sees workplace spirituality as a "pragmatic solution to careerist orientation". Noting this, they outline a tension between what many spirituality scholars are advocating: that spirituality can be "brought in" and a critical view that we should question where this spirituality is coming from, and who is set to gain the most from it. In other words, whose spirituality?

This directly flags up a major criticism of the functional/managerial spirituality in the workplace literature. Insofar as the work organisation is seen as a neutral context in which spiritual growth is simply located. This can be understood as just another method for the exploitation of labour, introducing and continually mystifying the elusive concept of spirituality as a discourse which can develop a more meaningful experience for the individual and a higher purpose for an organisation. Whilst at the same time de-emphasising the significance of non-work domains, Bell and Taylor see the discourse of spirituality at work to be more in-line with Goffman's (1968) "Totalizing Tendency" or a sacred version of Foucault's panopticon. The organisation is not so much turned into the traditional panopticon metaphor of a "psychic prison" (Morgan 1997), but perhaps a 'mental mosque' or a 'constricting/identity constituting cathedral'.

Underlying this discussion are many tensions. One tension is the emphasis placed upon the individual when it comes to spirituality at work. As we have indicated, spirituality at work focuses on the journey of the individual. This individual-based notion or approach brings with it many theoretical tensions and potentially steps into the dualism of structure and agency. In other words, the individual, as a part of the organisation is seen as having an 'essential self' that has potential spirituality that must be released and enabled, with the organisation being seen as a politically neutral provider of opportunities. This tension leads directly into the considerations of Goffman's (1968) "Totalizing Tendency" and Foucault's ideas on panopticon and the shift of pastoral power. (People no longer known by the church but doctors, families, education and employers having intimate knowledge of them and, thus, the micro-technologies related to this knowledge.)

As noted by Bell and Taylor (2003) the majority of spirituality literature focuses on the non-rational, informal and intuitive aspects of organisation. However, a tension arises when attempts are made to model, produce frameworks or create methods for "better" or "more productive" behaviours associated with the concept of spirituality at work:

".....in trying to understand and define spirituality they are obscuring rather than elucidating their intended subject”. (Bell and Taylor 2003)

We believe, therefore, that “spirituality” as an undefined concept or notion is still a valid phenomena for research. However, it is of upmost importance that as researchers within a field we "kick back" or diversify from a conceptualisation (and often vague definition; Benefiel, 2003) of spirituality at work.

Whereas previous conceptualisations of spirituality at work have attempted to:

"...solve the meaning of work by making work mystical only then to demystify and resolve it." (Bell and Taylor 2003)

We would argue that no demystification is needed, or at least, not yet. And definitely not in the manner previously seen. We agree with Brown (2003) that the spirituality discussed previously in the paper and critiqued by Bell and Taylor may not "exist" or fulfill the outcomes that they propose. However, our discussion of spirituality as a notion will be implicit in organisation as we believe that human beings are implicitly spiritual. To unpack this further it may be useful to consider the work of Ian Mitroff on what he considers to be ‘spiritual’ and to examine the fruitful tension this develops with Bell and Taylor's ideas in regard to spirituality being the re-enunciation of Weber's "Protestant Ethic".

Both Mitroff and Bell & Taylor agree that spirituality was historically experienced and celebrated in religious denominations (Christian, Muslim, Hindu etc). However, Mitroff strongly disagrees that workplace spirituality should have anything to do with religion, whereas Bell and Taylor see the
discourse of spirituality at work to be a re-enunciation of the "Protestant Ethic" in-line with New Age values (New Age religions being another severely criticised notion by Mitroff (2003))

Mitroff is critical of any contemporary spirituality being related to religion, acknowledging that spirituality is to be seen as both "above and beyond denominations". Moreover, using Wilber (1985) he speaks of how spirituality at work should stand as being broadly inclusive, without condoning or endorsing a spiritual experience or the activity of spiritual practice in a particular way. Religion, Mitroff states, imposes a particular form of God or a particular way of worshipping and living. Mitroff proposes that spirituality should be seen as a potential universal religion; being both universal, timeless and the ultimate source and provider of meaning and purpose in our lives.

This is a different conceptualisation of what spirituality could be in organisation to Bell and Taylor's view of it as a re-enunciation of the "Protestant Ethic" aligned to "New Age" religious values. We believe this is demonstrable of the tension we have noted in relation to the spirituality at work discussion overall, and is important to discuss if you are to explore the notion of spirituality further. For example, is a person in an organisation constituted as a docile body (via the Foucauldian notion of pastoral power) or, drawing on Goffman, is the "Totalizing Tendency" providing an overarching system of meaning legitimating the social order through reference to sacred power? This would restrict:

"... the possibility of retaining something of one's self from the organisation, making the constitution of identity through 'recalcitrance' (1968) more difficult for the individual to achieve." (Goffman 1968, cited in Bell and Taylor 2003)

Alternatively, using Mitroff's research, many spoke of wanting to bring their "whole selves" to work. In other words, a person has a self with which they may actively pursue a spiritual journey.

Many tensions underlie these positions and this reveals the political nature of the organisation and the polysemic nature of the discourse of spirituality at work. A warning can be issued, however, if one views spiritual matters through the lens of Bell and Taylor's use of Foucault and his ideas on the panopticon. Similar to the negative considerations mentioned previously, perhaps if Mitroff's managers and executives were to bring their "whole selves" into work it would be another aspect of their life that would be constituted by the dominant discourse? More specifically, if a person's life is viewed as full of alternative discourses constituting them in various situations in life, then to bring deep emotional and spiritual feelings into the workplace might mean the person's "whole self" may be "wholly constituted" or "wholly aligned" to the organisations values and goals!

We believe it to be more useful to view the theoretical dance between docile body and essential self as a tension. The discourse of spirituality questions the enlightenment notion of modern man (man without God) yet still finds itself leaning toward a modernistic view of identity with the consideration of the 'essential self'. This is set in contrast to postmodern or poststructural views of identity or self which see the person as being constituted by discourse and knowledge/power the latter is beyond our current discussion, but will be addressed a later paper.

5. Spirituality in the workplace, a critical review of Smith and Rayment’s (2007) SMP global fitness framework

"...It is not because Skinner does not understand his pigeons or his people as well as Bohr understands his particles, but because we are, reasonably enough, suspicious of people who make a business of predicting and controlling other people." (Rorty 1981)

So far we have explored views of spirituality as being beneficial to the individual, the organisation and even as a catalyst for societal transformation. We have also attempted to provide a brief overview of the negative and potentially dangerous side of spirituality. To investigate these issues further, we will look in more detail at one particular advocate of organisational spirituality: Smith and Rayment’s (2007) Global SMP framework for implementing spirituality in the workplace.

The SMP framework is a response to the lack of models for business in respect to spirituality (Harris, 2005) and is based on Senge’s (1998) systemic thinking that all things are interconnected and, therefore, should be considered whole. The paper proposes a "... a framework that incorporates the spiritual dimension into a holistic approach and guides leaders on all the areas to consider in this
approach” (Smith and Rayment 2007). The goal of the framework is to aid leaders in becoming “Spiritually Fit” in the way Warren (2005) uses the term, as a manager who has the skills and ability to nurture spirituality successfully in an organisation.

The framework is a 3x3x3 (3D) typology, giving a total of 27 cells the front segment being the “Organic Level” – individual, group or society; an “Holistic Level” - physical, mental and spiritual; and a consideration of the manager or leader’s “Fitness Plane” – Strength, Stamina and Suppleness. In this particular paper Smith and Rayment focus on the back segment of the framework, although the interconnectedness between all the cells is still an important consideration. This back slice relates to the spiritual nature of leadership. These spiritual aspects look at implications at the levels of society, group and the individual and how they are dealt with by the leader in terms of strength, stamina and suppleness. Strength, within this particular domain, is specifically related to a particular manager’s ability to appreciate and nurture the spiritual dimension of others and their own spirituality. Stamina is an attribute regarding the leader’s ability to consistently maintain their own beliefs and to maintain the spiritual dimension within the workplace. Finally, Suppleness is the concern for managers to embrace the many forms of spirituality and to communicate with people who have a variety of spiritual beliefs, including none. The onus is on the leader to maintain sufficient levels of each attribute to implement a spiritual aspect within the workplace. However, “spirituality” is a complex notion, and although Smith and Rayment offer a definition it is sufficiently vague:

“Spirituality is a state or experience that can provide individuals with direction or meaning or provide feelings of understanding, support, inner wholeness or connectedness…..”

(Smith and Rayment 2007)

The definition goes on:

“It is about care, compassion and support of others; about integrity and people being true to themselves and others. It means individuals and organisations attempting to live their values more fully in the work they do” (Smith and Rayment 2007)

Here the specific definition of what is termed ‘spiritual’ is clarified. However, the concept could still be confused with other considerations of humanism, religion or an increased consideration of ethics in the workplace. An interesting section of the paper discusses ‘what forms of spirituality are acceptable in organisation?’ Love of a football team or a particular musician, a live singing performance and so on. Many consider these activities provide them with direction, meaning and connectedness with others. We believe this is only a brief overview of the vast range of diverse activities, emotions or beliefs that may be considered “spiritual”. However, Smith and Rayment propose that the leader or manager, who is spiritually fit, should be the person to decide what should be part of an organisational spirituality. Moreover, Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) propose the functional benefit of the spiritual ideas of employees, because, once decided by management as appropriate, leaders should help relate these ideas to the company’s values and harness them to organisational goals.

It is acknowledged that it is difficult to convey the complete essence of spirituality, and that a definition might be useful to some leaders. We would argue that it is nigh on impossible to convey a complete description of something as personal as spirituality. It would be no more likely than proposing a framework for understanding the concept of “love”. However, on a critical level, what does this definition enable us to see about the authors’ supposed function of the framework? What if we go back to the first definition by Smith and Rayment and replace the word Spirituality in the phrase “Spirituality is a state or experience that…” with ‘Culture’, ‘Community’ or ‘An ethically informed mission statement’ or even; ‘A prestigious and large monetary bonus system?’ Do we arrive at a similar definition for each term?

At this point it is possible to consider several questions, for example: What are the implications of introducing a framework for implementing spirituality in the workplace? Moreover, with a (rightly) vague definition of spirituality what are the likely outcomes of such an endeavour? Also, is management expecting to align the fanatical supporting of Newcastle United with organisational targets (Alan Shearer for CeO?) Or, is it a genuine attempt to nurture a caring and contemplative individual? This raises the question of whether a caring and contemplative person’s beliefs can be aligned with an organisation that does not aspire to these qualities (Steingard and Fitzgibbons (1995).
So far our discussion of spirituality has not been based on one clear concept of spirituality. As Brenda Freshman (1999) says in her conceptual paper, the topic of analysis here is not so much about definitions of “Spirituality in the Workplace” but, “what other people are writing about when they refer to ‘spirituality in the workplace’”. Moreover, as noted by Brown (2003), the majority of work on spirituality is discursive and not “backed up” by empirical research. This leads us to question how a concept of workplace spirituality might be considered on an ontological level (i.e. naming something we believe in) and then at the epistemological level in the research methodology of a researcher?

We shall begin with a consideration of ‘What is Spirituality?’ tackling the ontological assumption of its definition as an abstract term. More importantly, for us, is an investigation of the use of the term within the “reality” of an organisation.

6. Methodological problems with the “S” word

6.1 Spirituality as a naming word

As noted above the definitions of spirituality are multiple and although drawing on similar themes there are a variety of different attempts to restrain it into a definition. A more productive endeavour would be to consider each definition as part of the explanans (from the Latin word to make plain or flatten out) in a way that questions our assumptions about the thing to be studied. The explanandum is the grammatical object that might undergo a ‘flattening out’ etc (Burrell 1996).

In response to the critique of multiple definitions of leadership (Yukl 1989), Alvesson and Deetz propose that a common definition of leadership is not practically possible, and would not be very helpful if it was, as it may obstruct and obscure new ideas and creative ways of thinking. Rather, they propose a different question which is:

“What can we see, think or talk about if we think of leadership as this or that?” (Alvesson and Deetz 2000)

This premise can be applied to the question ‘What is Spirituality?’ If we consider an idea of a spirituality as one which may be quantified and implemented within an organisation, then how does this affect the way we view spirituality in the workplace? From a critical research perspective it might inspire a research project aimed at viewing the micro-power issues of adopting an overarching managerialistic concept; for example, see Kunda 1992, Parker 2000 in response to corporate culture. On a more general level, as researchers of ‘critical’ orientation, we see that at the level of research methodology that the ontological and (latterly) the epistemological role of language (and, thereby, definition) as an action, therefore, can only be understood in a specific context. We believe concepts and words get their meaning through the metaphorical context in which they are employed and are not carriers of abstract truth set to be used against reality. (See again Alvesson and Deetz (2000) for a detailed discussion).

“Conceptions are always contest for meaning. Language does not name objects in the world; it is core to the process of constituting objects. The appearance of labelling or categorizing existing objects is derived from this more fundamental act of object constitution through language.” (Deetz 1996)

Therefore, the same definition may then be informed by different uses within a metaphorical context and, thus, have many different meanings. On the other, normative, side of the argument, however, is a claim that a singular definition is needed if cumulative knowledge is to be built up about a particular concept.

Another way to consider the problem of definition is Austin’s (1961) ‘Representational Problem’. Most of the discursive, non-empirically researched papers appear to address the question ‘What is the meaning of the word ‘Spirituality’?’. That is, an abstract definition stripped of its specific domain. Metanexus, a research organisation focusing on transdisciplinarity and the religion/science debate have disregarded the term ‘spirituality’ due to its abstract use by many disciplines (www.metanexus.net). This abstract definition describes a concept apart from the socially constructed context and is of no use to the critical researcher. Instead, the question ‘What is Spirituality?’ concerns the application of theory to a given social context. We argue that this is a more useful way of viewing the concept. Traditionally, it is the abstract definition which contextualises the applied use of
the term. However, we consider this tradition to be of little use when researching a sensitive and context dependent issue such as spirituality.

“The more universal and totalizing the definition proposed the greater (the) variation in meanings and language use. Further, the more dominant the definition, the more likely that the ‘phenomenon’ is only understood as it is preferred by some limited and dominant group” (Cited in Alvesson and Deetz 2000, see Calas and Smircich 1991, Martin 1990).

The political concern of definitions is of crucial importance when considering methodology and method for critical research. A definition relies more on the repression of alternative meanings than a rigorous attempt to provide an all-encompassing description of every possible interpretation, as this could potentially take a lifetime and a lot of paper! Drawing from Alvesson and Deetz (2000) at a practical level, elite/a priori definitions that try to fix research themes (imposing upon an ambiguous social contextual experience) ultimately will lock researchers into closed, conservative and uncreative modes of thinking. It is to the study of this social contextual experience that we now turn as we consider the implications of epistemological assumptions within methodology and method.

6.2 Researching spirituality

“Most versions of critical research are oriented towards investigating themes that are more hidden, that do not materialise so easily, or that are not fully registered and experienced by the subjects involved.” (Alvesson and Deetz 2000)

Examples of previous research methods in spirituality have used questionnaires (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000), analysis of mission statements as enunciations of culture (McCormick 1994) and, more usually, interviews (Krishnakumar and Neck 2002, Lips-Wiersma and Mills 2002, and Mitroff 1999). We propose a research method that will allow a deeper understanding of the contextual experience of participants and spirituality; one that runs alongside interviews as a way of better understanding the situation and as a way of gaining greater experience. Unlike typical methods where a researcher enters a situation with a method and methodology and takes away “knowledge” (or not) of the thing they intended to study, we view it as more of a self-exploration, or a self-reflexion of our experiences within situations. Typically research methods with this approach might be called ethnographic or even self-ethnographic. However, we believe that presentation of our work at conferences will provide an excellent opportunity to discuss the problem of method in our study.

This leads on from the problematic nature of ontological assumptions within previous projects and the problems inherent in these assumptions (more specifically definitions). During ‘fieldwork’ investigating spirituality, therefore, it is important to disregard general categories, frameworks and efforts to standardise meanings and instead focus on:

“Local patterns, where the cultural and institutional context and meaning-creation patterns are driven by participants (or jointly by participants and researchers)” (Deetz 1996)

Participants should provide meaning and behaviours (etc) to study. We are not making the assumption that the researcher is an expert and so should decide what is ‘going on’. We propose that the researcher should not go into the field with a pre-supposition of what spirituality is for other people. By all means it may be an opportunity to invite people to discuss issues about spirituality but, it should not turn into a ‘spirituality hunt’ by a researcher looking for a new research angle. One must be sensitive within the research to the situation in which the organisational members find themselves as they may never before have discussed issues so close to their heart.

This sensitivity extends to the researcher’s role within the organisation. As a critical researcher, we propose, it is important to establish an open attitude, and a postponement of closure by constantly reflexing and re-problematising aspects of organisational life, avoiding discursive closure (where potential conflict is suppressed) in the field and when writing up the research.

Drawing on Alvesson and Deetz (2000) the challenge is to concentrate on local actor’s meanings, symbols and values whilst continually reflexing as researchers regarding the multiple meanings and vast number of perspectives in relation to the topic. The challenge is, also, to avoid a framework that forces the material into a particular theory and language. A dominant voice might obscure the
ambiguities and varieties of the empirical situation and the multiple ways in which it can be accounted for.

Perhaps ultimately, though, it is important to consider and clarify the researcher’s emotional (and spiritual) commitments and research identities within the empirical field. To go out and “experience” and to “do” work with people in organisations and then to reflex (fold the experience back onto ourselves) in order to drive the inquiry forward.

7. Summary

7.1 Reflections/creed?

In summary, we need to be sensitive both theoretically to the notion of spirituality and, at the same time, sensitive to the way we research the emotional interactions of participants. We also need to attempt to be continually reflexive in our writing up of our research. The latter requirement has led us to reflect upon our own ‘spirituality’.

We believe that spirituality at work is implicit in organisation because organisation involves people. Hence, we are claiming that being human involves a spiritual dimension. However, we feel it necessary to be playful with the concept of spirituality and ‘kick back’ against the majority of definitions and conceptualisations we have encountered in the literature. Some would criticise us, perhaps, for being vague or un-rigorous in our endeavours. We would not accept this. We believe treating spirituality as an ill-defined, undefined and even ‘mind-less’ (Boyle and Healy, 2003) concept, in itself, provides sufficient purchase for inquiry.

As Boyle and Healy (2003) have suggested, future research in this area needs to be cautious of adopting theoretical approaches that restrict the way in which spirituality is both conceptualised and practiced within organisational contexts. Specifically, we argue that there is a tendency towards dualistic thinking in the literature; the docile body versus the essential self. Whereas the docile body is determined and constructed by the discourses within which they find themselves (be it God, power, politics, or family and so on), the essentially free individual determines their own journey on the basis of choices and beliefs (we see this as the basis of the ‘essential self’ position). As researchers, we seek to develop an awareness and sensitivity to a variety of positions, even to a melding of ideas, whilst at the same time being alert to our own beliefs and values concerning the spiritual nature of humanity. After all, it would be arrogant to suggest that it is possible or even desirable, to achieve a level of detached observation when researching a topic as acutely personal and subjective as spirituality in the workplace. We recognise that this is an ambitious project. Schervish (1996), for instance, pointed out that social science is limited in its power to explore such issues partly because it does not use ideas that come from spiritual life.

Quite apart from the practicalities of designing our conceptual or methodological frameworks, we might also question the appropriateness of researching into the topic at all. To illustrate this point, we close with an overview of the questions raised by Margaret Benefiel (2003). Benefiel alerts researchers to the potential side-effects of giving a recognised place to spirituality within an organisational context. Side-effects include the possibility of trivialising spirituality by reducing it to practices that impact the ‘bottom line’, that focus on the material aspects, and that could lead to cynicism if organisational spirituality is deemed to be a ‘failure’.

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The Research Audit Trial – Enhancing Trustworthiness in Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract: Positivist and interpretivist researchers have different views on how their research outcomes may be evaluated. The issues of validity, reliability and generalisability, used in evaluating positivist studies, are regarded of relatively little significance by many qualitative researchers for judging the merits of their interpretive investigations. In confirming the research, those three canons need at least to be re-conceptualised in order to reflect the keys issues of concern for interpretivists. Some interpretivists address alternative issues such as credibility, dependability and transferability when determining the trustworthiness of their qualitative investigations. A strategy proposed by several authors for establishing the trustworthiness of the qualitative inquiry is the development of a research audit trail. The audit trail enables readers to trace through a researcher’s logic and determine whether the study’s findings may be relied upon as a platform for further enquiry. While recommended in theory, this strategy is rarely implemented in practice. This paper examines the role of the research audit trail in improving the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Further, it documents the development of an audit trail for an empirical qualitative research study that centred on an interpretive evaluation of a new Information and Communication Technology (ICT) student administrative system in the tertiary education sector in the Republic of Ireland. This research study examined the impact of system introduction across five Institutes of Technology (IoTs) through case study research that incorporated multiple evidence sources. The evidence collected was analysed using a grounded theory method, which was supported by qualitative data analysis software. The key concepts and categories that emerged from this process were synthesized into a cross case primary narrative; through reflection the primary narrative was reduced to a higher order narrative that presented the principle findings or key research themes. From this higher order narrative a theoretical conjecture was distilled. Both a physical and intellectual audit trail for this study are presented in this paper. The physical audit trail documents all keys stages of a research study and reflects the key research methodology decisions. The intellectual audit trail, on the other hand, outlines how a researcher’s thinking evolved throughout all phases of the study. Hence, these audit trails make transparent the key decisions taken throughout the research process. The paper concludes by discussing the value of this audit trail process in confirming a qualitative study’s findings.

Keywords: interpretivist paradigm, qualitative research, research audit trail, research confirmability, trustworthiness, transferability, information technology, higher education

1. Introduction

The research study discussed in this paper is centred on the field of ICT evaluation. Positivist approaches have dominated past ICT research. These approaches emphasise the quantification of expected ICT system impacts, in order to reduce a potential investment to a “yes”/“no” decision. However, they are regarded as inappropriate by many authors, as the focus on positivist evaluation approaches has failed to resolve many ICT evaluation concerns (Irani and Love, 2001; Hughes and Jones, 2003). On the other hand, the interpretivist paradigm offers the opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding of an ICT system’s impact, as it facilitates the capture of contextual depth and detailed, nuanced descriptions. This is a more appropriate approach to ICT evaluation as it recognises the social and organisational contexts and avoids the unproblematic, value-free view of organisations associated with positivist approaches.

The interpretivist research paradigm emphasises qualitative research methods, which are flexible, context sensitive and largely concerned with understanding complex issues. Researchers widely debate how the trustworthiness of interpretivist research efforts is evaluated. Positivist researchers, who emphasise the issues of validity, reliability and generalisability, often regard qualitative research methods as unscientific. Several researchers suggest new criteria for evaluating qualitative enquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Leininger, 1994) and many different approaches to evaluating qualitative research have been discussed in the literature. This paper explores in depth the standards for evaluating qualitative inquiry. It considers how the canons of validity, reliability and generalisability can be used for evaluating qualitative research by reconceptualising these standards to reflect the key issues of concern for interpretivist researchers. The paper examines the role of the research audit trail, which is a strategy recommended by several authors for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative studies. Further, the paper documents the development of a research audit trail for an...
empirical qualitative research study in the field of ICT evaluation, and examines its value in confirming qualitative research findings.

2. Exploring the interpretivist paradigm

Interpretivism has grown in importance in IS research in the past decade (Walsham, 2006). In the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher is not perceived as being entirely objective; rather he/she is a part of the research process (Rowland, 2005). According to Walsham (2006: 321):

“we are biased by our own background, knowledge and prejudices to see things in certain ways and not others”.

Further, Wheatley (1992: 7) stated:

“we inhabit a world that is always subjective ... Our world is impossible to pin down, constantly and infinitely more interesting than we ever imagined”.

The interpretivist stance is holistic and considers numerous variables including the context of the study (Klein and Myers, 1999). Context is regarded critical. As outlined by Clarkson (1989: 16):

“people cannot be understood outside of the context of their ongoing relationships with other people or separate from their interconnectedness with the world”.

Hence, this approach aims to grasp the diversity of subjects' experiences (Kvale, 1996).

Interpretivism recognises the difficulty in making research value-free and objective. In terms of this view, a single objective reality does not exist. The social world does not lend itself to being understood by physical-law-like rules (Snape and Spencer, 2003). Multiple realities need to be considered. These include an external reality, which is what actually occurred in the physical world, and internal realities, which are subjective and unique to each individual (Bannister, 2005). Because each situation is different, the researcher needs to delve below the surface of its details to understand the reality. The meaning derived by the researcher is a function of the circumstances, the people involved and the broad interrelationships in the situations being researched (Saunders et al, 2007; Ticehurst and Veal, 2000). Walsham (2006: 325) maintained that:

“the researcher's best tool for analysis is his or her own mind, supplemented by the minds of others when work and ideas are exposed to them”.

Unlike the positivist stance, physical-law-like generalisations are not the end product. Rather understanding through detailed descriptions is sought by answering questions such as “what?”, “why?” and “how?”

3. Qualitative research methods

The interpretivist paradigm emphasises qualitative research methods where words and pictures as opposed to numbers are used to describe situations. According to Van Maanen (1983: 9) qualitative methods include:

“an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world”.

In qualitative research, the researcher is actively involved and attempts to understand and explain social phenomena in order to solve what Mason (2002:18) calls “the intellectual puzzle”. It relies on logical inference (Hinton et al, 2003) and is sensitive to the human situation as it involves dialogue with informants (Kvale, 1996). In general, the researcher collects large quantities of detailed evidence. Thus, qualitative research may achieve depth and breadth (Blaxter et al, 1996; Snape and Spencer, 2003; Ticehurst and Veal, 2000). Further, qualitative methods are useful when the researcher focuses on the dynamics of the process and requires a deeper understanding of behaviour and the meaning and context of complex phenomena (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Snape and Spencer, 2003). It is the most appropriate approach for studying a wide range of social dimensions, while maintaining contextual focus (Mason, 2002).

Conducting qualitative research requires considerable reflection on the researcher’s part, and the ability to make a critical assessment of informants’ comments. It involves debating the reasons for adopting a course of action, challenging ones own assumptions and recognising how decisions shape the research study. Mason (2002) provided the following guidelines for the qualitative researcher:
• The research should be conducted systematically and rigorously;
• It should be strategic, flexible and contextual;
• The researcher is accountable for its quality and claims;
• He/She should engage in critical scrutiny or active reflexivity;
• He/She should produce convincing arguments.

As outlined, positivist researchers often regard qualitative research methods as unscientific. However, Kvale (1996) challenges this assumption stating that it reflects a limited view of science. Rather science needs to be regarded as a subject of continuous clarification and discussion.

Qualitative data collection approaches include for example participant observation, observation, documentary analysis, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, biographical methods, case studies, interviews and focus group discussions (Ritchie, 2003). The choice of method is influenced by the nature of the research problem, the researcher’s theoretical lens or philosophical assumptions, the researcher’s skills and academic politics (Trauth, 2001).

The challenge for many qualitative researchers lies in analysing the body of evidence gathered so as to produce a convincing explanation of the phenomena, based on a holistic interpretation of the social understandings captured in the empirical data. The difficulty lies in the fact that the researcher is:

“faced with a bank of qualitative data [and] has very few guidelines for protection against self delusion, let alone the presentation of unreliable or invalid conclusions to scientific or policy making audiences. How can we be sure that an “earthy”, “undeniable”, “serendipitous” finding is not, in fact wrong” (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Kvale (1996: 32) suggested that:

“precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation correspond in qualitative interviews to exactness in quantitative measurements”;

while Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that:

“the strengths of qualitative data rest very centrally on the competence with which their analysis is carried out”.

Data analysis is an iterative process and requires what Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000: 248) termed “reflexive interpretation”. This is a need for reflection and interpretation on several levels. Reflection requires thinking about the research and as outlined by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000: 245), it involves examining how:

“the theoretical, cultural and political context of individual and intellectual involvement affects interaction with whatever is being researched”.

Interpretation takes place on four levels:
• Interaction with the empirical material;
• Interpretation of underlying meanings;
• Critical interpretation;
• Reflection on text production and language use.

Interpretation suggests that there are no clear rules and that the researcher’s judgment, intuition and ability to highlight issues play an important part in the process.

4. Evaluating qualitative research

Because of the role of researcher judgement and intuition, and potential for researcher bias in interpretivist research, the question as to how the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings can be demonstrated has received much attention in the literature. Miles and Huberman (1994) stated:

“Still the problem of confidence in findings has not gone away...We need to keep working at sensible canons for qualitative data analysis, in the sense of shared ground rules for drawing conclusions and verifying their sturdiness”.

When evaluating their research efforts, positivist researchers place significant emphasis on the issues of validity, reliability and generalisability. Kvale (1996: 229) suggests that these standards have
acquired the status of a “scientific holy trinity” among the positivist research community. However, they are regarded relatively little significance by many qualitative researchers (Kvale, 1996; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Mason, 2002). Strauss and Corbin (1998: 266) suggests that these canons need to be redefined in order to:

“fit the realities of qualitative research and the complexities of the social phenomena that we seek to understand”.

Some authors maintain that these standards are pertinent only to the positivist paradigm (Leininger, 1994). Others suggest adopting new criteria for evaluating qualitative inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Leininger, 1994). For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider the credibility, dependability, transferability, authenticity and confirmability of qualitative studies.

The principal issues for interpretivists are consistency and integrity in the study's design. Qualitative researchers emphasise the importance of reflecting on the body of evidence, the ability to make critical assessments of informants' statements, and the importance of producing convincing arguments and explanations (Mason, 2002). Many different approaches to evaluating qualitative research have been discussed in the literature. However, the author maintains that the canons of validity, reliability and generalisability can be used in evaluating qualitative research. However these standards need to be reconceptualised to reflect the key issues of concern for interpretivist researchers.

5. Validity

From an interpretivist’s perspective, validity refers to how well the research method investigates what it intends to (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003; Mason, 2002) and the extent to which the researcher gained full access to informants knowledge and meaning (Remenyi et al, 1998). Some qualitative researchers discuss the issue of validity in terms of their research authenticity; in other words the issue of validity is rooted in the philosophical contexts of the study’s research model and its fundamental assumptions (Lincoln, 2001). The important issue in qualitative research is achieving a congruence of understanding between the informant and the researcher (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003) and in ensuring the research is credible. This involves demonstrating that the research design accurately identified and described the phenomenon under investigation. A number of authors suggest strategies to enhance the validity of qualitative studies.

For example, Mason (2002) discusses the need to demonstrate the validity of data generation and the validity of the researcher’s interpretations. Validity of data generation is concerned with how appropriate a specific research method is for answering the research questions and providing explanations. On the other hand, validity of interpretation is concerned with how convincing the data analysis process and the researcher’s interpretations are. This is contingent on the validity of the research method especially the approaches taken in data analysis and the transparency of the researcher’s interpretations.

Lewis and Ritchie (2003) suggest that it is useful to consider the qualitative study’s internal and external validity. Internal validation is enhanced by adopting a constant comparative method and recognising the importance of deviant cases in acquiring a greater understanding for theory development. External validation is improved through triangulation and respondent validation.

6. Reliability

Reliability is largely concerned with whether a study can be repeated (Kvale, 1996; Lee and Baskerville, 2003; Mason, 2002; Yin, 2003). In the traditional natural and life sciences, reliability is an issue of considerable importance. However, qualitative researchers recognise the difficulty in reproducing social phenomena because of the challenges involved in replicating the precise conditions under which evidence was originally collected (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Even if the same informants participated in a later similar study, it is unlikely they would provide identical responses. This is because having reflected on the initial research process, their understanding of the key issues may have further developed or changed. However, if similar studies were conducted with considerable care, one would anticipate that the findings would not be entirely different. Hence, the issue of reliability needs to be conceptualised differently when considering qualitative studies.

From an interpretivist's perspective, reliability is concerned with demonstrating that the researcher has not invented or misrepresented data or been careless in data recording or analysis (Mason,
Lewis and Ritchie (2003) suggest that the researcher can enhance reliability by reflecting on and outlining in a transparent way the procedures that led to the research findings; by checking through his/her interpretations; by carrying out the fieldwork consistently and ensuring all informants have sufficient opportunity to discuss their experiences; by systematically analysing the evidence; and by supporting interpretations with evidence and offering a balanced perspective.

7. Generalisability

Generalisability is concerned with how applicable theories, which are generated in one setting, are to other settings (Yin, 2003). In qualitative research, statistical generalisability to a wider population is not the objective. Some authors, for example Lee and Baskerville (2003) maintain that the only way to generalise to a new setting in interpretive research is for a theory to survive an empirical test in that setting. However, Walsham (2006) suggests that a researcher can generalise to concepts, theory, specific implications or to rich insights. In general, the main focus in qualitative research is on insuring appropriate representation of the study’s events and on understanding the key issues under investigation. However, because of the nature of individuals and organisations, it is not unreasonable to expect that some findings may be transferable to other organisations. According to Remenyi et al (1998), a detailed understanding of the issues in a particular case can form the basis for better understanding those issues in other similar settings. Transferability to other settings depends on the congruence between the “sending context”, i.e. the context in which the research was conducted, and the “receiving contexts” i.e. the contexts to which the research findings are to be applied (Koch, 2006; Lewis and Ritchie, 2003: 268). Lewis and Ritchie (2003) use the term inferential generalisation to reflect the concept of transferability to other settings. The researcher needs to provide detailed descriptions of context and phenomena so as to enable others to assess the findings’ transferability.

8. The research audit trail

Strategies for establishing research confirmability need to be built into the qualitative research process. Several researchers recommend the development of a research audit trail, for example Heopfl (1997). Koch (2006) suggests that a study’s trustworthiness may be established if a reader is able to audit the events, influences and actions of the researcher, while Akkerman et al (2006) suggest that audit trails represent a means of assuring quality in qualitative studies. The development of a research audit trail is in line with Seale’s (1999: 158) guideline to use “reflexive methodological accounting” in demonstrating that a research study was carried out with considerable care. According to Rice and Ezzy (2000: 36):

“maintaining and reporting an audit trail of methodological and analytic decisions allows others to assess the significance of the research”.

The audit trail concept stems from the idea of the fiscal audit, where independent auditors authenticate a firm’s accounts and examine them for the possibility of error or fraud (Koch, 2006). A similar concept can be used in confirming qualitative research. The origins of the audit trail process in qualitative research can be traced to the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985). They suggest that by implementing an audit trail, an auditor or second party who becomes familiar with the qualitative study, its methodology, findings and conclusions can audit the research decisions and the methodological and analytical processes of the researcher on completion of the study, and thus confirm its findings. According to Sandelowski (1986), a study’s findings are:

“auditible when another researcher can clearly follow the decision trail used by the investigator in the study. In addition, another researcher could arrive at the same or comparable but not contradictory conclusions given the researchers data, perspective and situation”.

Audit trails document the course of development of the completed analysis. In developing an audit trail, a researcher provides an account of all research decisions and activities throughout the study. He/She makes explicit all decisions taken about theoretical, methodological and analytic choices (Koch, 2006). He/She examines the research process and the product of inquiry to determine the findings trustworthiness. In order to develop a detailed audit trail, a researcher needs to maintain a log of all research activities, develop memos, maintain research journals, and document all data collection and analysis procedures throughout the study (Creswell and Millar, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss six categories of information that need to be collected to inform the audit process:

- 1. Raw data
Through examining these information categories, a researcher can better assess whether the study’s findings are grounded in the data, whether inferences are logical and so on. Hence, the audit trail requires clarification and self reflection on the researcher’s part (Akkerman et al, 2006). It enables a researcher to reflect on how a study unfolded. Further, it helps a reader to follow each stage of the process and trace through the research logic and helps other researchers determine whether a study’s findings may be relied upon as a platform for further inquiry and as a basis for decision making. However, despite its role in establishing research confirmability, the audit trail is rarely implemented in practice.

Research audit trails may be intellectual or physical in nature. An intellectual audit trail assists the researcher in reflecting on how his/her thinking evolved throughout all phases of the study. A physical audit trail documents stages of a research study, from identification of the research problem to development of new theory; and it reflects the key research methodology decisions. Physical and intellectual audit trails for an empirical research study are developed in the following section.

9. The development of a research audit trail for a qualitative research study

9.1 Background to the research study

The research study for which the audit trails were developed was centred on the ICT investment evaluation process. Despite decades of research, ICT evaluation remained one of the most important unresolved concerns in information management (Nijl and, 2003). There was evidence of a lack of formal ICT evaluation in organisations. In many instances evaluation techniques were used ritualistically, under-used or not applied at all (Hughes et al, 2003). Further, a review of the literature revealed that ICT evaluation research in Higher Education Institutions was somewhat overlooked. Of 238 papers published in the years 2002-2006 of the European Conference on Information Technology Evaluation (ECITE), only five papers addressed the evaluation of ICT systems in the Higher Education sector. Further research was required in this area as these systems represented the means for competitive parity with or advantage over other educational establishments. This project sought to better understand the ICT investment evaluation process through evaluating the impact of a large-scale standard student MIS implementation in the Irish Institutes of Technology (IoTs).

9.2 Research methodology

The interpretivist research paradigm offered the opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding of the ICT system’s impact; it facilitated the capture of contextual depth and detailed, nuanced descriptions; and avoided the unproblematic, value-free view of organisations associated with positivist approaches. The study’s research methodology is outlined in Figure 1. The case study was the selected research method and was based on data collected from five sources – organisational websites, project documentation, newspaper articles, independent reports and semi-structured interviews. The case study is a key tactic in interpretive ICT research (McBride and Fidler, 2003; Walsham, 2004) and has been adopted by numerous authors such as Bergamaschi and Ongaro (2002), Bobeva and Williams (2003), Griffiths and Stern (2004), and Huang (2003). It was employed in 36% of research designs studied by Chen and Hirschheim (2004). The case study was defined by Yin (2003: 13) as:

“an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”.

The case study is appropriate in situations where a single explanation cannot provide a complete account of the research topic. It is suitable for achieving in-depth, holistic knowledge of broad, complex phenomena and in understanding interactive processes, relationships, political issues and influence tactics within specific contexts. Hence, it offers greater depth of enquiry than many other tactics. It provides up-to-date information, making it suitable for the study of contemporary issues (Al-
Case Study

Organisational websites → Semi-structured interviews → Newspaper articles

Project documentation → Interview schedule development → Sample selection → Pilot interviews → Interview schedule refinement → Conducting the interviews → Interview transcription → Case Analysis

Figure 1: Research methodology

Case studies were conducted within five IoTs. Purposive sampling was used in case site selection as this sampling strategy helps ensure that key research themes are addressed and that diversity in each category is explored. The five case sites were selected due to their diversity in a number of respects. They participated in different implementation waves, were geographically dispersed and differed in their student population sizes and academic programme offerings. The most valuable source of case study evidence was semi-structured interviews.

The interview enables depth, nuance and complexity in data to be captured (Mason, 2002) and is generative in that new knowledge may be uncovered (Legard et al, 2003). Its popularity is linked to its ability to obtain a range of informant views and to communicate multiple perspectives on a phenomenon (Johnson, 2001). It provides an undiluted focus on the informant and offers opportunity for clarification and greater understanding through use of follow-up questions (Legard et al, 2003; Ritchie, 2003). According to Kvale (1996: 1), the interview helps to:

"understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold the meaning of people’s experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations".

Mishler (1986) regarded the interview as an interactional accomplishment; Rubin and Rubin (1995) and Johnson (2001) suggested it was a conversational partnership; while Mason (2002) classified it as a type of social interaction. Kvale (1996: 14) regarded the interview as:

"an inter view, an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest".

These comments suggest that the interviewer and informant interact and influence each other. Hence, interviews involve a dual aspect – personal interrelations between the interviewer and informant, and the knowledge, meaning and understanding that results from their dialogue and interaction. In general, the interview takes place in an interpersonal context which is influenced by power, emotion and the interpersonal process. Hence, in interpreting statements made by informants, the researcher always needs to bear in mind the context in which the interview took place (Ellis and Berger, 2001). As stated by Warren (2001: 98):
Within the IoTs, 49 semi-structured interviews were carried out between 30 November 2005 and 24 May 2006 with senior management personnel, MIS team personnel and system end users. The selected informants were closely involved in the ICT project and had in-depth knowledge of the subject area. The approach I adopted corresponded to what Kvale (1996) termed the "traveller metaphor" of interview research. In this approach, the interview process is regarded as the creation of stories; the meaning of informants’ stories is uncovered through the researcher’s interpretations and these are shaped by the researcher into new convincing narratives of the evidence collected. In the traveller metaphor, Kvale (1996: 4) suggested that the interviewer is a:

“traveller on a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home...The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of conversation as ‘wandering together with’.”

In adopting the interviewer as traveller approach, the goal was not to extract specific details from individual informants; rather it was to explore questions such as how? and why?. Through gathering many informant stories in this manner, it was possible to develop a greater understanding of the issues in a broader context.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was recorded with the informants’ permission and was later transcribed. The informants were given the opportunity to verify the transcripts prior to analysis. Further, the supporting documentation was valuable in corroborating the evidence collected in the semi-structured interviews. It provided a means of triangulation in that it supplied specific details, and helped to augment and substantiate the interview data. The data analysis process is outlined in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Qualitative data analysis**

Data analysis was carried out using a variant of Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory (GT) method. GT is one of the most widely used qualitative frameworks in business and management studies (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). This GT analysis was supported by a Computer Aided
Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) package called N-vivo. CAQDAS enables researchers to manage qualitative data that would prove onerous through manual “pen and paper” methods. The N-vivo package facilitates efficient data indexing and management, and supports analysis through for example relationship and model exploration. As outlined in Figure 2, the interview transcripts were initially imported into this software. Examination of these transcripts led to key words/ideas being identified and these were coded using N-vivo. As coding progressed, it became apparent that many concepts were related and these were reclassified into a series of categories and related sub-categories using N-vivo’s hierarchical tree structure. This organised related concepts in relation to the overall research and facilitated greater understanding of the body of evidence through examining the key themes. Memo creation to clarify ideas and identify relationships with other categories, constant concept comparison and iterative reflection on what was already coded were important steps in this coding process.

The key concepts and categories identified through N-vivo coding, as well as important details from the other four sources of case study evidence were synthesised into a detailed cross-case primary narrative of the student MIS project. As outlined by Czarniawska (2004), narratives play an important role in the social world; they are a form of knowledge and communication as complex situations can be better understood in story format. Hence, they enable a researcher to shape various interview stories into a coherent account of the key themes. Through significant reflection on the primary narrative, it was reduced to the principal findings or themes. 15 findings were uncovered and these centred on the evaluation of five different aspects of the project:

- Evaluation of system selection;
- Evaluation of system development for the Irish IoTs;
- Evaluation of system commissioning;
- Evaluation of ex-post performance in the early years;
- Evaluation of ex-post performance at the time of research.

The processes involved in distillation of the key findings involved both creativity and flexibility. Retraveling the higher order narrative, to establish relationships between the findings and the extent to which they influenced each other, was the basis for developing the study’s theoretical conjecture. This reflected a distillation of the knowledge acquired through data analysis and provided new insights into the ICT investment evaluation process.

9.3 The intellectual research audit trail

As outlined, an intellectual audit trail helps a researcher to reflect on how his/her thinking evolved throughout a qualitative study. The following represents the intellectual audit trail for the ICT evaluation study outlined above:

- Starting philosophical position: When I commenced this study my research philosophy was predominantly positivist. This was a result of previously completing a quantitative Masters of Science research study that involved hypotheses testing and statistical data analysis.
- Questioning the positivist position: During the Master of Science degree, I became aware of the limitations of positivist research. Its attempts to simplify the real world and produce physical law-like generalisations were restrictive in addressing this study’s research problem and in developing new theory. In-depth understandings of complex social issues were sought and these would not be effectively captured through, for example, administering surveys and quantitative data analysis.
- The search for a philosophical stance: After significant reading on research methodology and attending research methods courses, I concluded that the interpretivist position was an appropriate foundation for this study. This was due to its holistic nature in attempting to capture contextual depth; and its recognition of the difficulty in making research value-free and the difficulty in understanding the social world through physical law-like rules.
- Considering alternatives for evidence collection and data analysis: As grounded theory is one of the most widely used frameworks in qualitative research, this was an appropriate approach for inductive theory development. However, I had difficulty in reconciling its requirement that research needs to be conducted in a theoretical vacuum and the restrictions of micro-coding on researcher creativity and flexibility. Therefore, an adapted grounded theory method was selected;
and this was supported by qualitative data analysis software to help in managing and interrogating the body of empirical evidence.

- **Interpreting the evidence:** Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) facilitated the creation, linking and hierarchical management of data concepts, and enabled cross tabulation of the key issues across all case study sites. This enabled interpretation of the evidence to begin early on. Because of my interpretivist position, interpretation was an iterative process that involved interaction with and reflection on the body of evidence on several levels.

- **Distillation of new theory from the body of evidence:** A narrative approach was selected as a suitable strategy for reporting the qualitative evidence. This was appropriate for the interpretivist position because it enabled the complex situations reported in the data to be better understood in story form. Further, it enabled creativity in developing a coherent story and in exploring the key relationships between issues. Hence, through this research process, the empirical evidence evolved from a set of interview transcripts, to a set of concepts, to a primary narrative, to a higher order narrative, and finally to a new theory and ICT evaluation model and guidelines.

### 9.4 The physical research audit trail

A physical audit trail documents the stages of a research study, and reflects the key research methodology decisions. The physical audit trail for the ICT evaluation study is as follows:

- **Identification of the research problem:** During the latter stages of my Masters of Science Degree, I discoursed with a number of Faculty members and senior managers within my research institution to identify a suitable area for PhD study. The large-scale student MIS implementation was a contemporary issue across the IoT sector at the time. The project was problematic and it was believed that IoTs were not leveraging the system’s potential. A senior manager highlighted the need to evaluate this project, as its impact on IoT operations was not clearly understood.

- **The research proposal:** Based on this research problem, a proposal was developed and submitted to the research institution’s research subcommittee for approval. This proposal included an outline of the study, its aims and objectives, and the research questions. The proposal was also submitted to the Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology (IRCSET), who funded the project. The study was registered in 2005.

- **Reviewing the literature:** An in-depth review of the ICT evaluation literature was undertaken. This focused on the ICT cost and benefit issues and the difficulties in evaluating ICT projects. Despite decades of research in this area, the literature review highlighted that the body of ICT evaluation knowledge was fragmented; there was lack of consensus on how ICT investments should be evaluated; and there were limitations in the evaluation methods used. Further, ICT evaluation in the higher education sector was much overlooked.

- **Designing a research framework:** The next step involved designing a research framework to support the collection of empirical evidence. As it is a key tactic in interpretive ICT research, the case study, based on multiple evidence sources, was selected as an appropriate research strategy.

- **The interview schedule:** The semi-structured interview was the primary source of case-study evidence. Based on issues identified in the literature and in defining the research problem, an initial interview schedule was prepared. This was pre-tested in a number of pilot interviews in order to determine informants understanding of the questions and the depth of the research inquiry, and was subsequently refined.

- **Selection of case study IoTs and knowledge informants:** In order to achieve breadth and depth of coverage across the research issues, five IoTs, which differed in a number of respects, were chosen as case study sites. The informants selected had in-depth knowledge of the student MIS project and these included MIS project team personnel, administrative system end-users and senior managers. Through both purposive and snowball sampling, knowledge informants were identified and asked to participate in the study.

- **Evidence collection:** In total, 49 semi-structured interviews were conducted across five IoTs. These lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions were later verified by informants. The interview transcriptions, as well as project documentation, independent reports, newspaper articles and website details were used in developing the study’s primary narrative.
Managing and analysing the empirical evidence: A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the empirical data. N-vivo software was useful in managing the body of evidence. Through constant data comparison, several ideas/points emerged from the interview transcripts and these were coded into key concepts. Through reflection on these concepts and iterative interaction with the evidence, these were later conceptualised into higher order categories and related sub-categories.

Adopting a narrative approach: The higher order categories and sub-categories were the basis for developing a cross-case primary narrative. This narrative was substantiated by reference to informant statements. Through extended reflection on the primary narrative and considering three questions: What does the text say?, why does the text say what it does?, and what is my understanding of what is taking place?, the primary narrative was reduced to the principle research findings. This process expanded my interpretation of the evidence over a series of stages. 15 key findings centred on five aspects of the project were written up as a secondary or higher order narrative.

Distillation of a New Theory: Through re-trawling the higher order narrative and reflecting on the findings separately and on the findings as a whole, relationships between the key findings were further explored. Through this process the study’s theoretical conjecture was distilled. This involved iterative reflection on the relationships and theory refinement. These contributions added to the extant body of ICT evaluation theoretical knowledge.

10. Conclusions – assessing the value of audit trail development

The above audit trails are a simple but useful strategy for determining the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry. From a researcher’s perspective, the need to produce an audit of his/her study upon its completion is an important factor in ensuring that significant emphasis is placed on the theoretical, methodological and analytical decisions made throughout the study and that the researcher critically reflects and evaluates the decisions made. It encourages researchers to develop more in-depth research notes in the form of journals and memos, explaining research decisions and activities, thus increasing research transparency. It is a particularly useful strategy for novice researchers, as it encourages a self-questioning and reflective attitude regarding the steps in the research process.

Secondly, the research audit trails are a valuable tool in enabling other researchers/readers to confirm the research findings. Quality findings, uncovered through an in-depth and transparent research process are critical when used as the basis of further research studies. Through examining a research study and its audit trails, other researchers can independently judge whether research inferences are logical, whether findings are grounded in the data, and whether a study’s research process is suitable as a basis of further study. Thus, despite their limited development in practice, research audit trails are an important strategy in confirming qualitative research. This paper calls for heightened focus on the research audit process as a means of evaluating research outputs.

References


Using Personal and Online Repertory Grid Methods for the Development of a Luxury Brand Personality

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Abstract: Interest has been growing in the brand personality concept, because it offers a systematic approach for developing symbolic benefits, which are becoming more and more essential for brand differentiation. Although they are a distinctive feature of luxury brands and often even exceed their functional benefits, there is still no personality concept designed especially for luxury brands. The aim of this article is therefore to develop and implement an appropriate methodology for developing a luxury brand personality. In contrast to the common quantitative approach, the article proposes a qualitative methodology including the Repertory Grid Method (RGM) and explains its benefits. It was implemented with a survey of 31 German millionaires who can be described as heavy luxury consumers. The content analyses of the data uncovered five personality dimensions including, for example, Modernity, which relates to the temporal perspective of a brand. The study extends the RGM areas of application and demonstrates its applicability in developing brand personality dimensions. The validity of the results improves if they are replicated with other studies and with varying research methodologies. To this end, recent developments in Web 2.0 provide a great source of inspiration. As a result, a complementary study was conducted to exploit these opportunities for online RGM and to allow for a more in-depth understanding about the personality dimensions. The article builds upon an overview of qualitative online research, common online RGM and the idea of Web 2.0 to expand the methodological toolbox with collaborative RGM that allows respondents to build on the input of previous participants. The procedure was simplified in line with the explorative approach and implemented with a specially programmed online tool. The results support the five personality dimensions and give further insights into adequate brand personality traits. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and benefits of collaborative RGM for researchers and marketers.

Keywords: qualitative online research, Repertory Grid Method, Web 2.0, luxury brand, brand identity, brand personality

1. Introduction: decoding the “aura” of luxury brands

Because the functional benefits of many products on the market today have become increasingly equivalent and exchangeable, the focus of brand differentiation is shifting increasingly to symbolic benefits (Kapferer 2008, p. 173). Moreover, this trend is also stimulated by the growing emergence of “fellow-shoppers” who buy a product for the most part due to the congruity between their personality and the symbolic personality of the product (Trommsdorff and Heine 2008, p. 1672; Vigneron and Johnson 1999, p. 434). These trends lead to an increased interest in the brand personality concept, which offers a systematic approach to create symbolic benefits (c.f. Esch 2008, p. 79).

The symbolism of luxury brands conveys to a large extent human personality traits (c.f. Vigneron and Johnson 2004, p. 490). Although symbolic benefits are an essential feature of these brands and often even exceed their functional benefits and even though Vernier and Ghewy (2006, p. 4) attest them to have an “aura”, the symbolic meaning of luxury remains largely unexplored (c.f. Dubois et al. 2001, p. 6) and there is still no integrated personality concept for luxury brands. Its development requires the investigation of luxury symbolism. But what research methodologies are there to explore the “aura” of luxury brands?

The objective of this article is to present and to implement an appropriate methodology for the development of a luxury brand personality. According to the explorative stage of the area of research, a qualitative methodology will be proposed that includes the Repertory Grid Method (RGM). The validity of results improves if they are replicated with other studies and with varying research methodologies. To this end, the recent opportunities of the Web 2.0 provide a great source of inspiration. A complementary study was therefore conducted to exploit these opportunities with a collaborative online RGM, and in order to deepen the understanding of the personality dimensions.

The article is organised into another four parts. The second part forms the conceptual groundwork. It explains the concept of brand personality and its common research methodology, defines luxury brands as the objects of investigation, and outlines the state-of-the-art of luxury symbolism. The third part describes the first empirical study. It introduces the RGM and its benefits for the research of
brand personality, outlines the survey procedure and demonstrates its results. The fourth part presents the complementary study. It gives an overview of qualitative online research methodologies, introduces the principles of Web 2.0 and outlines the collaborative online RGM and its results. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and the benefits of collaborative RGM for researchers and marketers.

2. Conceptual groundwork

2.1 The status of brand personality in brand management

The modern understanding of a brand is consumer and identity oriented. Brands are regarded as images in the minds of consumers and other target groups. In dependence on the human identity, brands are also ascribed as having an identity. The brand identity comprises all associations that are intended by the company (Aaker 1996, p. 68). It corresponds with the intra-company self-perception of a brand, which determines precisely how the brand should appear to the external target groups. It builds the fundament for brand positioning, which relies only on the most relevant characteristics for brand differentiation. As shown in figure 1, the brand image constitutes the antipole of the brand identity. It corresponds with the public-perception of a brand and is the result of marketing measures and other consumer experiences with a brand (Esch 2008, p. 91).

![The relationship between Brand Identity, Positioning and Image](image)

![The concept of Brand Identity](image)

*Figure 1: The status of brand personality in brand management according to Esch (2008, pp. 91 et. sqq.)*

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The elements of common identity concepts can be divided into two main components. The first component covers the physical-functional, mainly product-related associations and the other component includes the abstract, emotional associations of a brand (c.f. Kapferer 2008, p. 171 et seq.). Esch (2008, pp. 91 et. sqq.) differentiates each of the two components again into two sub-components (see figure 1). The rational component consists of Brand Attributes and Brand Benefits. Brand Attributes cover the functional characteristics of a brand or its products (such as the double-stitched seam or the big logo of a Louis Vuitton bag). The Brand Attributes lead to Brand Benefits, which include functional and psychosocial benefits (such as the longevity of a Louis Vuitton bag also because of its double-stitched seam or the possibility to demonstrate status because of its prominent logo). The emotional component of the brand identity is divided into Brand Tonality and Brand Symbols. The Brand Tonality covers the emotional characteristics of a brand and corresponds largely with the Brand Personality (for example, the personality of Louis Vuitton might be seen as elegant, glamorous and traditional). Brand Symbols can be described as mental images of a brand, which can relate to visual, acoustic, olfactory, gustatory and haptic perceptions. They help to create the functional and emotional brand associations (for instance, Louis Vuitton uses also its Monogram Canvas pattern to convey an elegant style). As this article concentrates on the Brand Personality, this concept will be explained in detail below.

2.2 The brand personality concept

According to Aaker (1997, p. 347) the brand personality refers “to the set of human characteristics associated with a brand.” She developed the most established theoretical framework of brand personality dimensions and a scale to measure them by drawing on research about the Big Five human personality traits. Because of her consumer-oriented brand definition, the dimensions were derived from a large-scale consumer survey. More than 600 U.S. respondents rated on a five-point Likert scale different brands of varying categories on more than one hundred personality traits. Aaker consolidated these traits by factor analysis to five distinct dimensions. These include Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness. Figure 2 illustrates her framework of brand personality including its sub-dimensions and a representative brand for each dimension (e.g. Hallmark cards typify the Sincerity dimension). While the framework claims general applicability across product categories, the dimensions might not be very descriptive for other cultures or specific categories (c.f. Austin et al. 2003, p. 81). Therefore, other studies followed in recent years, which usually replicated the procedure of Aaker to develop specific concepts for other cultures (e.g. for Germany by Hieronimus 2003 and Mäder 2005) and particular categories (e.g. for restaurants by Siguaw et al. 1999). This study aims to apply the brand personality concept to the luxury segment. As a precondition for that, the concept of luxury is outlined in the following.

2.3 The concept of luxury

In management field it is accepted to distinguish luxury products from necessary and ordinary products within their category by their essential characteristics. These include price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, specialty and symbolism. As with the notion of luxury, all of these characteristics are relative terms. A luxury product is characterised by a relatively high rating on each of these dimensions com-
pared to other products of its category (Trommsdorff and Heine 2008, p. 1670). The definition of luxury products is closely related to the *definition of luxury brands*, because they are distinguished from non-luxury brands by product-related associations. Therefore, the essential characteristics of luxury products correspond largely with those of luxury brands and lead to the following definition: Luxury brands are regarded as images in the minds of consumers that comprise associations about a high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity and specialty (c.f. Meffert and Lasslop 2003, p. 6). Just as Dior differs from Chanel, it is essential for every luxury brand to differentiate from other peer brands. This is achieved mainly with symbolic characteristics, which are explained below.

### 2.4 State-of-the-art of luxury symbolism

There is only a small literature base about the symbolic meaning of luxury brands. Some authors concentrated on some particular symbolic characteristics including Dubois et al. (2005, p. 123), Esteve and Hieu-Dess (2005), Kisabaka (2001, p. 192 et sqq.) and Ourahmoune and Nyeck (2008). In most of the literature, the luxury symbolism is only mentioned circumstantially in descriptions about luxury brand characteristics (e.g. by Lipovetsky and Roux (2003, p. 51 et seq.), Mutscheller (1992, p. 65), Valtin (2004, p. 26), Vickers and Renand (2003, p. 469); Vernier and Ghewiy (2006, p. 4) and Vigneron and Johnson (2004, p. 494). The research method for the development of a luxury brand personality needs to consider the special conditions of the luxury segment and will be outlined below.

### 3. First empirical study: using a personal Repertory Grid Method

In contrast to Aaker, the article proposes a qualitative methodology including the RGM. It introduces the RGM, describes the sampling, interviewing and analysis procedure and discusses the results and the applicability of the RGM.

#### 3.1 The Repertory Grid Method

This method was developed by Kelly (1955) to support psychotherapy and it spread into a variety of different areas of research including marketing (c.f. Marsden and Littler 2000). One of its two *central assumptions* is that there is no direct, immediate access to objective reality, because everything that people know was filtered by individual perception and further information processing. Correspondingly, people live in their unique *subjective reality* and all their actions can only refer to that. Another important assumption is that people attribute meaning to something and understand something (also a person, event, etc.) by comparing it with other things that they already know. A repertoire of *personal constructs* helps them to group everything according to its similarity and dissimilarity in order to reconstruct reality and their position within that. Pupils, for instance, could use the construct “fair-unfair” to differentiate between teachers; a new teacher would be judged upon that construct with reference to teachers they already know. This demonstrates that personal constructs consist of binary oppositions and that every new object is assigned a position within that dichotomy (Durgee 1986, p. 34). The *objective of RGM* is to uncover the repertoire of personal constructs. The *challenge* is that they are often difficult to express in verbal distinctions, because a great deal of them are subconscious. Therefore relying on simple direct questioning is inadequate. According to its theoretic base, RGM elicits personal constructs with an *iterative process* that requires respondents to compare different triad combinations of stimuli, to express their constructs and to relate the stimuli to the construct poles. Irrespective of its specific version, RGM leads to *structured data* that facilitate elaborate analysis and interpretation (c.f. Eden and Jones 1984; Fromm 2004).

#### 3.2 Sampling procedure

The investigation of luxury brand images with an open interviewing approach requires participants with a sound understanding about these brands. Therefore, only millionaires were selected (defined as individuals with a net worth of at least one million euros). The study of Dubois and Duquesne (1993, p. 42) indicates that wealthy people are not necessarily (heavy) luxury consumers. Therefore, the second selection criterion required that participants are actually consuming them enthusiastically. These criteria were verified in a preliminary talk before the interview. Beside that, the study requires a preferably heterogeneous mix of different personalities to ensure that it captures all relevant constructs. Therefore, the selection of participants followed a *snowball approach*: Initially, a very mixed group of students was selected for a seminar course at the Berlin Institute of Technology and consequently, they acquired very different interview partners mainly from their circle of acquaintances (c.f. Schnell et al. 1999, p. 280). The sample contains 31 participants including 14 women and 17 men.
mainly entrepreneurs, managers, experts from different industries and heirs. The age distribution is balanced between 20 and 70 years.

3.3 Interviewing procedure

The interviews were conducted in Berlin and Cologne by two interviewers at a time and took in each case about one to two hours. They started with an open discussion (free elicitation) with the participants according to Dubois et al. (2001, p. 7). At the beginning, the interview referred to fashion and later shifted also to another category that was chosen by the participants. Subsequently, brand associations were investigated according to the RGM procedure, which was complemented with the preference differences technique (c.f. Reynolds and Gutman 1988, p. 14). It required participants to expatiate in detail upon the differences in their preferences for luxury brands. Subsequently, participants were faced with print adverts of their selected brands to stimulate them further. In addition, projective techniques were deployed to also capture brand characteristics that are subject to social bias. Participants were asked to describe characteristics that would be important to other types of luxury consumers (c.f. Fisher and Tellis 1998, p. 566; Haire 1950, p. 651 et sqq.).

3.4 Data analysis

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed leading to some hundred pages of verbatim. Then, a content analysis was conducted according to Mayring (2002, p. 114 et sqq.). At the beginning, the associations were roughly arranged into some main categories. It followed an iterative process of reviewing and adapting these categories until a reasonable system of categories was identified and all associations were assigned to a category (c.f. Reynolds and Gutman 1988, p. 18 et seq.). In addition, results were compared and consolidated with the results of another researcher, who conducted an independent content analysis (c.f. Dubois et al. 2001, p. 7). The results were translated into English based on intense discussions with an English native speaker.

3.5 Results: the luxury brand personality

The results suggest that consumers perceive that luxury brands have five distinct personality dimensions. They are illustrated in figure 3 and include the following:

- **Modernity**: This dimension describes the temporal perspective of a brand, which can lie either in the past or in the present or future. The traditional side is associated also with the words (in descending order according to their number of mentions) conservative, old-fashioned, countrified and natural; modern on the other hand is linked to the words trendy, young, youthful, urban and progressive. The modern pole is typified by Donna Karan New York, the traditional pole by Hermès. These results are supported by literature in psychology, marketing and luxury marketing. First of all, Modernity corresponds with one of the most prominent personality and cultural traits, especially with “Openness to Experiences” in the Big Five model (c.f. John and Srivastava 1999, p. 105), the cultural dimensions “Uncertainty Avoidance” and “Long-term Orientation” from Hofstede (2001, p. 145 et sqq.) and with one of the two main dimensions in the value circle from Schwartz (1992, p. 45) “Openness to change vs. Conservation”. In the marketing context it is included in Aaker’s (1997, S. 352) dimension “Excitement”. In the luxury marketing literature Esteve and Hieu-Dess (2005) described tradition as an essential dimension for the positioning of luxury brands. Additionally, tradition was specified as an essential characteristic of luxury brands by Gurvierz and Besson (2000, p. 2), Mutscheller (1992, p. 65), Vickers and Renand (2003, p. 469), Vernier and Ghewy (2006, p. 4) and Vigneron and Johnson (2004, p. 494) and as an accessory characteristic by Doehn-van Rossum (2003, p. 98), Lipovetsky and Roux (2003, p. 51 et seq.), Lombard (1989, p. 13), Valtin (2004, p. 26) and by Kisabaka (2001, p. 219 ff.) with her luxury look “Nostalgia Luxury”.

- **Eccentricity**: This dimension describes the level of discrepancy from social norms and expectations, for instance in reference to loyalty to the law. Respondents described the conventional pole with the words boring, sincere, unremarkable, conservative, narrow-minded and honest, however with eccentric they associated provocative, freaky, funny, exotic, funky, naked, shrill, crazy, dubious, vulgar, overstated and bold. As a typical representative of a conventional brand they suggest Bogner, while Moschino is regarded as a typical eccentric brand. Eccentricity is comparable with the cultural dimension “Individualism” from Hofstede (2001, p. 209 et sqq.) and with the value category “Self-Direction” from Schwartz (1992, p. 45). In the marketing context it
can be found in Aaker’s (1997, p. 352) dimension “Excitement”. In their investigation about luxury
brand positioning Esteve and Hieu-Dess (2005) also revealed an “excentrique” dimension.

- **Opulence**: This dimension describes the level of conspicuousness of the symbols of wealth. These symbols cover a wide range of associations including ostentatious logos and valuable materials like gold and diamonds. The associations with the discreet pole comprise of words like frugal, understated, diffident, unobtrusive, puristic, unknown, connoisseur and minimalist. In contrast to that, the opulent pole was linked to the words conspicuous, pretentious, ostentatious, logo-oriented, kitschy, golden and famous. While Jil Sander is deemed to be the embodiment of a discreet brand, Louis Vuitton is deemed to be the embodiment of an opulent brand. This dimension is comparable to the value “Wealth” from Schwartz (1992, p. 33). In the luxury marketing context, brand awareness is described as an essential characteristic by Lombard (1989, p. 28), Mutscheller (1992, p. 65) and Phau and Prendergast (2000, p. 124). Belz (1994, p. 649) and Valtin (2004, p. 26 & 186) describe awareness and opulence as accessory characteristics and Kisabaka (2001, p. 130 & 193 et sqq.) incorporated this dimension in her luxury looks “Glamour Luxury” and “Logo Luxury” vs. “Understatement Luxury”.

- **Elitism**: This dimension describes the level of status and exclusivity that is displayed by the brand. The post-modern, democratic perspective is limited insofar that luxury is by definition exclusive. However, the democratic pole is described by words like natural, warm, casual, authentic and friendly and the elitist pole is associated with the words neat, artificial, aloof, aristocratic, donnish, arrogant and offish. A brand especially cited as democratic is Strellson and as elitist, Gucci. This dimension is comparable with “Agreeableness” in the Big Five model (c.f. John and Srivastava 1999, p. 105), with the cultural dimension “Power Distance” from Hofstede (2001, p. 79 et sqq.) and with the second main dimension “Achievement vs. Benevolence” from Schwartz (1992, p. 45). In Aaker’s brand personality concept (1997, p. 352) it corresponds with the dimension “Sophistication”. In the luxury marketing context, Dubois et al. (2005, p. 123) uncovered the dimension “Elitist vs. Democratic” and Kisabaka (2001, p. 202 et sqq.) described elitism in her luxury look “Noble Luxury”.

- **Strength**: This dimension describes the level of toughness and masculinity that is displayed by a brand. The soft pole is associated also with the words playful, feminine, kitschy, gay, youthful and decorated and the opposite pole is characterised by sporting, masculine, dynamic, successful, strong and rakish. Jean Paul Gaultier is considered as a typical soft brand and Hugo Boss is regarded as a typical strong brand. Strength is comparable with the cultural dimension “Masculinity” from Hofstede (2001, p. 279 et sqq.) and with the value “Power” from Schwartz (1992, p. 45). It is also covered by the dimension “Ruggedness” from Aaker (1997, p. 352). In the field of luxury, the dimension was analysed by Ourahmoune and Nyeck (2008). Kisabaka (2001, p. 202) explained that her luxury look “Noble Luxury” could either carry a masculine-dignified or a feminine-elegant note.

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**Figure 3**: The concept of luxury brand personality

These dimensions are *not independent* from each other. First of all, the poles on the left hand side in figure 3 can be characterised with “quiet” and the opposite poles as rather “loud”. In addition, there
are popular combinations, for instance modern-eccentric brand personalities. But then there are also modern, but rather conventional brands like Hugo Boss and traditional, but rather eccentric brands like Chanel.

3.6 The applicability of RGM for the research of brand personality dimensions

As demonstrated above, literature supports the results and therefore the applicability of the RGM. As the symbolism of luxury brands conveys largely human characteristics (c.f. Vigneron and Johnson 2004, p. 490), results were related also to psychological concepts including the Big Five model of personality (c.f. John and Srivastava 1999); the cultural dimensions from Hofstede (2001) and the value system from Schwartz (1992). In the field of marketing, the brand personality framework from Aaker (1997) provided another relevant basis. In addition, many similarities were found to the findings in the luxury marketing literature (c.f. Belz 1994; Dohrn-van Rossum 2003; Dubois et al. 2005; Esteve and Hieu-Dess 2005; Gurvierz and Besson 2000; Kisabaka 2001; Lipovetsky and Roux 2003; Lombard 1989; Mutscheller 1992; Ourahmoune and Nyeck 2008; Phau and Prendergast 2000; Valtin 2004; Vernier and Ghewy 2006; Vickers and Renand 2003; Vigneron and Johnson 2004).

Besides that, there are some essential benefits of RGM that explain its applicability. The quantitative approach is also influenced by subjective interventions of the researcher, especially by the determination of the number of factors in factor analysis and by the pre-selection of traits and stimuli. These decisions are even more difficult for the field of luxury, because researchers could only rely on its relatively small literature base. The qualitative approach of RGM allowed to explore the subject and to create a sound fundament also for subsequent quantitative studies. Respondents can select traits and brands as they desire. The set of traits certainly varies between different categories. On the one hand, there might be important constructs for a specific category, which are not included in the standard set of Aaker. On the other hand, the standard set probably contains traits that apply either to all or none of the brands in a specific category, which could lead to irrelevant dimensions. Moreover, most of the words describing personality are ambiguous and contextual (John et al. 1988, p. 174). While the quantitative approach requires deleting traits that load on multiple factors, RGM allows describing constructs with a group of words, which enables researchers to decode their varying contextual meanings for different constructs. In addition, it is difficult to differentiate constructs with the quantitative approach if there are popular, maybe even unexplored combinations of traits in a category. Another advantage of RGM is that it delivers relevant binary oppositions, which correspond to both the human information processing and the requirements for the design of a brand identity and positioning.

4. Complementary study: using an online Repertory Grid Method

The following paragraph presents the complementary study, which exploits recent opportunities of the Web 2.0 for qualitative RGM and explores further insights about the luxury brand personality. Based on an overview about qualitative online research, common online RGM and the idea of Web 2.0, a new version of collaborative RGM is explained and tested on a student sample. Subsequently, the results and benefits of RGM are discussed.

4.1 The status of RGM in qualitative online research

In contrast to quantitative online research that is already well established and increasingly displacing its offline counterpart (c.f. Skulmoski et al. 2007, p. 11), qualitative online research stands still in a relatively early stage of development. It can be categorized into reactive and non-reactive methods. The latter mainly include content analyses of any information in the web (such as websites, blogs, etc.) and participating and non-participating observations of user behaviour (c.f. Bensberg and Weiss 1999). Reactive methods comprise questionnaire surveys and synchronous and asynchronous interviews including one-to-one interviews (c.f. Fontes and O’Mahony 2008; Vioda et al. 2004) and focus groups (c.f. Stewart and Williams 2005). Questionnaire surveys can be classified into collaborative and non-collaborative techniques or versions. The questionnaires contain some qualitative research techniques ranging from simple open questions to advanced techniques. These include for instance Delphi (c.f. Snyder-Halpern et al. 2000), laddering (c.f. Reppel et al. 2008), but also RGM. The following paragraph explains the implementation of RGM into online applications.
4.2 Non-collaborative Repertory Grid Method

There are some web applications for RGM, e.g. nextpractice, sci:vesco.web and WebGrid. They provide researchers with a convenient procedure to set up a survey by entering some basic information including a set of stimuli, for instance a list of car brands. Respondents are faced with a short introduction followed by an iterative comparison process: They are required to select the stimulus of a given triad combination that they think would differ from the other two stimuli (sometimes dyad combination are used), to explain the construct poles in own words – non-collaboratively, i.e. independently of other respondents – and to evaluate all stimuli with reference to that construct. The existing tools offer analysis for single and multiple interviews and present results with data matrixes and graphic illustrations that even include interactive 3D grids. These applications are definitely state-of-the-art and exploit the (technical) opportunities of the Internet with new exiting features. However, they mainly squeezed offline applications into the web without challenging them on the modern understanding of the Internet, which is described as Web 2.0 and outlined below.

4.3 The idea of Web 2.0

The bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2001 marked a turning point for the development of the web. O’Reilly (2005) realized that the companies that had survived the crash and the new successful ventures seemed to have something in common. That’s the set of principles and practices of the modern second era of the web, which can be described as Web 2.0. The essential practices include the following:

- **Tags**: A tag is a keyword or term that is used to characterise pieces of information like articles, pictures or videos. In contrast to the traditional approach used in books or by the standard Windows File Manager which relies on hierarchical taxonomy, Web 2.0 content is organised by tags. They provide metadata about items of information that help users to find them by browsing or searching (c.f. Hearst and Rosner 2008).

- **Tag clouds**: A tag cloud is a visual depiction of the tags that were assigned to an item of information. The tags are usually listed alphabetically and the importance of a tag is represented with its font size or color. They are usually hyperlinks that lead to respective information or that can be used to describe an item of information (c.f. Hassan-Montero and Herrero-Solana 2006).

- **Folksonomy**: Tags on Web 2.0 pages are usually chosen and managed by their users collaboratively. This practice of social tagging leads to user-generated classification systems which are known as folksonomy (from folk and taxonomy). Tags are usually not restricted to predetermined vocabulary, but chosen freely (c.f. Golder and Huberman 2006).

- **User-generated Content**: Beyond the social classification of content, Web 2.0 pages allow and encourage also the creation of user-generated content. This includes creating and sharing texts, pictures or videos and commenting and editing on existing content. They come along with the essential principles, which require webpage creators to trust and to involve their users, but enable them to harness network effects and collective intelligence to create applications that actually get better the more people use them (c.f. Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent 2007). It’s time to exploit the opportunities of the Web 2.0 also for the RGM. Therefore, the next paragraph outlines a RGM 2.0.

4.4 Collaborative Repertory Grid Method

According to the explorative nature of the study, the procedure of RGM is simplified and relies on the results of the previous study. Each of its five rounds corresponds with one of the five personality dimensions and consists of seven steps, which are illustrated in figure 4 (the original questionnaire is in German and shows bigger adverts).

At first, respondents were faced with a triad combination of adverts. According to the principle of simplification, the adverts were chosen to represent at the best one of the five personality dimensions and respondents were already given an advert that they had to compare with another two adverts by entering some adjectives. Subsequently, they had to describe the opposite pole. In the third step, respondents had to select their preferred position between the construct poles on a four-point Likert scale. The next step required them to think about further adjectives to describe the construct. They could either enter new ideas into the input field or select items from a tag cloud, which contained adjectives that previous respondents used to describe the respective construct. This approach allows
the collaborative development of constructs and represents the main difference to existing online RGM. In the sixth step, respondents were faced with a list for each construct pole, which contained the adjectives that they previously entered. They were asked to organize them into a ranking order starting with the adjective that they think would best suit to describe the construct. The procedure was repeated for each of the other four dimensions.

The collaborative RGM application is an explorative version, which could lead to a fully respondent-generated RGM in a later stage. It was programmed from scratch using PHP and MySQL by two students. In accordance with the open source principle, the source code is available from the author.

![Figure 4: The questionnaire of collaborative RGM](image)

### 4.5 Sampling and interviewing procedure

According to the explorative objective of the study, a student sample was chosen. After a pre-test with five students, a request for participation and a link to the questionnaire was emailed to about 150
business students at the Berlin Institute of Technology in three waves. After two days a reminder was sent to people who didn’t already participate. This led to a sample of 52 students including 23 women and 29 men and a corresponding response rate of about 35 percent.

The data collection took seven days and ran mostly automated, beside the regular review of the user-generated vocabulary. It was necessary to correct mistakes in spelling, to modify some words (e.g. nouns into adjectives) and to delete some inappropriate words. In total, respondents entered 519 different adjectives.

4.6 Results of the complementary study

![Figure 5: Final tag clouds](image)

In figure 5 tag clouds are used to illustrate the results. Their main function is to create a feeling for the data. The font size of an adjective represents its importance, which depends on an underlying score. It increased every time an adjective was entered from a participant between a minimum of two points and a maximum of ten points depending on its position on the ranking order. The font colour of an adjective represents its connotation. It is neutral for black tags, negative for red tags (marked in italic) and positive for blue tags (underlined). Its intensity is represented with the brightness of font colour. The score of connotation was summed up every time the adjective was mentioned with a score between “-2” and “+2” depending on the position that the respondent had selected on the four-point Likert scale during the third step. This selection reveals the tendency of a respondent to choose more

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or less favourable words to describe a construct pole. According to the principle of simplification, the same score was assigned to all adjectives that a respondent had chosen to describe a construct pole.

The tag clouds reflect pretty much the previously identified personality dimensions. In addition, they help to identify meaningful and representative traits and deliver further insights about the impact of personal preferences on the choice of traits. For instance, eccentric-oriented respondents described the opposite pole with conventional, conform and boring, while conventional-oriented people described it (themselves) with classic and elegant.

The factor analysis offers another analysis tool. Therefore, a MySQL database query was implemented to create a frequency table that contains the number of joint entries of any two adjectives. If two adjectives were found within the top three of a respondents ranking order, their joint entry was counted triply. This is another simplification to roughly incorporate their level of similarity and their relevance to describe a construct. The matrix was 2-standardized and factor-analysed using principal components analysis and varimax rotation. The top ten factors of the first analysis explained only 44.6 percent of the variance. Therefore, the matrix was cleared from variables with cross-loadings over 0.4 or with factor loadings below 0.7 and from 21 words that are not adequate to describe a personality (e.g. black or technical).

The top ten factors of the subsequent analysis explain a variance of 72.2 percent and contain 156 variables without any cross-loadings over 0.4 (in total 16 factors with an eigenvalue above one; the 10th with 3.9 and the 11th with 1.5). Every factor includes between ten and 19 variables. Because of the simplified research design and the non-representative sample, the results don’t provide any proof, at most some support of the five personality dimensions. In addition, the factor analysis identified traits that are least ambiguous and that are most closely related to a factor. Figure 6 illustrates the factors with their top ten adjectives by factor loading. Some adjectives were skipped in favour of the representative terms of a construct pole (marked in bold). It also reveals some interesting insights about personality stereotypes. For instance, a traditional person is perceived to be English/British, gentlemen-like and lordly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modern</th>
<th>Eccentric</th>
<th>Opulent</th>
<th>Elitist</th>
<th>Strong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>contemporan</td>
<td>.975</td>
<td>.914</td>
<td>.917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>easy-going</td>
<td>.908</td>
<td>.911</td>
<td>.912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>youthful</td>
<td>.894</td>
<td>.911</td>
<td>.911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>innovative</td>
<td>.886</td>
<td>.900</td>
<td>.898</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>.876</td>
<td>.884</td>
<td>.887</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>young</td>
<td>.875</td>
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<td>.877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>casual</td>
<td>.829</td>
<td>.841</td>
<td>.841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>credible</td>
<td>.824</td>
<td>.827</td>
<td>.870</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>modern</td>
<td>.791</td>
<td>.879</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>clean</td>
<td>.693</td>
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guage and context information (c.f. Curasi 2001). Advantages include mainly its resource efficiency, its promptness, the accessibility of hard-to-reach target groups (O’Connor and Madge 2003, p. 140) and validity-related advantages including the prevention of interviewer bias (Hessler et al. 2003, p. 122), the stimulation with multimedia and the encouragement of self-disclosure (Joinson 2001, p. 188).

Specific disadvantages of collaborative RGM include the regular revision of tags during the survey and validity-related disadvantages including the bias by other respondents and possible bias by tag clouds that require people to change their reading habits (c.f. Hearst and Rosner 2008, p. 2). On the other hand, it is suited for studies that aim to disclose a consensus of a target group about their constructs. This principle is especially known from the Delphi method, which uses a multi-level process that also enables participants to consider responses from previous participants (c.f. Ziglio 1996, p. 9 et sqq.). Collaborative RGM reduces bias and struggle in data documentation and analysis, because the tag clouds depict the consensus of the respondents at every stage of the survey (c.f. Snyder-Halpern et al. 2000, p. 811).

5. Conclusions

The use of RGM led to the first concept of luxury brand personality. The five dimensions help marketers to analyse the symbolic meaning of brands and to create a personality for their own brand. For researchers, it offers a fundament for further research about luxury brand personality and to analyse its antecedents and consequences.

The article offers two main contributions concerning the research methodology. Firstly, it extends the use of RGM to the development of category-specific brand personality concepts and demonstrates its suitability for that purpose. Furthermore, it explored the opportunities of Web 2.0 to extend the range of versions with the collaborative RGM and demonstrated its practicability with a complementary online survey on a specially programmed web application. Its main difference to common online RGM highlights an essential success factor for the advancement of online research: The idea of Web 2.0 isn’t constrained to technical aspects; it claims trust and cooperation between webpage creators and users, which translates into a new researcher-respondent-relationship 2.0. This helps to stimulate and to empower respondents – and this corresponds to the modern customer-focus in brand management.

References


Research Methods – a Case Example of Participant Observation

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Abstract: This paper discusses the role of the researcher as a participant observer and reflective practitioner. The paper aims to assess the benefits and limitations of participant observation, and offer guidance as to how to manage the challenges inherent in this technique. The paper draws on the lead author’s experience as a participant observer when working on her doctoral thesis: ‘Factors Affecting the Viability of Electronic Marketplaces: an Empirical Investigation into International Steel Trading’. It discusses the issues and concerns resulting from participant observation and how these were dealt with in the case example. The empirical research was a longitudinal study tracking the evolution of steel electronic commerce between December 1998 and the present time. The events examined in this study were observed during the lead author’s ten years at a large steel producer/trading house. As a trader and a manager, the lead author was directly involved in the conduct of business. The study represents the contribution of an industry practitioner and, as such, provides a unique insight into a real-world setting.

Keywords: participant observation, qualitative research methods, qualitative data, longitudinal case work, steel trading case

1. Introduction

Qualitative methods, such as ethnography, action research, case study research, were developed in the social sciences, and were deemed to be more appropriate to the study of social and cultural phenomena than the quantitative methods of the physical sciences, such as survey methods, laboratory experiments, mathematical modelling. The rationale for conducting qualitative analysis stems from the observation that, given the human capacity to talk, the object of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the actors is largely lost when textual data are quantified.

Participant observation has its roots in anthropological studies, where researchers would travel to faraway places to study the customs and practices of less known societies. It involves participating in a situation, while, at the same time, recording what is being observed. Hence, participant observation has been associated with qualitative methods, as the data collected by this technique tend to be predominantly qualitative. It is potentially rewarding but presents unique challenges to the researcher. It offers the chance to obtain unique insights into the organization or social group. Challenges for the researcher include obtaining access and agreeing his/her role within the organizational or social setting.

This paper discusses the role of the researcher as a participant observer and reflective practitioner, and elaborates on the epistemology of practice. The paper aims to assess the benefits and limitations of participant observation, and offer guidance as to how to manage the challenges inherent in this technique. The paper draws on the lead author’s experience as a participant observer when working on her doctoral thesis ‘Factors Affecting the Viability of Electronic Marketplaces: an Empirical Investigation into International Steel Trading’.

The paper begins with a discussion of qualitative research methods. It establishes the main aspects of qualitative research, and discusses the data collection techniques, which cannot be divorced from the type of analysis being carried out. It then introduces participant observation and elaborates on the role of the researcher as a reflective practitioner. It discusses issues and concerns resulting from participant observation and how these were dealt with in the case example.

2. Qualitative research methods

‘A research method is a strategy of enquiry which moves from the underlying philosophical assumption to the research design and data collection’ (Myers and Avison, 2002, p. 7). It is possible
to identify two opposing philosophical traditions based upon distinct underlying ontological assumptions about the nature of reality. Realism posits that reality exists independently of our perception of it; idealism posits that what we call the external world is a creation of mind (Williams and May, 1996; Orlikowski and Robey, 1991). These opposing philosophical perspectives are represented in the social sciences by two traditions: positivism and phenomenology (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991). Positivism posits that reality is external and objective; hence, the observer is independent of what is being observed and objectivity is both possible and desirable. Phenomenology posits that reality is not external and objective, but is a creation of individual minds; hence, reality is subjective. Inevitably, many different variants are associated with both schools, particularly phenomenology (e.g. hermeneutics, from Greek 'hermeneuein', to interpret). The sharp division between these two views of the world seemed to dictate very different approaches to research design and hence data collection and analysis methods.

It is possible to classify research methods as quantitative (based on numerical data) or qualitative (based on verbal data). Quantitative methods are associated with the scientific approach to research, while qualitative methods have been traditionally associated with phenomenology. Early social researchers sought to apply the methods so successfully developed for the hard sciences to social research and the results can be seen in the positivist philosophical tradition (Lee, 1989; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). The sharpest distinction between quantitative and qualitative work can be seen in the approach taken at the analysis stage. In quantitative research a clear distinction can be made between data collection and data analysis. In qualitative research collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting are often carried on in parallel and the results of one activity can alter the direction of the others. The differences between research based on qualitative data and that based on quantitative data have seemed of great significance to many social researchers (Bryman, 2004). However the type of data is no longer automatically considered as the determining factor in the research design or research method. A mixed approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative data and uses more than one research method is now fully accepted for IS research (Cavaye, 1996; Myers, 1999; Myers, 2003).

2.1 Participant observation and qualitative research

A number of qualitative methods are open to the researcher, of which ethnography and case research are the main methods that utilise participant observation for data collection.

Ethnographic research derives from social and cultural anthropology whereby a researcher is required to spend considerable time in the field, and study the phenomenon within its social and cultural context. Ethnographers try to immerse themselves in a setting and become part of the group being investigated, in order to understand the meanings that actors put upon events or situations. The prevailing data collection technique is participant observation (Myers, 1999). Thus, Jean Briggs conducted her fieldwork among Canadian Eskimos; Liza Dalby among Kyoto geishas. Ethnographic research is very time consuming. The main benefit is its depth, and therefore the contribution of rich insight. One weakness is that it lacks breadth, as the focus is typically on one particular situation or phenomenon. Hence, one common criticism is lack of generalisability. In fact, it is possible to generalise from ethnography to theory (= theoretical generalisation). Also, the main data collection technique, participant observation, has strengths and weaknesses, and these are discussed further in this paper.

The case study is a research strategy which focuses on understanding a phenomenon within its natural setting. In the case study attention is paid to contextual conditions, regarded as highly relevant to the phenomenon being investigated, whereas an experiment typically deliberately separates the phenomenon from its context and focuses on a number of variables.

Case studies are the preferred research strategy when the phenomenon cannot be divorced from its context, the focus is on contemporary events, and the experience of the actors is important. The case study is the most common qualitative method used in information systems (Myers, 2003), and is particularly suited to the study of information systems in organisations, when the focus is on organisational rather than technical issues. The discipline of IS is characterised by continuous, often revolutionary change and researchers often lag behind practitioners in promoting and/or evaluating change. Researchers are often unable to provide guidance on how to manage the introduction of new systems, and often find themselves investigating how practitioners implemented and managed change, and developing theories from it. Case study research can be employed to capture and
formalise the knowledge of practitioners, develop theories from practice, and move on to the testing stage (Benbasat et al., 1987).

The case study relies on multiple sources of evidence and multiple data collection techniques. Yin (1994) lists six major sources of evidence: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artefacts.

In qualitative research, such as ethnographic and case research, data collection and analysis pose particular concerns. Data collection can be time consuming and tedious, and can result in the accumulation of large amounts of data. Subjectivity in the data collection and analysis process is considered one of the main disadvantages of case research. Bias arises from two sources: the influence of the researcher over participants' behaviours and the impact of the researcher's own beliefs. The last part of the procedure - reporting - can be difficult, as the researcher needs to establish the rigour of the process followed and the validity of the findings (Darke, Shanks & Braodbent, 1998). Data collection and data analysis form an iterative process with the choice of further data collection dependent on the results of previous analysis. Analysis is a subjective process dependent on the researcher's approach. Hence, the role of the researcher is key.

2.2 The Weberian tradition and the self

The expression 'value free sociology' was created by Max Weber in an attempt to establish a less naïve and more sophisticated methodology. Weber agrees with the positivists that a fact-value distinction ought to be preserved, and social science should only concern itself with questions of facts, while remaining ethically neutral on questions of values. Weber argues that an adequate description of social practice requires us to understand the meaning of the practices to the agents involved, which, in turn, also presupposes an understanding of values (which demands the implementation of the 'verstehen' sociology). Thus, Weber insists that the researcher must understand the values of agents and consider both the subjective and objective dimensions of social life. It could be objected that, in order to understand, one ought to decide between values. In fact, it has been observed that Weber's work itself evidences the struggle between the author's personal views and those of the agents he should be investigating neutrally, in that it contains value judgments in terms of praise or blame. Yet, it is precisely within this tension that the best social research is conducted.

Rosaldo (1989), writing in the context of the Weberian tradition, criticises the identification of detachment with scientific objectivity and the myth of the observer as a 'tabula rasa'. He argues that it is rare, if not impossible, for a researcher to become truly detached. Rosaldo argues that Weber's advocated neutrality does not exclude the scientist's passion and enthusiasm, and that the Weberian perspective underestimates the analytical capability of feelings of anger, frustration, depression, passion etc. and results in the elimination of other valid sources of knowledge. Rosaldo quotes the example of Jean Briggs, who, in her fieldwork among Canadian Eskimos, utilised her feelings of anger, frustration, solitude and depression to understand the mentality and values of her informants, in contrast to hers. Rosaldo concludes that the researcher is a 'positioned subject', whose 'life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight' (Rosaldo, p. 19). This argument implicitly acknowledges the role of the researcher in the research process, and reintroduces the self in social research.

Subsequent research challenged the idea of a social science in which the experience and values of the researcher had to be obliterated. Opinions differ whether an acknowledgement of the self is all that is required, or whether the self may legitimately be relied upon in the research process. Harris (2001) argues that the self ought not only to be disclosed, but may legitimately be utilised as a source of knowledge. The author discusses how her own life has been affected by non-profit and voluntary organizations, which later led to her involvement in charitable work, and stimulated her academic interest in the subject. Thus the academic work is influenced by the researcher's family history, and the researcher's knowledge is enriched by her life experience and charitable work.

Re-placing the self in the research process does not mean that the research should be less rigorous. Ultimately it is incumbent upon the researcher to keep the subjectivity in check and present and analyse the evidence objectively (then again, what constitutes evidence depends on the philosophical perspective).
3. The participant observer in qualitative research

Since organisations can be viewed as societies with their own peculiar customs and practices, participant observation has become increasingly popular in organisational research. Evered and Louis (2001) identify two different paradigms of organisational research, and term the two approaches ‘inquiry from the outside’ and ‘inquiry from the inside’, whereby the former is characterised by the researcher’s detachment from the organizational setting, and the latter by the personal involvement of the investigator in the research process. Knowledge of an organisation can be acquired in two ways: by examining data generated by the organisation e.g. company files, financials etc. (enquiry from the outside) or by functioning within the organisation (enquiry from the inside) and ‘being there’, becoming immersed in, and part of the phenomenon under study. The authors reflect upon their own personal experience entering an unfamiliar organizational setting. They became aware that, despite their training in the scientific method, they were adopting a different mode of enquiry to make sense of the new organisation: ‘It was a multisensory, holistic immersion’ (p. 387) whereby the authors were ‘noticing acutely’. They did not test hypotheses, but relied on improvisation learned in practice. Published academic research offered little guidance in understanding the new organizational setting, whereas papers by industry practitioners appeared more meaningful and relevant. The authors conclude that the knowledge acquired through ‘inquiry from the inside’ is inherently more valid and relevant to the organizational actors. Management research presents challenges of its own. Managers are busy individuals, and are typically reluctant to allow access unless they can see some benefit to the organisation. Hence, access for fieldwork may be difficult to obtain, and, if granted, it may be subject to various conditions about confidentiality.

Sometimes participant observation arises from an ongoing working situation, as is the case when the observer is an industry practitioner. Professional practice is a process of problem setting and problem solving. Practising managers are called upon to manage problematic situations characterised by indeterminacy, uniqueness and instability. Schon (1991, quoting Ackoff, 1979) appropriately terms such situations ‘messes’. The best professionals are able to make sense of these ‘messes’, discern patterns, identify deviations from a norm, recognise phenomena and adjust their performance. Such processes may be intuitive, tacit, unconscious. The author terms this ‘reflection-in-action’. The art of management is ‘science in action’, so that practising managers may become developers of management science (Schon, 1991). The researcher in this position acquires an in-depth and first-hand insight into a real-world setting.

A major criticism levelled at participant observation is the potential lack of objectivity, as the researcher is not an independent observer, but a participant, and the phenomenon being observed is the subject of research. The notion of participant observer does presuppose a degree of emotional detachment from the subject matter, the clear objective of the researcher being the conduct of the research. American Liza Dalby moved to Japan and lived as a geisha among geishas to conduct the fieldwork for her PhD thesis, and later recounted her experience in the book ‘Geisha’ (Dalby, 2000). As a researcher, she faced a similar challenge, namely, how to reconcile her very personal experience and views with the need for detachment traditionally expected of a researcher for her work to be regarded as scientific.

Inevitably participant observation raises ethical dilemmas: the investigation should not be conducted in a covert manner; informants should be informed of the nature and scope of the investigation. On the other hand, participant observation carries with it the concern that the presence of the investigator may influence the way informants behave. Informants may be suspicious of the researcher and reluctant to participate or be eager to please; they may interject their own impressions and biases etc. The personal relationship between researcher and informants may also influence the interaction (e.g. the researcher may empathise with his/her informants and vice versa). This ought to be taken into consideration when conducting the fieldwork. It is incumbent upon the researcher to build a relationship based on trust, and collect, analyse and display the evidence objectively. Liza Dalby, ‘the only foreigner to ever become a geisha’ became quite famous in Japan during the fourteen months devoted to the fieldwork: ‘I cannot pretend that I was the invisible observer, seeing but not seen’ (p. XV), she writes. In fact, she was interviewed almost as often as she interviewed and admitted that it would be naïve of her to pretend that her presence did not influence the way informants behaved. Although she lived as a geisha and participated in the daily routine of geisha life, she remained an outsider (= she isn’t a geisha, she is an anthropologist) and never completely blended in.
Both outside and inside research have pros and cons. The former may be methodologically precise, but yield results epistemologically irrelevant; the latter, on the other hand, may appear to lack rigour and/or objectivity. These shortcomings may be overcome by alternating between the two modes.

Thus, participant observation can be a very powerful technique, but presents the researcher with unique challenges. These include securing access to the site, finding a role acceptable to the social group or organization, accurately assessing the effect that the presence of the investigator has on the informants, and managing the analysis and reporting of the findings, so as to gain the insight without compromising the rigour and objectivity.

4. The research project

The case research examined in this paper was carried out for the lead author’s doctoral thesis ‘Factors Affecting the Viability of Electronic Marketplaces: an Empirical Investigation into International Steel Trading’.

It was predicted that the advent of electronic marketplaces would revolutionise current business practice. These predictions were supported by economic theory and academic research into the conceptual advantages of electronic marketplaces. The Electronic Market Hypothesis (‘EMH’, Malone et al., 1987) posits that IT will produce greater market governance through increased automation and the disintermediation of the middleman. Yet, while the economic rationale for the development of an electronic marketplace is in principle sound, hard evidence for such a definite trend towards greater market governance remains elusive, and academic research carried out hitherto suggests that additional variables must be considered and further studies are needed in different settings in order to fully understand how IT may affect market structures.

The doctoral thesis looked for evidence in support of the EMH in the steel industry. The study focused on the global physical Business-to-Business (‘B2B’) spot steel trading market, that is to say, business which is not under (short or long-term) contract. The empirical research was a longitudinal study tracking the evolution of steel electronic commerce between December 1998, when galvanised coils first changed hands via MetalSite, arguably the first steel electronic marketplace, and the summer 2007. Longitudinal studies are observational, and the events examined in this study were observed during the author’s ten years in the trading arm of a large industry incumbent.

Between 1998 and 2000 it was predicted that the advent of steel electronic marketplaces would lead to the disintermediation of the middleman, namely, the steel trading companies (Forrester, 1998; Andersen Consulting, 1999a; 1999b; Merrill Lynch, 2000; Best and Frazer, 1999; World Steel Dynamics, 1999, and others). Many trading platforms were established during the ‘dot.com bubble’, but there was no mass migration to anybody’s site and none attracted paying customers in any great number.

In the winter of 2000 the lead author’s employer also began to investigate the opportunity for the establishment of an e-commerce venture targeted to serve the intercontinental steel trading market. The lead author was seconded to the project in April 2000, and assigned to investigate the aspects related to order fulfillment/logistics. Over a period of eighteen months a number of activities (meetings, workshops, presentations) took place, involving representatives from the steel community and banking, insurance and logistics sectors. The lead author was a participant observer in these activities and had unlimited access to relevant information for the duration of the project. Throughout the research project and subsequently she continued to work in the industry as a trader and a manager, and witnessed the launch and demise of other B2B initiatives. The professional experience stimulated the intellectual curiosity of the lead author; her MBA dissertation investigated the impact of e-commerce on the steel industry. This investigation raised a number of issues, which reasons of space and time constraints prevented the author from exploring. Thus the PhD thesis builds upon the previous work by the author. In 2006 the lead author started utilising the services of electronic marketplaces to dispose of defective/reject steel lots, gaining valuable insight into the workings of online auctions.

Thus, the study represents the contribution of an industry practitioner and provides a unique insight into a real-world setting. A case method was adopted because it permitted the collection of rich qualitative data through participant observation, and allowed the author to capitalise on her experience in the field to contribute new insight and a different perspective to the subject matter.
4.1 The research design

The study has a multiple case design. The author undertakes a cross-case analysis of multiple IT-powered initiatives in order to test the working hypotheses and tentatively identify the determinants of e-marketplace viability. The selection of cases relies on theoretical sampling. The cases were chosen from a larger sample for literal and/or theoretical replication, because of the intrinsic similarities and/or differences between them, so that the researcher could test the same theory in different settings. The deciding factor was, ceteris paribus, accessibility. In this sense, the selection of cases was partly opportunistic; the choice of the cases allowed the writer to capitalise on unparalleled access to data and sites.

Good research design is an iterative, not a linear process (Lampel, 2004). The initial research design featured two cases, each representing a failed attempt at launching an electronic marketplace allowing one-stop shopping. Later it seemed appropriate to add a descriptive case at the beginning, to provide the reader with an understanding of the dynamics of international steel trading. When in the autumn of 2006 the lead author started selling steel rejects over electronic marketplaces, the research design was enhanced to feature additional cases. The final research design features seven cases; the experience of other electronic marketplaces is incorporated by reference in the study, and attention is paid to relevant context.

Case study research relies on multiple sources of evidence and data collection techniques. In the research project sources of evidence include:

- Documentation and archival records: company files, business plans, financials, published reports by management consultants, magazine and newspaper articles, slide-shows, emails etc.
- Personal communications: the author had informal exchanges with colleagues, senior executives of electronic marketplaces, journalists and logistics services providers (business and personal contacts of the author) during the normal course of business (face-to-face or by telephone, email, or instant messaging) or at industry events.
- Participant observation: in six out of seven cases the prevailing data collection technique is participant observation.

The role of the researcher in the study was that of:

- Professional: the researcher has unparalleled access to sources and contacts (enquiry from the inside);
- Ethnographer: the researcher is immersed and functioning within the organisation (enquiry from the inside);
- Historian: the researcher examines – retrospectively – data generated by the organisation (e.g. company files, financials, etc.) and is detached from the organizational setting (enquiry from the outside).

5. The benefits and limitations of participant observation in the research project

The study is about steel traders. In order to understand the role of the steel trader it is necessary to understand the business environment, the culture, the business practice and the interpersonal relations; the experiences of the agents are highly relevant and intelligible only within the social and cultural context of the industry. The steel trading business is highly dynamic. Each observation is, in a sense, unique and non-replicable. The industry knowledge is largely tacit, yet, little is done to capture and retain the tacit knowledge of practitioners, so that critical incidents, anecdotes, etc. are not recorded for future professionals; the pressure to be ‘lean and mean’ means that the writing up of ‘learning logs’, for example, is not encouraged. On the other hand, due to concerns over confidentiality, access for fieldwork is not easily granted to outsiders.

As discussed in section three, academic literature recognises the knowledge-yielding character of inquiry from the inside, and legitimises the contribution of industry practitioners to management research. In the research project participant observation arises from an ongoing working situation and fits the purpose of the investigation and the researcher’s circumstances. Participant observation enables the lead author to capture the tacit knowledge of industry experts and introduce the viewpoint of buyers, sellers and traders.
It has been said that managers in all industries get two thirds of the information at a personal level; data have sometimes been collected in a non-systematic manner though informal personal communications during the course of business, and informants are colleagues, business associates and personal contacts. Inevitably this raises the issue of methodological rigour (e.g. no formal interviews were conducted; none of the verbal exchanges were recorded; there are no transcripts). Notes were taken and these were revisited as soon as possible after the event to ensure accuracy, and filed electronically. Emerging issues were analysed and, where appropriate, further explored by telephone, email or instant messaging at the first opportunity; thus data collection and analysis proceeded in parallel. Inevitably an element of subjectivity is involved in processing qualitative data – while the views of the researcher are enriched by the practitioner’s experience, the angle is not strictly neutral.

Section three has elaborated on the role of the researcher as a participant observer and highlighted issues and concerns. The following section discusses how these were dealt with in the case example.

6. Managing participant observation

The research project draws upon the lead author’s experiences and the experiences of others in the industry. Hence, the study is an ‘inquiry from the inside’; the author has included subjective material, and written about her own experience as a businesswoman. The objectivity, the analysis and the reflection (‘inquiry from the outside’) came later, at the time of writing the thesis. The study therefore alternates between inside and outside enquiry following Evered and Louis (2001).

The lead author has attempted to present the evidence in an unbiased and clear manner. The study features a sample of vignettes of practice, from real life situations, quotes from company files, and a selection of photographs to illustrate concepts and substantiate statements. Care has been taken to fully display the evidence, and analyse the evidence objectively through within-case and cross-case analysis and pattern-matching, comparison with the extant literature, triangulation of data sources and of theories in order to satisfy methodological rigour, eliminate alternative interpretations and produce a compelling case. The reader is able to follow the researcher’s argument, assess the validity of the findings, but form his/her own opinion.

Unlike Liza Dalby, who remains an outsider in the geisha society and never really blends in, the lead author, as a trader and a manager, is an insider. Hence, data are collected discreetly during the normal course of business, so that, although informants are aware of the research project, this awareness need not affect the interaction. The choice of data collection methods reflected the preference of the writer for unobtrusive techniques, and a concern to minimise disruption (managers are busy people) and maintain a low profile.

A previous section has elaborated on the place of self in social research. In this study the self is not only explicitly acknowledged (for example, in the use of the first person pronoun ‘I’ to distinguish facts from personal reflections), but utilised as a source of knowledge; the experience of the lead author is treated as data. The lead author’s professional experience influences the research process, from the initial choice of the research topic (the professional experience stimulated the academic interest in the discipline of management) and of the research method, to the presentation and interpretation of the findings. The academic work is enriched by the experience of the practitioner, and the reliability of the findings is increased by the credibility of the researcher as an industry insider. The academic work in turn gives the lead author, through the collection and analysis of empirical data, further insights into the culture of the industry and the role of the steel trader. During the course of the research project the lead author becomes more critical and reflective, increasingly aware of her reflecting in action, and better able to reflect upon her reflection in action and articulate the tacit knowledge. The use of self enables the reader to understand how the knowledge has been constructed and to better evaluate the research findings.

In the research project concerns over subjectivity and/or lack of rigour were minimised by:

- Incorporating vignettes of practice, photographs, quotes from company files etc., and letting the facts speak for themselves;
- Analysing the evidence objectively through within-case and cross-case analysis and pattern-matching, comparison with the extant literature, triangulation of data sources and of theories;
- Alternating between inside and outside enquiry;
Distinguishing as appropriate facts from personal reflections (e.g. in the use of the first person pronoun ‘I’). These guidelines are recommended to other researchers in order to increase the robustness of the argument and satisfy methodological rigour.

7. Conclusions

The value of the study (apart from the contribution to the EMH debate) resides in the lessons learnt with regard to the contribution of industry practitioners to management research through participant observation. This paper has discussed the issues and concerns arising from participant observation and illustrated how these were dealt with in the case example, and has set forth guidelines as to how to manage this technique. Clearly, the challenge of being a PhD student while in full-time employment in the industry should not be underestimated. Industry executives are on call 24/7 and travel extensively. Still, the investigator has an advantage over full time ‘pure’ researchers, in that accessibility to the sites need not constitute an insurmountable problem, and there is so much to be gained from the research, professionally also, in terms of self-development and learning.

Ultimately the quality of the research ought to be assessed based on the appropriateness of the research method to the scope of the investigation, and the researcher should select the mode of enquiry to fit the topic, the state of knowledge and his/her own skills and style. Participant observation allows practising managers to capitalise on their unique circumstances to produce academic research which is interesting, contemporary, accessible and relevant to industry practitioners and scholars alike.

References

Claiming the Streets: Feminist Implications of Psychogeography as a Business Research Method

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Abstract: This paper is intended to establish a claim that the techniques of psychogeography may be advantageously employed in business and management research in order to provide a new perspective on how organisations are experienced. It examines this practice for its possibilities as a research approach for women and its compatibility with feminist research methods. Psychogeography offers an approach to gaining an understanding of the ways that human behaviour is shaped by the geographical environment (Coverley, 2006). It constitutes a style of collecting a variety of qualitative data using complementary methods, which gives a textured view of the real world in a particular environment. Psychogeography is primarily a literary tradition. However, its constituent parts are academic disciplines rooted in real world experience. The attraction of psychogeography to a business researcher is many layered. It invites the researcher to observe the environment slowly and painstakingly, whilst “strolling”, and to construct meanings in a number of ways. Walking is celebrated by psychogeographers as a cultural act and an important way to understand the world, yet the male-as-norm character of psychogeographers is well established (Solnit, 2001). The masculine tradition of psychogeography may operate to challenge woman researchers to examine the possibility of using this approach in conjunction with feminist perspective research methods as a way of exploring and questioning women’s place in a patriarchal culture (Acker et al, 1983). Feminist research methods seek to address the “invisibility” of women’s experience in academic studies (Roberts, 1990:7), to overturn the male-as-norm perspective, and to highlight the possibilities for women to engage in ‘male-preserve’ activities. In the case of the male preserve of psychogeography these intentions would apply not only to the subject of the study but also to the practice of the research method itself.

Keywords: psychogeography, feminist research methods, qualitative research, safety in the field, London, organisations

1. Introduction

This paper is intended to establish a claim that the techniques of psychogeography may be advantageously employed in business research in order to provide a new perspective on how organisations are experienced. It examines this practice for its possibilities as a research approach for women and its compatibility with feminist research methods.

Psychogeography takes an interpretivist stance to collecting a variety of data using complementary methods. It offers an approach to gaining an understanding of the ways that human behaviour is shaped by the geographical environment (Coverley, 2006), constituting a style of collecting qualitative data which gives a textured or layered view of the real world in a particular environment.

The psychogeographic tradition is centred on London (and also Paris) and although this seems an unnecessary limitation for many reasons, this city's evident foundation on commerce invites a psychogeographic interpretation from an organisational perspective. The view of the city as a “site of mystery” of which the truth may be discovered beneath the uppermost layers of the most visible aspects (Coverley, 2006:13) chimes with business research aims to understand how organisations are experienced and why people behave as they do. The notion of psychogeography as a male preserve will be explored in terms of whether feminist perspective methods might be an appropriate way of bringing women into this practice and it also raises the issue of personal safety.

In investigating the possibilities of psychogeography for the business researcher this paper takes Marylebone Lane in central London as an example.

2. Psychogeography

Lexically psychogeography seems to operate at a point where the two disciplines of psychology and geography “collide” (Coverley 2006). It is primarily a literary tradition – many of today’s psychogeographers are writers of fiction (notably Will Self and Iain Sinclair) and the antecedents of their psychogeographic work include novels (such as Robinson Crusoe). However, its constituent parts are academic disciplines rooted in real world experience. Psychology provides explanations of the workings of the mind and the geographical element encompasses the environment, geology, and.
economics. Debord’s oft-cited description of it as “charmingly vague” permits the discovery within it of a number of related fields, especially those which might engender a similar “spirit of discovery” (Debord, 1955:8).

What psychogeographers do whilst studying how behaviour and emotions are affected by environmental features – which may or may not be “consciously organised” (Debord, 1955:8), is walk around: they stroll; in the French term which is often used, they are “flâneurs” (Coverley, 2006:12).

Psychogeography offers an attractive and many-layered invitation to the business researcher. The “stroller” may observe the environment slowly and painstakingly and may construct meanings in a number of ways, such as watching people act, reading texts, evaluating artwork, engaging people in dialogue, and building up histories from earlier experience in the locality and previously written commentaries. The practice explicitly includes the search for new methods of “apprehending our urban environment” (Coverley, 2006:13). Iain Sinclair (2003b) demonstrates all of these in a psychogeographic walk in East London.

3. How is psychogeography practised?

This question recalls contributions at a 2008 public discussion on psychogeography from both Self (2008) and Sinclair (2008) on Transport for London’s literature on walking, which they jokingly referred to as “How to Walk”. The term “strolling” implies purposelessness in direction and timing, yet in their writing psychogeographers describe carefully planned routes – Will Self’s walk from London to Manhattan clearly required him to board a pre-booked flight from Heathrow to JFK airport at the correct time (2007); Sinclair’s account of a walk in East London includes his dogged attempts to arrange a view of a piece of installation art at the University of Greenwich and an interview with its creator, whilst claiming that “time should be allowed to unravel at its own speed, that’s the whole point of the exercise” (2003b:7).

The epic nature of some of these walks – Self’s (2007) to Manhattan, Sinclair’s (2002) around the M25 motorway ringing London – suggests that they are one-off experiences, that one may walk this way only once to gather legitimately serendipitous data. Sinclair (2007b:44) claims to know a person who tears out the pages of her A-Z of London as she (unusually, it is a woman) covers the territory for she intends never to re-visit sites. However, in walking London psychogeographers are often visiting areas with which they seem familiar and on which they have evidently conducted background research. Sinclair’s (2002) orbital walk of London around the turn of the millennium was conducted in a number of stages, including revisits to sites to gather additional data.

4. Is psychogeography a suitable framework for the study of businesses?

Any casual stroller would perceive that London is a city founded on commerce. The psychogeographer’s “study of the effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of people” (Debord, 1955:8) indicates very strongly that psychogeography may operate in organisational research as well as on the margins of society. The central topic areas listed by Baker (2003:323); [Debord’s, 1955] emotional and behavioural effects of the environment, and also its ambiance, “cognitive mapping” which is the “city in our heads”, and local history, all have relevance in the study of organisations. The emphasis of psychogeography is on walking, which is, as Sinclair (2003b:4) notes, “the best way to explore and exploit the city”. Other techniques employed by psychogeographers – reading relevant literature, observing environments and engaging key actors within those settings in dialogue are well recognised within mainstream qualitative business research. History’s action upon an area’s ambience, creating “chronological resonance” (Ackroyd, 2000:661; Baker, 2003), is particularly evident in organisational settings: businesses succeed each other in a given location or a single firm remains lending an area stability.

The techniques of reading texts, consulting current organisational websites, strolling in the street, observing the exterior of the business - not just its bricks and mortar, but also the signs that are displayed, the interactions of passers-by with its appearance in a particular site; entrance into the premises as a member of the public, as a possible or actual client, and as a psychogeographer/researcher, all serve to mine successive seams of data in this geological or many-layered approach (Chtcheglov, 1953). Layering of the research may also be seen in the data that is gathered, the history of the site and of the organisation itself, present-day growth and changes – whether “consciously organised” (Debord, 1955:8) or not.
This is slow-speed research – it is done at a stroll. It will take time to get to know the area and to collect data from a number of different sources. Psychogeography offers ways of understanding organisations that are not all available at once to other approaches.

5. Marylebone Lane

Iain Sinclair (2008) described the “key to psychogeography” as the search for the “north-west passage” out of London, evoking the sixteenth-century quest for a route to Asia via the Arctic. The less frequented, diagonal street of Marylebone Lane seems to suggest a psychogeographical approach, especially as it happens to offer a “north-west passage” away from the much more commercialised Oxford Street. It is a narrow street in the west end of London, its S-bend curves contrasting with the grid-like pattern of the streets around it (see Figure 1). Seemingly a back water, yet it links the shoppers’ paradise of Oxford Street with the bustling Marylebone High Street. It seems also to connect with a more distant past than its neighbouring streets as its winding configuration follows the course of the Tyburn stream, now hidden underground.

At its southern, Oxford Street end is the original location of the village of Marylebone or Tyburn (Howard de Walden Estate, 2006). Almost every one of its buildings houses a business; these include cafes, restaurants, pubs and a large four-star hotel; clothes and shoe shops, a solicitor’s office, two haberdashers, a grocery store “established in 1900”; and a nightclub offering “totally nude table-dancing”. There are no “chain” businesses, - or, apparently, the ubiquitous franchise operations - apart from the Radisson Berkshire hotel and the NCP car park at the Oxford Street end (“…the ugly 1960’s car park ... is the one blot on the landscape”); the majority of the businesses in Marylebone Lane are unique, suiting and adding to its own “quirky” character (McConnell, 2007,). In contrast to its brash neighbour of Oxford Street, Marylebone Lane seems to invite strollers, not necessarily for window shopping but to breathe in the atmosphere and to seek to understand how its ambiance affects the behaviour and emotions of fellow visitors and those who inhabit this lane by living there and/or working in its businesses.

An intriguing aspect of Marylebone Lane is that although it is quiet and seems “secret” (Baker, 2003:328) many of its businesses are very visible in their virtual existence on the internet.

Figure 1: Location of Marylebone Lane (at the centre of this map and containing the featured shop, from whose website the map is taken) source: Saltwater, 2008
6. Is organisational research a suitable topic for psychogeography?

The psychogeography of London has businesses at its heart. The suitability of organisational research to psychogeography is very much founded on its city locations, to which may be added the possibility of public access to these premises. A large proportion of organisations are open to the public – shops, restaurants, places of entertainment and leisure, transport facilities, churches and so on - and are therefore legitimately on the route of the psychogeographer’s stroll or within the researcher’s (strangely rural-sounding in the context of this discussion) “field”. It is clear that as a research approach psychogeography would be much less appropriate for research into closed business premises such as offices or factories.

Sinclair spends a good deal of his walk in – or discussing - organisations of various types: City institutions, the Barbican theatre, the historical Temple of Mithras, various churches (2003c). One of his landmarking methods is the line of organisations: “Railway to pub to hospital: trace the line on the map” (2003b:1). He introduces the “psychogeography of retail” (the business of many of the Marylebone Lane organisations), concerning the hierarchy of the pricing of second-hand books depending on where they are sold (p. 21). Self (2007) lists shops at Heathrow Airport as a demonstration of the “England of prosperity” (p.39).

Sinclair’s stated aim for his first walk is written messages, graffiti, “the spites and spasms of an increasingly deranged populace” (2003b). Organisational signage has a great deal in common with graffiti as data. Businesses in Marylebone Lane declare what is important to them: “Established 1900”, for example, sets a claim on history and substance. The sign on a pub showed that it was called, in reference to an earlier historical layer, “The Conduit” [of Tyburn]. In March 2009, the pub’s name has changed to “The Coach Makers” [Arms]: at first sight an irrelevant choice, yet it is a return to the building’s original name which is fixed into the wall high above the door. A bronze plaque fixed to the restaurant wall at 108 Marylebone Lane explains the design of the stained glass window there. “Light in the Darkness” by Julian Stocks, illustrates partly the Tyburn stream which flows beneath the lane (Jurys Clifton Ford Hotel in conjunction with the Howard de Walden Estate, 2006)

7. Is it worthwhile research?

In order to weigh the worth of psychogeography as an approach to researching organisations it is necessary to consider its methodological contribution. It is clear that this is a strategy within the interpretivist tradition as it seeks to understand the human behaviour which is observed using one or a number of methods (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The techniques of psychogeography are eminently suitable for the collection of qualitative data: descriptions, perceptions, memories and explanations, sights and sounds. Data that are collected – “by suspending … ‘common-sense’ (London Psychogeographical Association, undated) - may be unexpected but may be ordered by the researcher using a recognizable epistemology into an analytical framework (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The scientific or positivist stance on research reliability is that the results should be repeatable (see e.g. Easterby-Smith et al, 2004). The London Psychogeographical Association (undated) seem quite gleeful in their repudiation of scientific methods as psychogeography lacks replicability. However, the position on replicability or reliability varies if one takes a relativist stance as it seems reasonable that “similar observations [would be] reached by other observers”. In this regard, a reflexive, constructionist approach, such as that of feminist research, would require only “transparency” in the techniques for data analysis (Easterby-Smith et al, 2004:53).

Validity in psychogeography may be its greatest strength. The relativist inclusion of sufficient perspectives would be satisfied by the layered approach. Triangulation is an important aspect of qualitative research as it allows findings to be viewed from more than one perspective. It may be divided into methodological triangulation – in Marylebone Lane the various layers are uncovered using different methods: reading, watching, listening, consulting, interviewing, all of which might form a pattern of corroboration; and data triangulation which may be practised by comparing different sources of information collected at different times (Denscombe, 2007). The term “triangulation” calls to mind the actual (rather than metaphorical) theodolites used to survey landscapes and is therefore an apposite concern as the literal research landscape may be viewed from numerous perspectives.

The constructionist “access to the experiences of those in the research setting” is also well-attempted. Generalisability to the population at large – even to the London population - is clearly not achieved by using the data collected by psychogeographers. However, constructionist issues about the relevance
of the concepts to other environments (Easterby-Smith et al, 2004) may usefully be applied to ensure the holistic approach to sense-making.

8. Is psychogeography dangerous?

The various types of potentially dangerous situation in conducting social research listed by Craig et al (2000) include the vulnerability of women researchers working alone. They suggest planning the research design to reduce danger, such as interviewing in public places rather than participants’ homes, appropriate dress, setting appropriate social distance and taking precautions to ensure that assistance may be called. In a section entitled “Setting up Fieldwork” (p. 5) they describe activities which are recognisable elements of psychogeography. These include collecting advance information about participants and their environment and gaining an idea of the character of an area.

London is presented as populated by murderous criminals. Sinclair describes a gangland funeral (2003a) and if the title of Jenks’ (2006) chapter, “Watching your Step” were not enough to convince the walker to be careful where they stray, his descriptions of the bloody fates awaiting gang members who breach territorial boundaries leave one in no doubt as to the danger of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sinclair’s description of his intentions to collect ‘the messages on walls, lampposts, doorjams: the spites and spasms of an increasingly deranged populace’ (2003b:1) suggests a dangerous field of study and the threat contained in the possibility of meeting a vicious native.

Solnit discovers that, “companions have been women’s best guarantee of public safety” (2001:244). Indeed, Sinclair and Self, who are both men, often take a companion on their psychographic walks. On the walk which includes the University of Greenwich, Sinclair (2003a) takes the photographer, Marc Atkins; Self (2007) mentions a number of male companions on his walk to Manhattan. The companion often also contributes to the text – and to the practice of triangulation in research terms - as the author comments on his reactions to the environment.

9. May psychogeography be practised by women?

Coverley (2006) lists seventy-two works in his “Bibliography and Further Reading”; of these only six are authored or co-authored by women. Will Self (2008) agreed with a questioner at a 2008 Psychogeography event that this practice is a male preserve. He has previously described psychogeographers as a “fraternity” of “middle-aged men” (2007:12). He commented that Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary was “unjustly pilloried” for saying that she felt unsafe walking in London at night (see Oakeshott, 2008). The Psychogeographical Association (undated) suggests that individuals are “constrained” to particular places, a notion which becomes rather alarming when the category of people whose presence might “transform a place” is women. This view echoes the representation of woman flâneur (that is flâneuse) to the early French psychogeographers as a prostitute (Coverley, 2006). The Association may be attempting to express a view that women and men experience places differently but their tone seems to present a challenge to mount a new campaign to (re)claim the streets or at least to attempt a feminist interpretation. Male privilege is extended in psychogeographical accounts as not only are the psychogeographers men but the great majority of the people they meet in the course of their observations are also men. Early French psychogeographers operated in an “erotic” Paris conducting seemingly Freudian walks which were mainly concerned with “the pursuit of beautiful women” (Coverley, 2006:21). From this perspective women are not to be the actors in the outside world: they “do not look, they are looked at” (Jenks, 2006:150). In Marylebone High Street the advertising for the Sophisticats nightclub offering “totally nude table dancing” constitutes an outdoor invitation to the male gaze in an indoor setting (see Figure 2). On the poster photographed in March 2009 the graffito, “Whore” is clearly seen on the woman’s face. Historically women were vilified and even punished merely for walking, either alone or with a man. Their reasons for walking were sexualised even when those of their male companions were not. The explicit understanding to be taken from this is that women need a good reason to be outside – such as shopping or collecting their children: “women cannot simply walk” (Jenks, 2006:150; Solnit, 2001).

In the City of London Sinclair traces the history of one of the church-sites to the ancient cult of Mithras. He notes that “women were not permitted to attend the ceremonies”, yet in the next sentence one of these ceremonies (cutting a bull’s throat) is depicted as “crucial” in “understanding the psychogeography of the city” (Sinclair, 2003c:115). Two pages later, lest any woman still foolishly imagine herself at the heart of this narrative, Sinclair’s account of his experience at a seven a.m. Ascension Day church service contains inappropriate, explicitly sexual imagery in a description of a
woman worshipper. Walking is celebrated by psychogeographers as a cultural act and an important way to understand the world, yet it seems to be denied to women (Solnit, 2001). Rebecca Solnit discovered from a particularly extreme experience when her intentions were misconstrued that she “… had no real right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness out-of-doors …” (2001:241). It seems that not only is the woman psychogeographer vulnerable to attack from the brutal indigenous population, but the male-as-norm character of psychogeographers and their interest in male-dominated society have been established since time immemorial.

Figure 2: Poster outside Sophisticats nightclub, 28 Marylebone Lane

10. Is psychogeography compatible with feminist research approaches?

The prospect of integrating features of feminist perspective research practice with psychogeography, including the non-exploitative relationship between the researcher and researched, sharing of subjectivity, and an intention to study women’s place in society in order to improve women’s lot is one which would repay investigation, both theoretically and in practice. The notion of psychogeography as a masculine activity touches on two areas of interest to feminist researchers: essentialist beliefs that the ‘traditional’ place of women is in the domestic sphere, while men go about in the outside world; and the issue of personal safety. Women’s place in the home is often explained by the identity of the male with culture and the female with nature (Ortner, 1982). The culture of the outside world may be seen as dangerous to women, especially if they are seen as deviants just for being there (‘asking for it’).

The clash between the subjects of interest to male psychogeographers and feminist researchers serves to introduce the obstacles to such a consideration and to highlight its fascination. The masculine tradition of psychogeographical practice may operate to challenge woman researchers to examine the possibility of using this approach in conjunction with feminist perspective research methods as a way of exploring and questioning women’s place in a patriarchal culture (Acker et al, 1983). Feminist research seeks to address the “invisibility” of women’s experience in academic studies (Roberts, 1990:7), to overturn the male-as-norm perspective, and to highlight the possibilities for women to engage in ‘male-preserve’ activities.
The charming vagueness of psychogeography and its explicit search for new ways to understand the city environment are compatible with the non-existence of a particular feminist method, which encourages feminist researchers to “use any and every means available for investigating the condition of women in sexist society” in order to combat exclusion (Coverley, 2006; Debord, 1955; Letherby, 2003; Stanley, 1990; cited by Watts, 2006:386). In the case of the male preserve of psychogeography these feminist intentions would apply not only to the subject of the study but also to the practice of the research method itself. The psychogeographical multiplicity of data collection methods chimes well, moreover, with the “messiness” of feminist research processes and the knowledge they generate (Letherby, 2003:6).

Watts (2006) discusses her discomfort at disguising the feminist perspective of her research as her women participants were not in sympathy with her views. She also implies that the participants in feminist research should be exclusively female. However, these two considerations are less important in the context of psychogeography. Firstly, feminist research methods are not necessarily recognizable to a layperson and therefore are unlikely to be rejected by unsympathetic participants. Secondly, the intention to improve the lot of women may be achieved by studying men as well as women (Letherby, 2003). It is important to note also that many of the features of feminist perspective research, such as the emphasis on “ethics of care”, are now considered to constitute “good practice” within mainstream qualitative research. (Watts, 2006:387-385).

Hegde (2009:279) terms the recognisable features of feminist perspective research as “methodological dilemmas” as she finds the fulfillment of aims concerning “voice, speech, silence, the politics of location, and the recuperation of experience” very difficult in an ethnographic study of women in India, yet due to the differences between her methods and those of the “stroller” these aims could much more easily be integrated into research using a psychogeographic approach. The foregrounding of organisation members’ own understanding of their situation would be achieved with more difficulty as the psychogeographer operates as an outsider, literally passing through. Inter-subjectivity (or self-disclosure) is more relevant as the researcher experiences the layering of the study, although full inter-subjectivity (in terms of offering participants editing rights) would present difficulties in the ordering of multi-layered analysis (Reinharz, 1992; Shields & Dervin, 1993). First-person narratives within feminist research are similar to the self-consciousness psychogeographical writings about experiences “on the road”.

11. Conclusions
The intention of this paper has been to explore the possibilities of applying a psychogeographic approach to feminist perspective organisational research. Various aspects of established methodological concerns have been compared with psychogeographic practice in testing for suitability in the business field. An obstacle to the psychogeographic approach is that it is not suitable for research in all types of organisation. The “stroller” must have access to the premises – they must be on the route of the stroll. Safety is a very important issue: it has been seen that Self and Sinclair, two of the most well-known practitioners, always walk with at least one companion.

An important barrier to undertaking organisational research as a woman psychogeographer that must be considered is that of the practice’s apparent masculinity, which results partly from safety concerns, but also from its avowed interest in male-dominated society as well as traditional anti-feminist views about suitable activities for women and appropriate locations for their activities. These obstacles presents a great attraction as it seems that this is a territory ripe for a feminist re-interpretation. It is therefore contended that psychogeography would be a welcome addition to feminist perspective, organisational research methodological toolkit.

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Developing a new Perspective on Leadership Theory: From a Tree of Knowledge to a Rhizome of Contingencies

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Abstract: Does the discursive formation of leadership theory hinder the development and practise of alternative leadership styles in the UK? This research question is in response to the issues summarised in the PriceWaterhouseCooper’s 2008 report on Key Trends in Human Capital. Eight years into the new millennium, leadership is still at the top of the human capital agenda. Although companies invest considerable amounts of money in leadership development, the report suggests that there is limited evidence of leadership programmes delivering value for money, and that three in every ten leaders in the UK do not demonstrate essential leadership qualities. This indicates issues with the practical application of leadership research. The common denominator of all leadership research and application is the leadership theories. The theories are an easily comprehensible, continuous series of events that lead into the present of leadership, supporting all leadership research. Unquestioned assumptions support the theory framework, becoming commonly accepted truths. These suppositions include; the grounding of theory and research in reality; leadership is a fundamental component of the human condition; that social and economic progress has only been possible due to leadership, together with the unquestioned dismissal of alternative voices. Finally there is a notion that leadership theory evolves, drawing on a Darwinian event of natural selection, by evoking biological empirical science to explain a discursive structure. The research and the subject of this paper is to challenge the assumptions and framework of leadership theory through the creation of a research strategy based on Foucault’s methods, creating a rhizome of contingencies rather than a progressive tree of knowledge. The paper will address definitions of the archive, archaeology and genealogy, as contextualised within the research.

Keywords: leadership theory, Foucault, methodology, philosophy, research strategies

1. Introduction

It is an unquestioned belief that the development of the right kind of leadership is fundamental not only to the survival, but to the sustainability of businesses and organisations in the United Kingdom, thus maintaining leadership as one of the most researched phenomena within social science (Thorpe, Lawler & Gold, 2007; Grint, 2008). However, PricewaterhouseCooper (2008) in their report on human resource trends comment that in spite of the emphasis on leadership development, United Kingdom leaders are outperformed by their contemporaries in both Europe and America. The metric employed to evaluate the performance is based on quantifying the impact rather than characteristics of effective leadership. The metric includes value and wealth creation, the retention and productivity of followers, the levels of internal promotion and development of followers and corporate social responsibility initiatives including diversity. The PricewaterhouseCooper report confirms the statistics identified in 2006 by Proudfoot Consulting who identified a 30 per cent productivity gap between the United Kingdom and the United States equivalent to 85 lost working days per United Kingdom worker (Mannion, 2009). Although there may be a lack of agreement regarding the conclusion that United Kingdom business leaders are somehow lacking, the opinion has been stated universally and therefore needs further investigation. This paper is an introduction to the research strategy which initially explores the assumptions that underpin leadership research. The objective is to describe the research methods utilised to gather together the statements that form our current understanding of leadership and to interrogate those statements to explain why they have developed.

This research is proposing that an explanation for the perceived gap between the performance of United Kingdom leaders and their European and United States colleagues is created by two compounding issues. The first is a series of assumptions that have become unquestioned truths currently providing a foundation to leadership research. The second is a bifurcation between the development of United Kingdom business leadership practice and the social, cultural and economic needs of the United Kingdom to which it should be a response. This analysis is born out by the Globe research project conducted over ten years in 61 countries and discussed in Culture and Leadership Across the World (Chokar, Broadbeck & House, 2007). The global enterprise has begun the work of quantifying the relationship between culture, organisation and leadership. Within the report there is an interesting divergence between the media analysis of business leadership and that of middle managers. The media show British business leaders as fitting a liberal culture, where there is no
discussion of high power distance or hierarchies, but of action and energy that motivates and empowers others. However, middle managers themselves discuss a culture that is ‘stratified, individualistic, masculine’ (343), where there is a large difference in power and little humanity, sharing or kindness.

Alban-Metcalfe & Alimo-Metcalfe (2007) suggests that the United Kingdom leadership models are heavily influenced by developments in America, whereas Styhre (2005) believes European leadership models, due primarily to language issues, have not been influenced to the same degree. Taking the perspective that leadership literature, which is the product of research into leadership development and practice, is constructed to answer precise social needs at defined historical moments, the research is exploring why statements regarding leadership are made at all, what purpose they accomplish (Alvesson, 2002), and finally what social and economic need are the statements responding to.

In order to explore this proposition further a methodology has been developed based on the methods created by French philosopher and historian, Foucault. Foucault is most famous for his investigations into current understandings of madness which he suggested were not based on scientific knowledge as commonly assumed, but has been constructed to address specific social and economic needs at particular historic moments (Foucault, 1998, 2005, 2007). Whether one agrees with Foucault’s understanding of madness is of secondary importance to the fact that he has developed an alternative way to understand the construction of the term madness by incorporating social, cultural and economic need at specific historical moments (Foucault, 1998). This creates a discursive formation where the present understanding of madness as a psychological and physiological condition discovered through advances in science is only one of a number of possible understandings. The alternative understanding put forward by Foucault is that madness is a constructed response to social, economic and cultural need at particular historical moments, with science retrospectively providing the evidence. This research is creating a similar discursive formation centered on the term leadership, specifically business leadership.

2. Philosophical considerations

The research process which is qualitative, based on the interpretation of texts both academic and popular, and can be described as the process of finding the ‘bits and pieces that have to be in place to allow something else to be possible’ (Kendal & Wickham, 2003:25). Not unlike a patchwork quilter, drawing on fragments of materials from a variety of sources to create something new but formed through the recycling of what already exists. Hollinshead (2004) suggests that in qualitative research there is little emphasis on the decisions made by researchers at the foundational level. Most attention is on methods, focusing on the ‘technical accuracy or instrumental procedure’ (Hollinshead 2004, 83). The debate indicates that a well-developed research strategy requires sensitivity to philosophical changes in the perception of leadership, due to post-modern considerations of what it is to be human, and the perception of reality (Tosh 2002; Ford, Harding & Learmouth 2008; Klenke 2008).

This research strategy is characterised by four fundamental principles, developed in answer to criticism that much qualitative research work becomes descriptive rather than being rigorous in analysis and coherently explicit in application (Hammersley, 1992: 28):

- Grounding this study is a philosophical awareness of the debates that characterise thinking in qualitative research and the established objective and positive approaches inherent in leadership research.
- It is largely interpretative in that it seeks to understand the cultural power/knowledge matrix informing the interaction between individuals and society, in the application of meaning to the term ‘leader’. It will not therefore be generalisable, as understood within traditional leadership research.
- The findings will be three-dimensional in terms of geographical and temporal locations so that understanding of present day interaction with the term leader develops and emerges from the researcher’s interaction with historical leadership theory and the data found outside the developed archive of knowledge. The findings will therefore be transient and evolving.
- The research requires a multi-faceted strategy that is more than the use of multiple methods. The methodology needs to accommodate theories and ideas from history, psychology and aspects of
post colonial, post feminist and post structural theories. The term patchwork quilter describes both
the content and the process of data collection.

Ontology represents the ideas that inform beliefs concerning the ‘being’ of human, and the nature of
engagement with reality. Within leadership theory, this is an important consideration as leadership
concerns the understanding of what it is to be an individual, a subject and an object of knowledge
(Ford, Harding and Learmouth 2008). Epistemology is the philosophical foundation for deciding what
knowledge is possible and if that knowledge is adequate and legitimate (Guba and Lincoln 2005).
Methodology is the theory that encompasses the methods used. Each methodology has its own
ontological and epistemological understanding. In order to contextualise these areas, it is necessary
to provide some general definitions in which to contextualise the philosophical position of this study.

2.1 The essence of humanity and the understanding of reality

Objectivism is an ontology were meaningful reality exists outside the human consciousness. An object
carries a meaning, understandings and values waiting for discovery. Bryman (2008) suggests that
foundation of traditional leadership research is within this ontology. The structure of the research
centres on an identified problem. The product is a rational explanation together with
recommendations which are in-line with the current organisational structure and management.

The second is that of subjectivism, where the meaning is imposed on the object by the subject. The
object contributes in no way to the formation of its meaning. Meaning, constructed through language
derives from imported ideas from other areas of consciousness, such as dreams, aspects of planets
and religious beliefs. Meaning derives from ‘anything but an interaction between the subject and the
object to which it is ascribed’ (Crotty 2007 9). Crotty suggests that structuralism and post-structuralism
is within this epistemology.

The third is that of constructionism. Meaning comes into existence through our engagement with the
world. Constructionism actually has two branches of thought attached to it. One is constructionism,
based on collective generation and transmission of meaning and the other is constructivism, which is
a focus on the individual’s meaning-making activity (Crotty 2007). Ontology seems relatively
straightforward; however, post-modernism, has in recent years, disturbed the rational and logical
definitions of ontology.

2.2 Post-modernism and the lack of human essence

Over the past twenty years, the development of a theoretical post-modern stance has shown that an
objective ontology is impossible to achieve within research as the researcher unconsciously brings
beliefs, values and attitudes to the interpretative element of research (Tosh 2002; Hollinshead 2004;
Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Crotty 2007; Bryman 2008). The hallmark of post-modernism is the
prioritization of language over experiences resulting in a sceptic response to the human capacity to
observe and interpret the external world, particularly the human world (Tosh 2002). From this
perspective, there is an implication that leadership is not objectively real, or related to human
experience and meaning. It is a creation of discourse (Alvesson 2002; Ford, Harding & Learmouth
2008).

Alvesson (2002) suggests that language is external and real, it precedes any experience because
experience has to mediate through it. Within post-modernism there are three main aspects concerning
language; the first is that the individual reconciles experience through language. The experience is
categorised, then typified and finally rests within everyday familiarity (Denzin & Lincoln 2005).
Secondly, discourse structures an individual’s subjectivity providing its social identity. The discourse
precedes the individual and provides a series of, ‘images, folk tales, beliefs, values and attitudes’
(Denzin & Lincoln 2005 485), which are applied to the new event, rendering it understandable,
explainable and familiar. The third point is that in everyday life we think that there is a one-to-one
relationship between the word, the object it refers to and the image then created.

This is a position developed by Saussure (1974), who developed the notion of the signifier and
signified as a chain, developing the term structuralism. Post-modernists and post-structuralists
including Derrida believe that language is value-laden and that linguistic and non-linguistic practises
interrelate. The creation of meaning is from a vast store of images that have developed through the
individual’s lifetime. Language is not therefore a neutral reflection of reality. Language provides a
structure determining our perception of the world (Tosh 2002), undermining the belief of a human
essence that is discoverable. Recent research into leadership utilises deconstructional notions
particularly that of Ford, Harding and Learmouth (2008), where there is a view that the subject, the
leader, through an interaction with the object, leadership, creates leadership, which language
mediates, drawing upon stored images of leadership to create a known entity, that of a leader.

Alvesson (2002) suggests that post-modernism assumes no core or essence to human nature. If a
person is ‘thrown’ into a new discourse, the subject will respond to the changes and will be re-created.
If there is an essence, it is the exposure and adaptation to the potential of discourse. This flexibility,
although appearing to be liberating also creates insecurities. Individuals develop deliberate
normalizing strategies where they voluntarily cling to identities primarily offered, in modern society, by
corporate cultures and an ideological understanding of professional standards, and how those
standards of behaviour are applied (Alvesson 2002, Ford, Learmouth and Hardy 2008). Wilson Harris,
a Euro-Caribbean writer and theorist, expresses an anxiety over the nature of choices available in the
context of cultural, social and political forces. He suggests that humans have a tendency to,
‘extrapolate assumptions of character from a dominant model, to assume that a people or an
individual ought to conform to particular models whether imposed or wished for’ (Harris 1981 43). The
effect of post-modernism on the philosophical foundations of research is one of undermining the
distinctions between the various ontological positions as language appears to mediate between the
human and the world within and through the three main perspectives. It is the post-modern
perspective of subjectivity and the constructed meaning of reality that provides the ontological
grounding for this research.

2.3 What is acceptable knowledge?
Epistemology concerns the question of what is acceptable knowledge within a discipline. The central
issue is whether the social world reflects the natural world. The term positivism affirms the need to
regard the social world as operating in the same way as the natural world. The second term is that of
realism, which suggests that there is a reality existing externally and separately from our perception of
reality. It is within these two stances that traditionally leadership research is conducted (Bryman 2008,
Crotty 2002). Interpretativism is a polemical position to positivism and from a post-modern position
offers an alternative to realism (Bryman 2008).

2.4 Possibility? - as accepted knowledge
Within this research an intermediate epistemological position is suggested, where the question of
what is acceptable knowledge represents a point of departure which seeks to understand the
‘conditions of possibility’ (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine 2008, 91). This view enables a challenge to the
authority of one cultural way of seeing, for example, the authority of business and academic
conceptions of a leader, whilst un-concealing the significance of alternative cultural ways of perceiving
leadership through the discourses of those voices historically dismissed (Parker 2002, 10). This
stance provides the epistemological foundations on which to suggest that Foucaultian methods create
a methodology. Methodology refers to the research strategy used to investigate the reality identified
through the researcher’s assumptions based on ontological and epistemological considerations.
Methodologies include grounded theory, phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnography and
historiography; Foucault’s methods provide a methodology, emphasizing discovery, description and
meaning, and a way around ‘society- individual dualism’ (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008:93).

3. Research strategy and the quilt-maker
Denzin and Lincoln (2005) articulate a cogent argument that describes the qualitative researcher as a
bricoleur or quilt maker, concentrating on the very creative aspects of developing the methodological
elements of a research paradigm. Creativity seems to offer a key concept in developing a
methodological research strategy into the fragmented area of leadership research, for which there is
no encompassing definition (Bass 1990, Thorpe, Lawler & Gold 2007, Ford, Learmouth & Hardy
2008). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) express the need for creativity in the role of a qualitative researcher
through the use the terms bricoleur and quilt maker. The term bricoleur is defined by Levi-
Strauss(1966) as being a ‘Jack of all trades, a kind of professional do-it-yourself’ (Denzin & Lincoln
2005, 4), producing a ‘pieced together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex
situation’ (2005, 4). Many researchers have used this term to describe the act of qualitative research
(2005, 4). For this study, the term quilt-maker (hooks 1992) describes this particular multi-faceted
research strategy more successfully.
To explore the link between methodological development and the quilt-maker, the film *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995) will facilitate the contextualisation. A quilt-making group using the theme ‘Where Love Resides’ create a quilt. Each member of the group uses scraps of material from clothing that has personal meaning to them creating a patch for the quilt that expresses their own perception of where love resides. Each patch created represents in an abstract format personal recollections and perceptions, which inform the theme. Using connecting fabric that takes into account colour, shading and perspective of the individual patches a harmonious whole is created. In terms of the study, the quilt maker and the quilt pictorially represents the many grounding theories of leadership, linked together in a matrix connected by cultural, social, economic and legal understandings, both present and historical, carefully chosen to create a harmonious whole.

The quilt, with its roots in Afro-American history (hooks 1992) also represents aspects of alternative theory not usually brought into account within leadership research, fiction writing, post-colonial theory, post feminist theory, history, post modernism and psychology. These perspectives incorporated within this methodology will illustrate that leadership theory is the subject of sharp ideological differences and is not value free and objective. The methodology will investigate why one leadership theory enters the ‘archive’ of acceptable knowledge at the expense of alternatives (Tosh 2002). These varied theoretical perspectives add a much-needed depth to the study of leadership and a rich interpretation of how and why we have reached this point at this time.

4. Common denominators, unquestioned assumptions and principles

The common denominator of leadership research, whether explicit or implicit, is the leadership theories. The theories are an easily comprehensible, continuous series of events, a tree of knowledge, leading into the present, underpinning all research, model development and application. Through the literature review, five assumptions supporting the framework of leadership theory were identified and have become commonly accepted, unquestioned truths (Thorpe, Lawler & Gold, 2007; Price and Hicks, 2006; Bryman, 2004; Parker, 2004; Midley, 2004) rooted in the philosophical underpinning of research strategies, but not articulated. These assumptions include:

- The belief that social progress, economic growth and organized society have only been possible because of leadership providing a foundation for Fordism, Taylorism and Scientific management.
Leadership is a natural part of being human and it is impossible to imagine what we might do without it, underpinning investigations into leadership traits and competencies.

That the rigorous methods used in researching leadership guarantee that the research reflects the reality as it is seen, supporting work completed by the Hawthorne Studies influencing the development of research into leader behaviour and its impact on motivation and improved performance (Mullins, 2007: 53).

That research contains views from all the voices available, not just a chosen few which is implicit in work on transformational, charismatic and visionary leadership, with only the voices of leaders present.

Although researchers (Price & Hicks; Parker, 2006:2; Thorpe et al, 2007; Klenke, 2008) have identified these assumptions, this research suggests that there is a need to understand why and how these assumptions became implicit within leadership theory in order to understand the influence on present day understandings of leadership. To find the answer, it is necessary to develop a research philosophy and strategy that focuses on the “why” and “how” of leadership rather than the “what”.

5. Developing the research methodology

Sara Mills (2003) suggests that using the methods of Foucault is difficult to achieve in practise. It is easy to utilise his themes, repeating his ideas rather than making use of them. Foucault’s concern is to question the way we think and to explore areas in terms of problems rather than subjects. In order to do this he develops particular methodological positions, the elements of which can be utilised in developing a methodology that will question the way we consider and research leadership.

Foucault related discourse to diverse social groups, linking them to specific practises in which they were located. This work continued in the nineteen-seventies, and identified heterogeneous links between institutional practices and the construction of subjectivity (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkeridine 2008). Deleuze (1977), through his understanding of Foucault suggests that the application of theory to practice is no longer a tenable position; it is an interactive and open-ended process. This aspect will extend the work recently completed by Ford, Harding and Learmouth (2008), and their assertion that leadership is a performance that intertwines within the discursive practises of the current times. This creates a position of leadership that engages with the psychology of an individual where, ‘it penetrates the psyche and allows for the construction of identity or a self’ (21).

The term discourse, since the nineteen-seventies, refers to the large field of research that comes under the banner of qualitative and is concerned with the analysis of language and text. Foucaultian discursive formations are distinguishable from other versions of discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkeridine 2008). The problem with using Foucault as a methodology is that the techniques where developed to eschew all formalisation (Smart 1992). However, following the lead taken by Arribas-Ayllon and Walkeridine (2008) it is possible to discuss Foucault within a three-dimensional model in which to analysis discursive formations rather than discourse. Firstly, there is an ‘historical enquiry’ (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkeridine, 2008:91). This includes the development of an archive, and the archaeological and genealogical inquiry. The second dimension explores the mechanisms of power (91), trying to uncover the functioning of that power. Thirdly, an analysis of the material and signifying practises in which individual subjects are involved resulting in the subjectification of the individual (91).

6. Creating the archive

The research will initially use two very different methodologies to develop and make visual the corpus of knowledge that refers to leadership. The first will use Foucault’s notions of the archive and the statements that form the archive. The aim of the research is to understand the discursive structure that has formed around the term ‘leader’ within a business context. The initial step is to construct the archive of leadership literature composed of the current understanding of leadership discourse and research as it applies in the United Kingdom.

This activity reveals the statements (Foucault, 2005) identifying leadership as understood today. It also brings together the texts that contain those statements regarding leadership that are currently in use. What is interesting is that at present the archive for today is drawing on texts written authors such as Machiavelli (1464), Sun Tzu (6th century BC), Likert (1932), Maslow (1943), Collins (2001), and Huczynski (2006). Foucault suggests that the range of texts come together because they contain
the same statements about leadership, although developed at different historical moments. Foucault poetically describes the archive as a space where statements, the signs, symbols and practices of leadership, ‘shine, as it were, like stars; some that seem close to us, actually shine brightly from afar, while others that are in fact close to us are already beginning to fade’ (Foucault, 1998:146). This very much describes leadership literature, illustrating how in different historical moments certain texts shine only later to dim, and then to re-emerge at a later date.

Figure 2: A Wordle picture of the dominant statements concerning leadership in academic journal articles originated in the United Kingdom in 2007

Statements are defined as thoughts that are, ‘different in form, and dispersed in time, form a group if they refer to one and the same object’ (Foucault 1972/2007:35). Figure 2 represents the first stage of constructing the Archive. The texts for this particular word cloud represent academic journal articles originated in United Kingdom institutions during 2006/2007. The texts have been selected using a structured literature review (Transfield, Denyer & Smart, 2003). This method of developing the leadership archive provides a detailed audit trail enabling justification as to why certain literature has been included in the archive. Identifying the texts was achieved by focusing on four search engines using the search terms “leader”, “leadership”, “business” and “United Kingdom”; the years from 2007-2009. There is also a manual search of those journals rated 4* in the Association of Business Schools: Academic Journal Quality Guide (Kelly, Morris, Rowlinson & Harvey, 2009). These particular journals have been chosen as they are powerful gatekeepers of academic knowledge. Popular books on leadership have been taken form the Management Today journal which identifies the top ten best selling leadership books in the United Kingdom for 2008. Text books are taken from the bibliographies of the selected journal articles and popular books.

From the visual image, it can be seen that in 2007 statements such as leadership itself, followers, transformational, military, characteristics and romance are all important statements that create the effect of leadership contributing to the formation of leadership as we know it today. Statements are an important component of Foucaultian methodology and are a unit within a discursive formation that
beings about an effect, much like a sentence which is an objective description of what is happening is a unit of discourse (McHoul & Grace, 1993).

In order to recognise statements of leadership within the archive Said’s seminal work Orientalism (1978) will be used as a template. Said (1978) created a new dynamic within post-colonial theory, moving away from a Marxist interpretation of domination and repression to a Foucaultian view of discursive formations. Said suggests that the Orient is not a creation of nature, it is constructed by ‘generations of intellectuals, artists, commentators, writers, politicians and more importantly through the naturalising of a wide range of Orientalist assumptions and stereotypes’ (Said, 1978 in Ashcroft & Aihluwalia 2001:168). Terms such as exotic, mysterious and a land of opportunities and adventures are constructions of the Orient that we still hold today and often seen in travel brochures. Viewed as a discursive formation, Orientalism illustrates how the power to construct knowledge enables the retention of authority and control. Power in Foucaultian terms is creative, affecting the ability to construct and therefore claim knowledge, which in turn fixes and names identities (Foucault, 1998). Post-colonialism links Alvesson’s (2002) thoughts on why leadership statements are made and what they are accomplishing with Foucault’s notions on the historical conditions and social needs enabling the production of leadership statements.

In this particular research, an investigation of management and leadership theories and the accompanying research and academic critique will identify the statements that have contributed to the discursive formation of leadership. The archive develops by examining the ‘sets of rules which at a given period and for a given society define…the limits and forms of the sayable’ (Foucault, cited in Mills 2003, 64). Many of these rules are unquestionably accepted, and only those statements, which fit the rules, become part of the circulating discourse. This stage of the research represents a search for the statements into a discourse that privileges certain ideas and dismisses others developing a corpus of knowledge concerning a specific object, in this case the leader.

Foucault’s methods avoid giving primacy to the ideas of the individual, preferring to view the human subject as being subjected to, ‘particular, historically located, disciplinary processes and concepts which enable us to consider ourselves as individual subjects and which constrain us from thinking otherwise’ (McHoul & Grace 1993:3). According to the Foucaultian view, these processes enable the subject to state, ‘what we are’ (McHoul & Grace 1993:3) and need establishing in order to develop the current literature, research and theory into a visible archive of leadership knowledge. Achievement of this objective will create the first step in the research process, making visible the current structure of leadership literature. Once completed, the second stage of the research will use archaeology within the newly created archive.

7. The archaeological dig

The leadership archive consisting of a homogeneous network of relations and causality provides coherence to leadership theory and literature. This consistency creates a logical ‘total history’ (Kendall & Wickham 2003, 24), which can be divided into definite cohesive periods and stages. The second stage of the research will be to analyse the actual statements within the archive and to make visible the rules regulating the development of statements, and interrogate how institutions provide the limits within which discursive objects may act. Foucault describes archaeology as aiding the exploration of the networks of what is said and what can be seen, in a set of social arrangements (Kendall & Wickham 2003, 25). Archaeology links to Foucault’s conception of discourse as a practical representation of language. He suggests that past discourse is not a theme commented on, but is a monument described. In archaeology, it is the condition under which discourse exits and its laws of construction, that are important and not the subject who articulates the thought (Foucault, cited in McHoul & Grace 1993, 49). This section will also explore in greater depth Foucault’s notions of discourse, its application to the corpus of leadership theory, research and critiques, providing a foundation on which to base an alternative perspective on the development of leadership literature. The use of archaeology is very much a historical exploration of the laws and conditions under which the leadership statements are created. In order to look at the present, as a ‘history of the present’ (Mills 2003, Kendall and Wickham 2003) Foucault’s method of genealogy is utilised.

It would appear that as assumptions implicit within leadership literature are being revealed, that the archive of leadership literature has passed through the final threshold, that of Formalization. This is where assumptions become legitimate starting points for knowledge development through research.
The assumption that leadership is necessary and can be objectively measured forms the starting point of all leadership research.

The preceding threshold concerns the development of acceptable paradigms in which knowledge can be acquired. In leadership research until recently, research was only accepted if it was conducted in a positive, objective, quantitative paradigm, and this is still the case for certain 4* journals.

The threshold that was of most interest to Foucault was that of epistemology. This is the stage where attempts are made to establish the body of knowledge as a coherent, valid and unified body of knowledge. It is at this stage that research is most influenced by cultural and social factors.

The first threshold is that of positivity. This is the point where the term ‘leader’ is first mentioned, where the body of knowledge starts to be recognised as a separate discourse.

This stage of the research is concerned with discovery. The aim is to discover the connecting themes and statements of the literature now and to back trace them until there is a change in those statements. This change represents a threshold within the archive, and is associated with a change in the economic, political and social agenda of that time. This process continues until all the thresholds have been identified. Completion of this task will result in the formation of an archive of leadership knowledge encapsulated into the statements made about leadership. The third stage is to understand what social need these statements are responding to, and therefore what the statements in our present threshold are actually a response to. This is accomplished by utilizing Foucault’s method of genealogy.

8. Genealogical tracing

Archaeology and genealogy are regarded as being complimentary by Foucault (Kendall & Wickham 2003, 31), and he describes genealogy as the tactics for using the results of archaeology (Foucault 1980, 85). Archaeology explores the use of discourse in its historical milieu, and genealogy starts to integrate Foucault’s notion of power and knowledge. Genealogy will also explore the leadership archive from the perspective of a ‘history of the present’ with an emphasis on power. Archaeology provides a snapshot of the web of discourse in its historical context, whereas genealogy describes statements as ongoing processes, and concentrates on a strategic use of archaeology to answer problems about the present. Power, as discussed by Kendall and Wickham (2003), is neither possessive nor repressive in Foucaultian methodology it is practised, and it is from this perspective that the research will engage with the archive. It will provide another perspective on leadership literature, concentrating on the issues of power and knowledge within the historical formation of leadership knowledge and the privileging of certain statements. It is within the genealogical phase that the notion of quilt-maker is developed. In order to explore statements as ongoing process it is necessary to consider them in terms of post-feminist, post-colonial, psychological and modern philosophical themes and methods. It is here that the connecting stories surrounding the individual ‘patches’ of theory are re-interrogated and re-formed, and how it effects the role of the human subject in the creation of archives and discourses.

Rabinow (1984) suggest that, ‘our culture attempts to normalize individuals through increasingly rationalised means by turning them into meaningful subjects and docile objects (xxiii). The suggestion is that the individual is a stable entity with an essence open to examination and conditioning (Kendall & Wickham 2003:53). This leaves the individual in a position of oppression allowing power to become a force that is possessed and owned. Foucault however sees the individual as an effect of power and it is the discursive processes that constitute the individual (Mills 2008, 83). Genealogical tracing explores the archive through the effect that the power and knowledge of leadership theory has on the bodies that are its target.

9. Conclusion

Leadership theory over the past eighty years has undergone a ‘reduction of changes and differences by invoking explanations employing models of creation, consciousness, and evolution (Smart 1992). This has developed a smooth unifying history of leadership theory with appropriate causalities in place. In order to overcome this problem and create a site for the development and acceptance of alternative leadership models the research strategy based on the conditions of possibility creates a problem based research question.
Through the initial literature review into business leadership, it is apparent that one of the many issues available for exploration is, “Why are United Kingdom leaders being outperformed by those in Europe and America?” The answer will add knowledge to the debate concerning the production of a leadership model that will aid United Kingdom business not only to survive but to develop during these difficult times.

The proposition states that the reason could be that leadership in the United Kingdom, due to influences from America has not developed in order to respond to cultural and social needs in the United Kingdom, creating a rupture between the practice of leadership and what is required. The suggestion is that the discursive formation of leadership literature and the assumptions it implicitly contains inhibits the ability to create alternative leadership models more appropriate to the United Kingdom in the twenty-first century.

The research is therefore attempting to discover the historical conditions that enabled the discourse of leadership to exist rather than attempting to discover what leadership is. By questioning underlying assumptions, investigating cultural and social needs to which leadership is responding Foucault’s historical conditions of possibility are revealed. It is a process of finding the ‘bits and pieces that have to be in place to allow something else to be possible’ (Kendal & Wickham, 2003:25), not unlike a patchwork quilter, drawing on fragments of materials from a variety of sources to create something new but recycled from what already exists.

The aim of the research is to contribute to the understanding of leadership within the United Kingdom. The research is developed in the belief that there is a need to align the social, economic and cultural need of the United Kingdom to leadership development and to achieve that task, it is necessary to discover “why leadership”, the conditions that enable it to exist and what the fundamental purpose is.

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Researching Organizational Culture Using the Grounded Theory Method

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Abstract: Researching organizational culture using the grounded theory method is intuitively logical, given the ease of conceptualising organizational culture as a basic social process. In spite of its intuitive appeal, there are numerous challenges along the research voyage that could facilitate or jeopardise the unsuspecting researcher’s investigation. The aim of this paper is to alert prospective researchers, to some of the critical considerations that arise when designing and conducting research of this nature. The paper first tackles issues that are related to the conceptualisation of organizational culture as the phenomenon of interest, before turning to the research design implications. Research considerations that are related to the conceptualisation of organizational culture and the formulation of the research, include (1) the school of thought that the researcher embraces and the implications of its research traditions; (2) the assumptions made about the nature of organizational culture (such as its degree of uniformity or variation, its definition and construction, and its stability and development over time) and the implications for its investigation; (3) the contextual characteristics of the study (such as the size of the organization being investigated) and their implications for the manifestation of organizational culture; and (4) the researcher’s values and interests and their implications for accessing credible data. Other than the implications of conceptualisation of organizational culture on the formulation of the research problem, further research design considerations discussed include (1) aligning the researcher’s ontological and epistemological assumptions with the assumptions made about organizational culture; (2) identifying sources of data and techniques for its collection, that are appropriate to the conceptualisation of culture and its temporal characteristics in particular; and (3) reconciling the level of data collection with its level of analysis in order to aggregate and reconcile various individual perspectives of a collective social construct.

Keywords: grounded theory; organizational culture; research design

1. Introduction

According to Goulding (1999:6), grounded theory developed as part of a movement that was inspired to narrow the gap between what she calls “theoretically uninformed” empirical research and empirically “uninformed” research, proposing the inducing of theory from data. The original rationale of the grounded theory method was to discover or generate a well integrated, inductive theory that accounts for a pattern of behaviour, and which is relevant to those involved (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In subsequent decades, there has been a surge in the use of grounded theory in disciplines beyond sociology, including marketing and business management (Baker 2002; Goulding 1999); social work, nursing and health studies (Cutcliffe 2000); and psychology (Henwood and Pidgeon 1992).

The roots of grounded theory are closely associated with symbolic interactionism, which Kendall (1999) suggests has a similar emphasis being placed on meaning and action in contexts where social interaction is on-going, reciprocal and varied. Hebert Blumer, an early proponent of symbolic interactionism, offers three tenets that form its basis (Allard and Anderson 2005), namely (1) that people act towards things based on the meaning those things have for them; (2) that these meanings are derived through interaction with other people; and (3) that meanings are managed and transformed through a process of interpretation and self-reflection. Symbolic interactionism and the grounded theory method emphasize the actor’s perspectives of reality in the interpretation of that reality (Goulding 1999). Symbolic interactionism creates a framework for a researcher to enter the world of those being studied, understand and construct the meanings that objects, words or gestures have for the actors as individuals, members of groups and communities, while they are engaged in purposeful and reflexive interaction (Berg 2007). Another similarity is the emphasis on developing a contextual understanding of how people behave within a specific social context (Parker and Roffey 1997). Creswell (2007) argues that the use of grounded theory permits the researcher to study the meanings that events have for people acting in a social context. Furthermore, Goulding (1998) states that grounded theory enables researchers to systematically study human interactions in a way that embraces the interrelationship between action, the conditions in the environment shaping the action, and the consequences of taking action.
The grounded theory method is specifically characterized by the development of new theory, which is generated by focusing on basic social processes, interaction, or action that is identified in incidents by the people who have experienced the phenomena (Goulding 1999; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Grounded theorists seek to identify patterns in the social processes present in the human interaction being studied and ultimately to explain “a considerable portion of the action in an area” (Backman and Kyngas 1999:148). Schwandt (1994) advises that a researcher in grounded theory is expected to go beyond a thick description of the experiences of the participants, and to develop theory which has explanatory power within the participants’ milieu. Organizational culture is concerned with processes involved in creating meaning and action, and so at first glance, researching organizational culture using the grounded theory method is intuitively logical, given the symbolic interactionist roots of grounded theory and the ease of conceptualising organizational culture as a basic social process. In spite of its intuitive appeal, there are numerous currents and eddies along the research voyage that could either facilitate or “scuttle” the unsuspecting researcher’s investigation. The aim of this paper is to alert prospective researchers to some of the critical considerations that arise when conducting research of this nature. The paper first tackles issues that are related to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of organizational culture as the phenomenon of interest, before turning to other research design considerations.

2. Conceptualising and operationalising studies of organizational culture

When embarking on a research enquiry, it is generally accepted that the phenomenon being investigated has a bearing on the formulation of the research problem, the consequent design of the research, and its implementation. Here, four considerations are discussed, namely: the theoretical position or school of thought assumed by the researcher; the nature of the organization culture phenomenon itself; the context within which the phenomenon is manifested; and the researcher’s value position and area of interest in relation to the phenomenon.

2.1 Schools of thought

Within every field of enquiry, there are various schools of thought or “research tribes” who contest the field, seeking to establish their own position and to discredit opposing views. The study of organizational culture is no exception (Sackman 1991). Conceptually, the researcher needs to identify the tribes marking their territory in the study of organizational culture and consider what this means for the research and its design. One approach to identifying tribes is to directly identify the various research conventions that are typically adopted. Therefore one of the functions of the literature review is not only to establish the current state of development of the research field, but also to develop an understanding of the research methods and techniques that have been used (Creswell 2007). One potential area of original contribution that the researcher may attempt to make, may well be to use a unique research design to further advance the understanding of the organization culture phenomenon.

Several authors have constructed typologies of organizational culture (c.f. Scott et al. 2003) emanating from a quantitative perspective and seeking to measure various dimensions of a given culture at a specific point in time and location. A variation of this approach is adopted by Hofstede (1980) and others, who also follow a quantitative approach, but emphasize the influence of national culture on local organizations (e.g. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998). Alternatively, Schein (1996a) and others subscribe to the qualitative perspective of culture and define culture as a deep phenomenon which is manifested at various levels and, they argue, cannot and should not be measured quantitatively. The researcher should therefore appreciate that some research designs and tribes are complementary, while others are not. For example, quantitative conceptualisations of culture will not easily lend themselves to grounded theory methods, while qualitative approaches will.

2.2 The nature of organizational culture and implications for its investigation

Related to, but separate from considerations of the school of thought that the researcher adopts, is the conceptualisation of the phenomenon itself. The researcher’s assumptions about the nature of organizational culture will shape what the researcher is looking for and how it can be accessed. This is illustrated here by examining the assumptions made about the uniformity of culture, the definition and conceptualisation of culture that is subscribed to, and the time dimension of culture.

Organizational culture can be assumed to be uniform, differentiated or fragmented (Martin and Frost 2004). The integrationist perspective focuses on patterns, commonalities, or the wide appeal within
the organization as a cohesive whole. Scholars subscribing to this perspective refer to culture as “collective consciousness” or “collective programming” (Hofstede 1980); and “underlying shared assumptions” (Schein, 1984) or simply group values (Sackman 1991). This view focuses on consensus, common sets of values, and norms that are clearly expressed and understood by the majority within an organization, enabling members to behave in a meaningful way towards others and to interpret the meaning of the behaviour of others’ various contexts (Jaskyte and Dresseler 2004). Consequently, culture is considered a unitary outcome, a state which belongs to the organization, and which is relatively stable. Researchers guided by this view have tended to try and unpack cultural manifestations through interviews with a number of individuals and then ascertain the degree of consensus. Alternatively they will determine if interviewees respond in ways similar enough to make reasonable inferences that they are operating with the same understanding of cultural aspects. In modern organizations, these shared values are typically expressed as mission, vision and value statements, as well as in other artefacts.

A differentiated perspective acknowledges cultural heterogeneity and plurality within organizations, as well as the potential for conflicting sets of values or beliefs (Martin 1992). Culture is therefore based on the view that consensus can exist to a greater or lesser extent and contends that integration of culture occurs only within a sub-culture - but that even at this level inconsistencies are likely to exist. According to Johnson (2000) individuals may have varying beliefs about many aspects of their organizational world, but there is some level of agreement of core sets of assumptions, without which an organization could not function. This assumption of some degree of consensus, distinguishes the differentiation perspective from the fragmentation perspective, which conceptualizes culture as a continuously changing reality, fragmented through disruptions of short-lived cultural episodes. This would be typified by the various sub-cultures developing in project teams, for example. While the researcher may emphasize one perspective over the others, Martin and Frost (2004) contend that any organization has aspects of integration, differentiation and fragmentation, and argue that researchers should therefore take all the three perspectives into account to understand the dynamics of culture more fully.

Additionally, the researcher needs to carefully attend to the definition and construction of organizational culture that is adopted. Quantitative designs of studies of organization culture pre-determine the dimensions of culture to be investigated (Kotter and Heskett 1992). These pre-determined conceptualisations often adopt formal abstractions that were not initially grounded in observed reality (Schein 1996b) and their etic or outsider approach to researching culture gathers fairly simple, universal, aspects of culture. Subcultures are largely ignored because of using standardised instruments to measure patterns of behaviour and values. Furthermore, the reduction of the complex phenomena of culture into static and broad dimensions can be stereotypical, limiting, and lacking depth and dynamism (Hofstede, et al. 1990).

On the other hand, some conceptualisations of organizational culture assume that it is manifested at various levels and that these levels also reflect differing depths of awareness or consciousness. For example, according to Schein (1984) some levels of culture are unconscious in that those who are in the culture may find it difficult to recognize cultural characteristics because they have taken them for granted (Schein 1990). Generally, scholars who have adopted a multi-level perspective also recognise that this reflects different levels of cultural consciousness in terms of implicit and explicit aspects of culture; with the outer layers of culture being more visible and objective, while the less conscious core of culture is deeper, implicit, invisible and subjective (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998). Comparatively, the outer, more superficial aspects of culture lend themselves to objective and quantitative research designs, while the deeper cultural aspects are more accessible through qualitative approaches such as grounded theory.

Another conceptual feature to be considered is the stability and development of organizational culture over time. The grounded theory researcher has various temporal perspectives to consider as he/she studies basic social processes in an organizational setting. It is argued that organization culture is always in construction, so that an understanding of the present is informed by a construction of past reality and relating events that occurred over time in an organization’s life. Pettigrew (1997:340) observes that “procesusal” studies have temporal modalities or interconnection of the past, the present and the future. This raises the question of whether the study should be designed as a retrospective reflection by participants; simply focus on real-time; or combine both. The retrospective design requires further clarity on how far back one can go without amplifying problems of recall by
participants or how hindsight bias distorts the past events which participants express. On the other hand real-time studies engender problems of access and failure to capture fortuitous activities. In addition to this, Miller (1979:22) conceives two different temporal aspects of process namely, passage which relates to processes of “being, perishing and duration”; while temporal chronology, or order, focuses on whether events occur before, after or alongside other things or events, and their time of occurrence. This has implications for researching the present culture which is historically rooted or has evolved from the earlier culture (Pettigrew 1997). The paradigm model by Strauss and Corbin (1990) may address the horizontal temporal connections of the basic process of culture (e.g. past, present and future) while the conditional matrix (Strauss and Corbin 1990) helps to relate the various vertical contextual levels of culture (e.g. sub-culture, sector, and national levels). While elements of passage may be accounted for in this way, the researcher has to initially establish the temporal chronology, which the coding schemes of grounded theory could overlook.

2.3 The context within which organizational culture is manifested

The context within which the study occurs will also influence culture’s conceptualisation. For example, in comparison to a large corporate, studies of small family businesses are less likely to have different, formalised, sub-cultures at various levels or in various sections of the enterprise (Haugh and McKee 2004). Cultural differences between large and small firms emanate not simply from their size difference, but rather from the impact size has on the strength of culture, strategic direction, execution of managerial activities and performance. It is argued that the context of smaller firms is characterised by owners seeking independence and a higher level of owner-manager control over the business (Haugh and McKee 2004); frequent, informal communication between employees and customers (Ram 1991 cited in Haugh and McKee 2004); and informal and unpredictable relationships between employees and their employer. Ultimately, the centralization of power suggests that strategists are also the day-to-day decision makers in the firm (Haugh and McKee 2004). This would mean that in smaller enterprises the researcher should more easily recognise the roles of leaders and followers as the creators and shapers of culture. Finally, leaders of smaller firms may serve both business and family leadership roles and also oversee matters of family loyalty and discipline. This could bring to bear a unique factor as a shaper of organizational culture.

2.4 The researcher’s value position and interest

The fourth main consideration related to the organizational culture concept, is the researcher’s value position and interest in studying the topic and any associated concepts (e.g. competitive advantage, performance, strategy). This has potential ethical implications and may affect disclosure by participants of relevant, but sensitive information. The organizational researcher needs to be aware that some organizations or their members see research as an intrusion, and may be unwilling participants, sensitive to questioning, or sceptical of the research objectives and agenda. This can affect access to the research site. The researcher should also be aware that information may be affected if participants fear being reprimanded for harbouring views that are different from cultural or organizational leaders. The researcher therefore has the ethical responsibility of addressing concerns of individual privacy and confidentiality, disclosure, and informed consent.

3. Research design considerations

Thus far, attention has been given to the effects and implications of the conceptualisation and operationalisation of organization culture on the formulation of the research problem of a grounded theory study. Besides the research formulation implications discussed above, there are other research design considerations that the researcher needs to reflect on. The following are discussed below: (1) the researcher’s ontological and epistemological assumptions, (2) identifying appropriate sources of data and techniques for collection, and (3) reconciling the level of data collection versus its level of analysis.

3.1 The researcher’s ontological and epistemological assumptions

There are currently two main approaches to grounded theory – a Glaserian and a Straussian school – which hold differing ontological assumptions. Grounded theory following the Glaserian approach adopts a realist ontology, and the researcher is guided by neutrality and detachment, so as not to “contaminate” data and the theory (Glaser 1992). Ontologically, culture is more likely to be seen as objective; relatively static; and a property of a group that is relatively stable. Consequently, use of this approach may be limited to the external and objective aspects of culture, which the participant is more
willing and comfortable to share with an outsider. The grounded theory researcher may be less engaged, and a distanced expert who may have difficulty in accessing the unconscious cultural assumptions of participants (which would require a more subjective interaction).

Alternatively, in the Straussian approach, which leans towards a relativist ontology (Annells 1996), culture would be viewed as socially constructed by several people interacting with one another in a given context, who all have different views of the culture. As such, studying culture requires gaining a deeper insight of the phenomena and the meaning it has for all of those who are experiencing it, and the researcher interacts with participants to understand their subjective reality. As Schwandt (1994:18) observes, the researcher gives his “construction of the constructions of the actors one studies”. The type of interaction and the level of intensity of closeness between the researcher and the researched will vary with the degree of cultural awareness or consciousness of participants. That is, a more intense level of interaction may be required if research participants have a low consciousness of the culture.

The ontological assumptions of the version of grounded theory advocated by Strauss, seems to be better aligned to the view of culture as a social reality which is in a continuous process of construction and is stable only temporarily (Martin and Frost 2004). Culture comprises of the multiple and subjective perspectives of members. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) the researcher interacts closely and continuously with the data in the process of generating theory rather than suspending his judgement and values until all the data is analysed.

The constructionist perspective of grounded theory inherent in the Straussian School emphasizes that it is not actually possible for the researcher to be completely neutral, as analysis is the interplay between the researcher and the data and the “story” in grounded theory reflects the views of both the researcher and the researched (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The multiple views of participants involved in the context also help to capture the full complexity of phenomena. An insider experience of phenomena is also subjectively different from that of the outsider, and so adopting an emic perspective in the research of culture, allows the researcher as a relative outsider to contrast his beliefs with those of the participants, and thereby gain a deeper understanding of culture through close and interactive co-construction of reality. The potential danger here is one of undue bias, where the theory that is constructed may be based primarily on the interpretations made by the researcher and thereby dilutes the participants’ perspectives. Given the subjectivist epistemology of the researcher that is adopted here, Creswell (2007) advises researchers to give an account for their personal experiences and explain how this may have impacted the study.

3.2 Identifying appropriate sources of data and techniques for collection

The researcher needs to identify sources of data relevant to the conceptualisation of culture, and data collection techniques which correspond with the level of cultural consciousness of research respondents or participants. Quantitative researchers typically use standardised, pre-designed and value-free survey instruments to study the more visible, audible, tangible and conscious aspects of culture (Schein 1996b). Some qualitative researchers such as Pettigrew (1990) suggest the studying of culture is equivalent to a stream of social drama, and view organizational culture at a relatively high level of consciousnesses, examining the daily routines and rituals both retrospectively and in real time in a longitudinal study. Here the researcher presumes that the members of a cultural group are aware of what is cultural. An alternative qualitative approach assumes a lower level of awareness of culture. For example, in accessing culture at the level of basic assumptions, Schein (1984) proposes a process of reflection by participants on a stream of “critical” incidents, in order to access culture at the sub-conscious level and understand the forces shaping the culture. Schein (1984) suggests an interactive and joint exploration in an interview or focus group, so as to raise the level of cultural consciousness of insider participants and thereby access the social reality. The collaborative relationship with insiders as co-researchers may enhance disclosure, reflection and the joint exploration of meaning in a culture.

However, Partington (2000) cautions that interviews are retrospective, second-hand accounts relayed by the interviewee, rather than accounts directly observed and captured by the researcher. In dealing with the unconscious, there is the possibility that true motivations may even remain hidden from the actor (Izzo, 2003), and therefore not divulged in the interview. As a result, the researcher is unable to assess the extent to which there has been either deliberate or unintentional bias in providing either a more socially desirable or logical account. In the light of these weaknesses of interview-based data,
the researcher will have to decide on the advisability and feasibility of collecting other types of data. Consideration will also have to be given to the prospects of combining historical and real time perspectives of culture that are available in various data forms. Historical data such as documentary or archive materials can inform the context of social interaction and past culture; complementing real time data collected to understand the present culture, and accessed through interviews and/or observation.

3.3 Reconciling the level of data collection versus its level of analysis

Culture is largely conceived as a group-level phenomenon, whereby shared knowledge influences perceptions, thoughts, values and behaviours of individuals in their social interactions (Maznevski et al. 2002). Pettigrew (1979) contends that an understanding of everyday routines, symbols and core assumptions helps explain collective framing of issues, and collective responses to such issues and problems. Cultural knowledge is distributed across individual minds to arrive at a culturally best estimate of what one would require to know to function effectively, relative to a particular aspect (Jaskyte and Dressler 2004). While culture is shared collectively, it is also inherent and entrenched in the minds of individual group members. Based on “cultural competence” (Jaskyte and Dressler 2004) it is argued that organisational representatives can adequately describe the culture of their organisation, such that some scholars even view a single respondent as adequately representative to reveal the culture shared by the members in a group (Maznevski et al., 2002). Other individual-level cultural analyses define possible patterns among individual’s preferences and aggregate measures of culture so as to develop a description of culture and examine variances within and across (sub)organizational cultures.

The collection and analysis of data from individuals is criticized for both ignoring the social aspects of culture, and thereby failing to examine the degree of sharing of culture among members; as well as not acknowledging that some of the cultural aspects exist outside of conscious thinking, and so individuals do not have a full knowledge of their culture (Jaskyte and Dressler 2004). This critique also discredits the aggregation of scores of individuals to analyze group level phenomena, as this approach would exclude the interaction needed to access “culture [that] exists between minds” (Jaskyte and Dressler 2004:267). Other scholars recommend that a collective perspective should be obtained by interviewing a group of people collectively, so as to promote social control and thereby minimise the emergence of individual cultural interpretations. Alternatively, data collected at the individual level may be discussed and checked at a group level, which may include both interviewees and those not interviewed.

This has implications for the collating of data and verification of findings. When moving from individual to collective representations of culture, the grounded theorist should clarify his or her perspective on triangulation. An ontology assuming multiple realities from actors contradicts the notion of using triangulation for convergence. The attempt to triangulate individual perspectives of culture to check consistency or validity would actually be futile. However, the view that a core set of assumptions create coherence and functionality of an organizations suggests the grounded theorist may use triangulation (e.g. organizational level feedback) to confirm these core assumptions by asking other people in the organization for their views. The challenge for the researcher is to specify the degree of cultural consensus resulting from different perspectives of the same organization that would qualify a cultural assumption to be regarded as a part of the core.

4. Conclusion

This paper has served to illuminate the various conceptual challenges and research design implications for a grounded theory study of organisation culture. In particular, the paper has served to highlight the impact that the characteristics of the phenomenon of interest has on the formulation and design of a grounded theory study. In researching organisation culture, the researcher needs to be conscious of the contextual and historical features that shape the current culture. Furthermore, culture should be assumed to be only temporarily stable, within an unremitting chain of changes that continuously shape the culture.

The nature of the interplay of the research method with the conceptual phenomenon being investigated has also been illustrated. This has highlighted some of the typical assumptions and key considerations that the researcher needs to grapple with to ensure that the research voyage is secure in terms of conceptualising the phenomenon of interest, and the research design. Further research is
required to examine whether researchers follow these guidelines in their research practice and what the implications are for the quality of the research that is produced.

References


Challenges of Multicultural Data Collection and Analysis: Experiences From the Health Information System Research

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Abstract: The effect of culture has been a popular topic in recent information system research. However, it is not a simple task to either collect or analyze data containing elements of “culture”. This paper presents previous literature on how to measure culture, the theoretical background how to build this construct and a short description of empirical study we conducted in a multicultural environment. Our research topic was to examine the usage of health information exchange systems in two different kinds of healthcare sectors (i.e., Finland and USA). Finally, we reflect on our experiences both in collecting data as well as in analyzing it through the lenses of cultural differences. Strengths and weaknesses of multicultural data collection are discussed together with opportunities and threats of analyzing data with the purpose of finding cultural elements.

Keywords: multicultural data collection, information systems, health care professionals, interview, focus groups

1. Introduction

Information system (IS) research discipline has already a widely spread tradition of explaining IT-related issues with cultural differences. There recently has been many special issues in IS journals addressing cultural issues (e.g., Aladwani 2003; Davison & Martinsons 2003). However, culture is a challenging variable to research with its divergent definitions and measurements (Leidner & Kayworth 2006) and many challenges have been acknowledged by a number of authors (e.g., Gallivan & Srite 2005; Karahanna, Evaristo & Srite 2005; Myers & Tan 2002; Straub, Loch, Evaristo, Karahanna & Srite 2002). The main criticisms have arisen from the weak conceptualization of culture, which has led to obscurity in the evaluation and comparisons of the results. Moreover, the measures of the culture often are insufficiently described and conceptualizing of culture is lacking theoretical background.

The term health information exchange (HIE) is used to describe often electronic exchange of patient-specific information concerning his/her health. The rationale of HIE is to guarantee patient safety specifications in situations where patients are using several service providers e.g., if a patient goes to a local health center for blood pressure medication, his/her specialist in a hospital should be aware of that. HIE has been seen as a way to increase patient safety and reduce costs in the healthcare sector. However, it is challenging to share health-related information across organizations. The barriers are many: legal, social, cultural, technological, and economic. Therefore, studying the factors prerequisites for successful HIE can facilitate the path towards safer and more efficient healthcare.

We chose to conduct the empirical data collection in Finland and in US because of the structural differences of healthcare sectors in those countries. In Finland, the healthcare system is universal and everybody is entitled to (basically) free healthcare, whereas, in US the system is more market-driven and financially based on insurances. This paper written in cooperation with Finnish researchers (referred as Finnish scholars) and US researchers (referred as US scholars).

There are many challenges when conducting empirical studies about culture. In this paper we discuss these challenges and illustrate this discussion with examples from a field study in healthcare sector. This field study took place in Finland and US and it was executed as a semi-structured interviews. Besides language and general cultural challenges, healthcare sector with its nation specific characters and legislation was found to be a very challenging environment for a multicultural data collection. Besides challenges in conducting a multicultural empirical study, we discuss the challenges in extracting cultural elements from the data e.g., how to analyze the data through multicultural lenses and finding cultural elements from the data.
The paper is structured as follows: first we make a literature review on topics combining information system (IS) studies with cultural issues and present our theoretical approach to understanding culture dimensions. Then, we describe the empirical setting of our data collection among the healthcare employees both in Finland and in USA. Finally, we reflect on our experiences and estimate the strengths and weaknesses of our data collection together with a mirroring to the upcoming data analysis. The results of this paper can help fellow researchers when planning and conducting multicultural data collection. Furthermore, some insights of how to analyze and compare results that are based on interviews from different cultural contexts are also presented.

2. Culture and IT research

Culture has recently been a popular topic in IS research: previous literature reviews about culture in IS research by Leidner and Kayworth (2006) found 82 articles that addressed the relationship from culture to IT. The themes covered were classified to: 1) culture and IT development, 2) culture, IT adoption and diffusion, 3) culture, IT use and outcomes, 4) culture, IT management and strategy, 5) ITs influence on culture, and 6) IT culture.

Studies about information systems development articles have the general main idea that the variation across cultures could lead to differing perceptions and approaches in information systems development (Leidner and Kayworth 2006). For instance, national culture has been found to affect the reporting of failing in information system development processes in a way that more individualistic cultures were more predisposed to report bad news than collectivistic cultures (Tan, Smith et al. 2003). The commitment behavior in software development has been found to be affected by culture in a way that low uncertainty avoidance cultures have lower perceptions of risks in the system development process than high uncertainty avoidance cultures (Keil, Tan et al. 2000).

The concept of national culture has dominated the IS research literature (Myers and Tan 2002; Leidner and Kayworth 2006). It has been argued that exploring national differences is especially important for the IS research because of the tight connections of globalization and IS (King and Sethi 1999). Since many organizations are doing business beyond the national borders and global activities are often facilitated by IT the topic of national culture has been seen important to understand the effects of cultural differences in a national level (Ives and Jarvenpaa 1991).

However, the notion of national culture has been criticized for being simplifying above all in overlooking and generalizing the attributes of culture (Straub, Loch et al. 2002; Walsham 2002; Karahanna, Evaristo et al. 2005). Especially, the tendency of relying on Hofstede’s (1980) previous work on assuming cultural differences according on national borders has been a source of criticism (see Myers and Tan 2002; McCoy, Galletta et al. 2005). Although offering an easy and well-established solution for studies, this approach has several shortcomings. For instance, Myers and Tan (2002) argued that national culture does not reflect the true cultural beliefs present within different nations and, moreover, do not provide the possibility of subcultures. Moreover, Hofstede’s work has been argued not to be valid nowadays since the surveys were made in the 1970s and solely among employees from one large company (IBM) and with a sample consisting mostly of male employees (McCoy, Galletta et al. 2005). A recent study testing Hofstede’s cultural dimension found significant differences in the country scores compared to Hofstede’s original work (1980) suggesting that these country scores might not be up to date or even working in today’s global world (McCoy, Everand et al. 2005). Despite all the debate, Hofstede’s work still dominates the culture-related studies in the IS research (McCoy, Galletta et al. 2005) and it has been argued to still have a place in the research field (Ford, Connelly et al. 2003). In addition, the current conceptualizing of culture in IS studies has been criticized for assuming culture to be static and not chancing element (Myers and Tan 2002). IS-culture research culture is often studied from a fragmentary perspective (Gallivan and Srite 2005) neglecting the combinations of national and organizational cultures.

Several solutions have been suggested to overcome these problems in the current conceptualizing of culture in IS research. One solution has been seen to be the use individual level measures of culture (Myers and Tan 2002; Straub, Loch et al. 2002; McCoy, Everand et al. 2005; McCoy, Galletta et al. 2005). Measuring culture at an individual’s level would help to avoid too wide generalizations within groups (e.g. nation-states, races etc.). According to Straub et al. (2002, p.19) ‘culture must be measured at an individual level even though it is assumed that it is a group level phenomenon’. Straub (2002, p.19) argues this is because culture can only manifest itself through the individual and therefore it is not possible to access ‘the collective unconscious of the entire culture ’ but instead it is
appropriate to use individual unit of analysis when measuring culture. In the domain of healthcare, for instance, age, organization unit, gender and ethnic background were found to have an influence on organization culture perceptions (Helms and Stern 2001), thus suggesting that perceiving culture is an individual process.

Moreover, in order to develop more rigorous ways for measuring culture the use of theory-based measurement has been recommended (Straub, Loch et al. 2002). Previous cultural studies in the IS field have recommended structuration theory (Walsham 2002), value-based approach (Leidner and Kayworth 2006) and Social Identity Theory (Straub, Loch et al. 2002) as a prominent theoretical back ground for cultural studies. In our research, we are using the Social Identity Theory as a background to develop our concept of culture and its measures.

3. Theoretical base for culture

To understand how subjective culture develops within an individual this study uses the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner 1979) as the theoretical background. According to SIT, a person has not only one personal self, but several selves that are corresponding to different group memberships. Changing social contexts trigger an individual to think, feel and behave on the basis of these levels of self. The basic idea of SIT is that such categories (e.g., nationality, sports team) provides a definition of who one is, in other words what is one’s social identity. The concept of social identity has been defined as ‘the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership’ (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). People have several such category memberships they feel to belong and each of these categories represents a social identity in the individual’s mind. These memberships in turn produce group behavior, for instance, normative behavior, collective behavior, shared norms, and mutual influence (Hogg and Terry 2000).

The social identity immediates social contexts in a sense that social context triggers social identities into active use. This means that the category that best fits the context becomes salient in that context. For instance, in a working environment the professional identity and the membership in the working group might be dominant and lead to certain behavior (e.g. way of talking) while in a pub the behavior might be affected by the membership of the group of football fans. This is due to structural fit (i.e. situationally relevant similarities among people) or normative fit (i.e. category specifications account for contest specific behaviors.) Identification process is explained in SIT based on an individual’s self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction (Hogg and Terry 2000). It is beyond the scope of this study to take a stance on the formation of groups and the socio-psychological origins of SIT. Instead the interest lies on the impacts of such group memberships on how it affects on attitudes and behaviors. Although SIT has developed within European social psychology it is articulating also with organization and management science (Hogg and Terry 2000). Typically, an individual’s ingroup is a membership in a preexisting social group, such as gender and race (Bhattacharya, Rao et al. 1995) or vocation (Mehra, Kilduff et al. 1998) but to a certain extent individuals also derive their identity from the organization or work groups they belong. For many people their professional or organizational identity can be even more pervasive than the identity based, for instance, on gender or nationality (Hogg and Terry 2000).

Originally suggested by Straub, Loch et al. (2002) and later supported by Gallivan and Srite (2005) and Karahanna et al. (2005), SIT has been argued to be a suitable theoretical basis for culture studies in the IS research and it has been previously used in the IS studies to explain IT adoption (Gefen and Ridings 2003). In this study SIT is used as a background theory explaining the mechanism behind the empirical findings. In this thesis SIT is used as a platform from which the conceptualizing of the culture is conducted. In the other words, it is used as a theory for explaining (see Gregor 2006) with the purpose of rather than predicting, explaining primarily how and why some phenomena occur.

Hofstede (1991) suggest that several layers of cultural programming shape one’s behavior. These layers consist of national, regional, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, generation, social class, and organizational culture. A recent article of Karahanna et al. (2005) elaborated further the layered notion of culture and created a hierarchy of cultural layers (Table 1.) The uppermost (supranational) layer of culture pertains to group of people sharing a region, ethnicity, religion or tongue. The second (national) layer consist or collective properties shared by citizens or countries. The third (professional) layer focuses on the employing organization and industry. The fourth (organizational) layer consists of shared social and normative values in organization. The final (group) layer consists of cultural
differences within a single group at a level less than of the organization. These layers of culture are overlapping and it is suggested that individual’s culture is a product of these different levels of culture and, more precisely, their combination. (Karahanna, Evaristo et al. 2005)

**Table 1**: Levels of culture (Karahanna, Evaristo et al. 2005 p. 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supranational</td>
<td>Any cultural differences that cross national boundaries or can be seen to exist in more than one nation. Can consist of:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Regional – Pertaining to a group of people living in the same geographic area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic</td>
<td>Ethnic - Pertaining to a group of people sharing common and distinctive characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Linguistic – Pertaining to a group of people speaking the same tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>National Collective properties that are ascribed to citizens of countries (Hofstede 1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Focus on the distinction between loyalty to the employing organization versus loyalty to the industry (Gouldner 1957)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>The social and normative glue that holds organizations together (Siehl and Martin 1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Cultural differences that are contained within a single group, workgroup, or other collection of individuals at a level less than that of the organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To illustrate the notion of interaction between the cultural layers, this study builds on the virtual onion metaphor (Figure 1). The virtual onion metaphor was first introduced by Straub et al. (2002) and it is used in this study as a tool to scrutinize individual's identity, which in turn is expected to shape IT behavior and attitudes. Virtual onion notion is based on SIT (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and it suggests that each individual, like onions, consist on different layers. In the metaphor these layers are different cultural identities. These layers are mentioned to be virtual in a sense that they can shift and change over time and circumstances. Drawing from the metaphor of a virtual onion, this study understands culture rather than just one dimension of person’s identity, various layers of culture (Myers and Tan 2002).

**Figure 1**: Interrelated layers of culture (Karahanna et al. 1998)

In Figure 1, the layers of culture are hierarchical and interactive. Each individual belongs to a specific national, professional, organizational etc. culture. Some of these layers may be dominant and this dominance may be dependent of different situations. The interaction of the layers derives the individual’s subjective culture that eventually influences the individual’s behavior. The ellipse *Individual* is not another layer of culture but instead illustrates how this individual culture is a combination of the different layers. It is also assumed that the layers nearest to the core are more important but that these layers can, besides interacting with each other, trade places. (Straub, Loch et
Reetta Raitoharju, Eeva Heiro, Ranjan Kini, and Martin D’Cruz

al. 2002) This means that for certain contexts and actions group layer could be dominant while in some other national level.

4. Empirical research

Our research topic was to examine the attitudes and prerequisites of healthcare employees on health information exchange. We wanted first, to collect prerequisites that healthcare professionals thought are necessary for a successful HIE between organizations. Second, we wanted to examine how cultural and structural differences between Finnish and American healthcare sector are affecting the results. We chose to use qualitative approach and exploratory case study since there is still no established theories for studying HIE across cultures.

First, Finnish scholars conducted a data collection in Finland. They interviewed 11 nurses and physicians about the research topics. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured leaving room for extra questions and clarifications. Before the interviews Finnish scholars gave a short presentation about HIE and its development in Finland in order to make the interviewees aware of the topic. The interviews lasted about an hour each and they were recorded and transliterated soon after the interviews.

Then Finnish scholars travelled to USA to Illinois and Indiana to collect data there. In US, US scholars helped with the practical arrangements and also participate to interviews. Most of the interviews in US were conducted as focus group interviews due to the tight schedule of the professionals. Focus groups were chosen for data collection method because of the synergy that could be developed by the interviewees by feeding off one another. Altogether 23 healthcare professionals participated in the focus group interviews consisting of physicians, nurses, managers and IT personnel. Before each interview Finnish scholars presented both the topic of the research (i.e. HIE) and the Finnish healthcare sector. The interviewees were very interested in Finnish universal system so we used approximately 15min to 30min of our interviews for describing the system. These interviews were also recorded and transliterated.

For analyzing the data we used a framework of layers of culture combined with conceptual framework for prerequisites of HIE (figure 2).

![Figure 2: Theoretical framework](https://www.ejbrm.com)

We transliterated the interviews. We then were looking for themes in Figure 2 and marked them in the text. We also categorized the respondents according to different group memberships based on interrelated layers of culture in Figure 1.

5. Strengths and weaknesses of the data collection phase and the threats and opportunities of the data analysis phase – experiences from the field

5.1 Data collection – strengths

Obviously, by conducting interviews both in Finland and in US we were able to get deeper understanding of the research topics. By personally interviewing and adjusting our questions
according to person and country it was possible to lead the discussion further. Moreover, we were able to recognize in the transliterating phase the, humor, jokes, sarcasm etc. By visiting several hospitals and watching several demos of healthcare information systems, it became clearer to us, in which kind of environment the everyday work is conducted.

5.2 Data collection – problems

One of the biggest problems encountered in the data collection was the difficulties with the language. Not only the spoken language but the references and meanings we were not familiar with. Finnish scholars found it very useful to have local scholars with them in the interviews to clarify missing points to us.

Finnish scholars also met difficulties in understanding the healthcare specific vocabulary, both in Finland and in US. We needed extra assistance due to the fact that we were lacking the vocabulary. In some cases we felt that it annoyed the interviewees and they felt less confident sharing information with them.

5.3 Data analysis – benefits

Especially beneficial was the presentations Finnish scholars were giving prior to our interviews in US. By trying to explain the unique setting of the Finnish healthcare sector they as researchers realized many points that are bound to Finnish culture. By trying to establish an extensive picture of the Finnish healthcare sector, we had to look at the sector from the perspective of US. That is expected to help us with the analysis of the data, especially the Finnish interviews.

Another benefit is that we did not include questions about the culture as such in our interviews. As culture is a very sensitive construct to examine we wanted to extract issues related to culture in a later phase i.e. the analysis. Having a strong theoretical background for our study helped us a lot when analyzing the data. We divided the data according to the themes of individual, group and national level culture according to our own perceptions.

5.4 Data analysis – problems

It is really hard to try to extract the cultural pointers from the data. Although we adopted the framework of SIT, it was difficult to decide which of the answers were supposed to refer to cultural and which ones to structural differences. Moreover, since part of the data is in Finnish and a part of it is in English it is challenging to find common key words for grouping the themes. Since the meaning of the words differs greatly across languages we were not able to create word-based system to analyze the data.

Especially challenging was the fact that Finland and US are very far apart in utilizing information technology in the healthcare sector. In Finland, it is already an everyday tool whereas in US there are many physicians not to mention nurses that are not using IT as widely. This created difficulties when analyzing the results.

6. Discussion

We found all in all multicultural data collection very interesting and rewarding. However, it brings several challenges to research as well. We found it especially useful to have both US and Finnish scholars to work with the interviews. Understanding culture-bound expressions or references can be almost impossible without local help. We also consider giving short presentations about the own research settings useful in order to share a common understanding of the research topic.

Interrelated layers of culture offered a solid background for examining cultural influences on HIE. However, it was more challenging than we expected due to small, of interviews and lack of in-depth knowledge of U.S national culture and healthcare professionals occupational culture both in Finland and in US.

References


Fact-Based Understanding of Business Survey Non-Response

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Abstract: A 2007-2008 two-nation business survey was carried out by two universities and supporting business development agencies. The intention of describing small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and their use of information technology and cooperation was disrupted by a very low response rate. Some practices concerning nonresponse (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007) are discussed and implemented. The collected data are compared to data known in advance from registers for the nonresponding companies. Also, a second data set with concise answer information from nonrespondents was obtained by phone for categorization of the nonrespondents. Finally the nonresponse is related to data about contact between the companies and business development agencies to illuminate interest as the dependent variable. The article is an investigation into nonresponse at the organizational level and demonstrates throughout the article how facts obtained by other methods (multi mode) besides the central survey can improve the understanding of nonresponse.

Keywords: business survey, fact-based, nonresponse, self-selection, regional development, SMEs

1. Selection and nonresponse

The object for this article on nonresponse is a research survey carried out in 2007-2008 addressing the issues of electronic business and company networks in small and medium sized production companies in two adjoined European national regions (in Germany and Denmark).

The focus on the nonresponse implies that this article is not driving at descriptive measures presenting the level of ICT use or the degree and benefit of networking in the companies. Instead the description of the survey will target factors potentially influencing the nonresponse.

The postal survey was carried out on a random selection at each country of around 500 companies from official registries.

1.1 Selection bias and nonresponse bias

When the sample frame is not appropriate for the population that was intended for the survey research we are facing a coverage error. This coverage error is expressed as members of the survey population not having a known non-zero (often equal) chance of being included in the sample (Dillman, 2007, p. 196). Normally what is experienced is that some appropriate members are not included in the sample frame and thus have a zero chance of being selected for the survey. Thus they are not covered.

Non-enforced surveys always include an ultimate strong element of self-selection. Even though a company has been selected for the sample it is only when there is a response from the company that the selection is truly fulfilled. Within the sample there is thus self-selection occurring. Basically nonresponse would not present a problem if it was randomly distributed. However, to the degree that interest lies behind the self-selection we can expect that variables affecting the decision to participate could also affect the answers to the variables in the questionnaire. Consequently the bias of self-selection will then lead to results that are not representative for the population thus creating nonresponse bias. The primary goal when investigating nonresponse is to validate the obtained responses by demonstrating that the nonresponse is either insignificant in size or random (and thus not causing bias). However, in this article even with nonresponse bias we have the secondary goal of obtaining data from additional sources and turning this information into facts bringing understanding and further raise ideas to obtain more valid information on nonresponse.

1.2 Selection from a national registry

The population is SME companies within the production area in the two regions.
In Denmark a central registry was available including software for selection. The selection from the initial 646,395 companies was filtered primarily upon the NACE codes (the European standard industrial classification). Production companies were targeted through the NACE codes in the range 15.00 to 37.20 (manufacturing) plus the codes between 72.21 and 72.22 (software). This brought the number of companies down to 48,262. The selection on NACE codes is based on the several (up to four) NACE codes supplied by the firm. "Production" might thus not be the main field of the company and the investigation ends up with overcoverage.

The companies should be located in a national region operationalized as a selection based upon postal codes which resulted in a set of 10,174 companies. The standard European complete definition of SME companies also includes economic measures of the company (European Commission, 2005). For practical reasons we concentrated on the attribute of number of employees (small companies have 10-49 employees and medium size companies 50-249 employees). Only few companies reported in the questionnaire figures outside the 10-250 employees. The final selection included common company types (limited, partnership, and individually owned) thus reducing the number of companies to 1,431.

Overcoverage caused by the broad definition of "production", the not fully precise regional boundary definition, and imprecise account of number of employees can obviously influence response-rates as some companies might experience themselves as not belonging to the defined population. Because of indications that this only affected very few companies this issue of overcoverage has not been empirically investigated.

The frame was lastly processed by the random selection of 505 companies for the sample. For these companies some registry variables were transferred (the selection criteria mentioned above plus appropriate contact information).

1.3 Selection from the local registries

In Germany a registry of companies placed at an organization of the regional companies served as the data source for our selection procedure. It is part of the general responsibilities of this organization to maintain this repository and the companies within the region are obliged to pay a yearly membership fee as well as to frequently report business figures. The assumption was made that a number of 500 companies could be found meeting the same criteria used for the national based selection procedure in Denmark as described above.

However, the list contained fewer companies than expected and a comparison to a company database maintained by participating business development agency revealed that some relevant companies were not included. It is assumed that the discrepancy between the two lists was caused by the latter list containing a more up-to-date status. This was confirmed when during the survey it turned out that some of the companies were closed down, had moved to another region, or had quite different numbers of employees than registered in the first list. With additions from the business agency list the total number of 526 companies for the sample was reached.

2. Response and nonresponse from the survey

The paper questionnaires with postage paid addressed envelope for easiest return was mailed out in the two regions in August (Germany) and September 2007 (Denmark).

The questionnaire was directed to the person responsible for production in the company. This should secure that the person would understand the questions as well as being able to supply the relevant information. The questionnaire included a field for reporting the name and position in the company of the respondent. From the Danish side - where this information is entered into the database - it is observable that a good third of the questionnaires were answered by the CEO while to a lesser degree the information was delivered by a production manager followed by several positions within the economic side of the company (including bookkeeper). As several companies are small the CEO can often be the owner and the bookkeeper might be the person also managing production while the CEO takes care of sales.
2.1 Nonresponse rates in the survey

Only a small number of companies returned the questionnaire without reminder. 32 Danish questionnaires of the 505 questionnaires mailed out were received. On the German side - where the mailing out of questionnaires took place a bit earlier in time - some questionnaires were received in late December as the survey was extended to a total of 526 companies. The response rate in both regions together was thus initially 8.4%. (87 received questionnaires of the 1031).

This very low response rate early triggered taking reminding actions. It was not expected that a mailed reminder to the companies would accomplish much more than the initial mailing. Instead a process of phone contacts was initiated. The phone method of contact was chosen because the change of in media-channel to more directness was considered helpful for the follow-ups and because follow-ups on the reminder could be carried out quickly. Furthermore, the phone reminder included the potential to further qualify the nonresponse as note taking was accompanying the phoning process. The reminding procedure was carried out on the basis of a randomly selected group among the nonrespondents of the companies. The systematic phone contacts to the companies lead to an overall increase of the response rate. On the Danish side 32 of the reminded companies returned the questionnaire and on the German side the number went up with 11 companies. When receiving the questionnaire the date was noted. The distribution of the received questionnaires is shown in Figure 1 below.

![Figure 1](https://www.ejbrm.com/85/issn1477-7029)  

**Return Date**  
Return Code: orange = premier, green = reminded

**Figure 1**: Received questionnaires distributed on response date, country, and reminder

The overall response of the survey gained and reached 12.6%. (64 and 66 respectively, 130 of 1031 companies).

2.2 Response rates in other SME surveys

Business surveys are known to produce unsatisfying response rates. An investigation of 183 business surveys since 1990 showed an average response rate of 21% (carried out by Paxson in 1992 (unpublished); referenced in Dillman (2007, p. 323)). Similar work by Baruch (1999) is referenced in Rogelberg and Stanton (2007) when reporting that the typical survey response rate in 1975 was 64.4% but dropping to 50% in 1995. Baruch also found a lower response rate when the units were organizations and states in the abstract that “It is also recommended that a distinction is made between surveys directed at individual participants and those targeting organizational representatives” (Baruch, 1999, p. 421). Furthermore, we believe that some changes are more prevalent among SMEs.
- such as company name change, address change, mergers etc. - and that these changes are among the possible causes of low response rates.

In studies of response rates for business surveys it is observed that: "an authoritative sponsor and a legal mandate clearly produce higher response rates among businesses" and "university survey researchers appear to suffer from substantially higher nonresponse rates in business surveys than do government agencies" (Willmack et al., 2002, p. 214, 215). It is hardly surprising that the more official data collections are able to obtain response rates up to 90%. In addition to carrying the official badge of legitimacy official surveys might even be directly legally enforcing the answering. However, the problem of nonresponse in business surveys is even higher when we turn to studies of SMEs. Business surveys are often investigating the larger companies and not the small and medium size companies. This is furthermore accentuated as Northern American SME studies are covering companies with up to 500 employees compared to the 250 in Europe (used in our research).

A recent regional SME study on "Enterprise competencies for effective information systems and information management: a quantitative and qualitative study of the SME sector within Wales" (Jones et al., 2003) used a similar study approach as our project. The quantitative questionnaire investigation obtained a response rate of 26%.

In a large study on eBusiness carried out at the Cranfield School of Management in 2002 (Daniel et al.) 6,500 SME companies were selected. After "de-selection" a response rate of 10.4% were obtained. The researchers’ acceptance of the interest-based "de-selection" from companies not considering nor presently using eBusiness makes the response rates unusable for evaluation of the survey. These SME figures are compared to an investigation of 13,500 larger firms where a surprisingly even lower response rate (4.5%) was obtained (Daniel & Grimshaw, 2002, p. 139).

In Singapore small business were investigated with an immediate impressive survey response rate of 40.6% (Thong, 1999). The rate is obtained by 166 companies responding out of original 1200 companies that are scaled down to 409 because the other companies had moved or simply ceased to exist. This is another example of "de-selection" or positively phrased self-selection. The mortality of the companies in this investigation is of a magnitude that ought to make that issue the focus of attention. The high response rate could be said to only cover very steady companies. An equally high response rate of 42% was obtained in an Australian survey reported in Goode & Stevens (2000).

Forty years ago response rates below 80% were often considered worth improving. Bachrack and Scoble (1967) made an extra effort with a special follow up and obtained an 83% response rate. These days the company response rates at 40% are gaining respect and surveys even go as low as 4% without much consideration (Daniel & Grimshaw, 2002). In our survey investigation of SME companies the response rate of 12.6% is thus considered within reasonable and expected limits. However, none of these response rates guarantee the power of valid generalization.

2.3 Relationship and confusion between survey error and nonresponse

Dillman investigates in his work on surveys the errors based on coverage, sampling, measurement, and nonresponse (2007, p. 11). Dillman exemplifies that the error categories can often be mistaken and confused as some (non-professional) surveyors will note that follow-ups are not necessary as with about 1000 questionnaires the accuracy will be about 3% (Dillman, 2007, p. 194). Statements like that clearly focus on sampling error theory while disregarding the error affected by other sources. To illustrate the severe effects of nonresponse we will exemplify through the possible extremes. When we for instance find that 64 of the 130 answering companies report that they maintain an internet-site in English language we can calculate that to 50%. Based upon the small sample of 130 companies the 95%-confidence interval is calculated to a proportion between 0.41 and 0.59 when we are not taking the nonresponse into account. However, on one extreme we could assume that all of the non-responding companies (901) in reality do have an English internet-site (result: 965 of 1031 = 94%). Secondly, we could at the other extreme assume that none of the nonresponse companies have an English internet-page (result: 64 of 1031 = 6%). Thus according to our calculations obtained with inclusion of possible nonresponse we can assume that the factual percentage is to be found somewhere between 6% and 94%. That level of inaccuracy implies that further investigation into the reasons of nonresponse will be valuable in order to be able to react on the results from the investigation. Figure 2 illustrates how rates of nonresponse at 20%, 40% and 80% affect the recalculated confidence interval.
Figure 2 exemplifies how high rates of nonresponse result in very broad confidence intervals that are practically ruining the possible information about the found proportion. With 80% nonresponse even the most extreme proportion can be turned in the other direction e.g. as 0% found in the survey cannot guarantee that 80% cannot be found in the population.

3. Investigations into nonresponse

Lynn identifies several reasons for nonresponse:

- a. Failure of the data collector to locate/identify the sample unit
- b. Failure to make contact with the sample unit
- c. Refusal of the sample unit to participate
- d. Inability of the sample unit to participate (e.g. ill health, absence, etc.)
- e. Inability of the data collector and sample unit to communicate (e.g. language barriers)
- f. Accidental loss of the data/questionnaire” (Lynn, 2008, p. 37)

In this company survey the registry on the Danish side is judged to be very well updated as the selected companies existed and the corresponding addresses seemed to be correct. This observation is based upon the fact that the postal service did not return the mail. On the German side the register was less well updated. The categories concerning inability or accidents are considered less relevant for this survey as a company is contacted and an able person should be available. The central category concerning nonresponse for this study is thus the refusal from the company towards participation in the survey.

3.1 Comparison between responding and nonresponding companies

Rogelberg and Stanton (2007) name the comparison of responding companies and the nonresponding companies with regards to known company attributes like size; age etc. as "archival analysis" in their overview of "nonresponse bias impact assessment strategy (N-BIAS)" that is regarded as a list of "best practices". Such comparisons of survey results from the completed sample
with known values from the sample frame are a search for differences. The table below shows (Table 1) that in our research the observed differences were not found to be significant (95% level).

Table 1: Archival analysis means for size (no. of employees) and age (established year) for responding and non-responding companies (Denmark only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Responding</th>
<th>Non-responding</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of employees</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>non-significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established year</td>
<td>1974.2</td>
<td>1976.6</td>
<td>non-significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 64</td>
<td>N = 441</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The comparisons are made in order to obtain evidence that generalizations are not (yes, not!) possible. Armstrong and Overton (1977) are referencing George Gallup (1972) that the method “comparison with known values for the population” could have hindered the failure of Literary Digest when the magazine wrongly predicting the outcome of the Roosevelt-Landon election in 1936. However, not finding significant differences simply preclude these specific variables as having a significant effect on the answering pattern and this is not supplying logical support that there is no difference between the responding and the non-responding companies. The method is then a demonstration of the fact that we have not pin-pointed the company attributes that effect the company to decide for the response or the nonresponse. Without confirmed theory of nonresponse this test can at best only prove that our sampling results are invalid for generalization by being supported by significant difference.

3.2 Imputation for nonresponse

Imputation is a method of “filling in a value for each missing value” (Rubin, 1987, p. 11). This is the introductory message in Rubin’s book on the more advanced method of “multiple imputation” that he is advocating. Imputation sounds like a simple procedure and Donald Rubin concentrates in the immediate following on the advantages of this imputation primarily that the imputation makes it possible to use complete-data methods. With computations of incomplete data like calculating the average of a vector of values where one or more values are missing must necessarily result in the resulting value becoming undefined or “missing”. Imputation completes the vector. However, an obvious and still interesting question is which value to select for imputation. Software including features for imputation will typically provide several imputation procedures like: mean, hot-deck, regression etc. (Matignon, 2007, p. 180). The question of selecting the imputation procedure is not simple and the advantages of the different methods are typically given in the form of their easy computability. Rubin (1987) is aware of the added costs of imputation and remarks that the efforts should be regarded relative to the alternatives such as “field efforts aimed at reducing nonresponse or increasing sample size”. This illustrates that even at the highest level of expertise - where Rubin certainly belongs - we can experience that the absolute number of respondents is regarded as the central measure that matters most in the evaluation of a survey. Rubin also continues that the imputation can be improved by relying upon the data collector’s knowledge. It ought to be noted that this is likely to generate all kinds of interesting errors when the data imputator first is following a hypothesis when performing the imputation and then secondly is trying to find evidence of the same hypothesis in the data. And will quite likely succeed in that. This is serious implementation of a self-fulfilling prophecy. A variation of this approach is used in the regression techniques applied for extending the coverage in an Internet based survey to a larger population (Dever et al., 2008) although the authors in their conclusion write about the respondents: “Whether estimates from this restricted group can be used to make inferences about a larger population depends on whether households that have Internet access are different from the general population of households” (op. cit., p. 59). We are still waiting for the miracles.

Among the hypothesis based imputations are the group of methods of extrapolations.

3.3 Extrapolation to nonresponse

The extrapolation technique for investigation of nonresponse bias is named "wave analysis" in N-BIAS (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). The “data collector's knowledge” is argued to be that if late respondents at a second point in time differ in an explicit direction from the early respondents then the nonrespondents will differ likewise at a third point in time (imputation by regression and projection). The easy solution is obtained when the observations do not differ, because then - voila - this will in the same stream of thought imply that nonrespondents do not differ from the respondents. However, this is not a logical conclusion to the unknown. The method was applied in some of the earlier
mentioned studies with a welcomed result: "No significant differences were found between the responses of these two groups for either of the surveys. It was therefore concluded that the responses received were unlikely to contain a non-response bias." (Daniel & Grimshaw, 2002, p. 139). Similar comparison calculations using Mann-Whitney rank tests were performed by Goode and Stevens although they are more cautious when concluding: "However, determining nonresponse bias is error-prone, and the results of the response analysis above may be inaccurate" (Goode & Stevens, 2000, p. 137).

Goode and Stevens are right being cautious as they are also referencing Filion that 25 years earlier investigated the method. Even though Filion in the discussion in the article wrote more positively about the method - although including that this opinion was based upon a survey with a response rate of around 70% - he concludes: "Observations in this study should warn researchers against assuming that respondents do not differ from nonrespondents" (Filion, 1975, p. 492). In our opinion the key lies in obtaining further information about the nonrespondents.

### 3.4 Information from the nonrespondents

In our study the feeble response rate early called for some extra action in order to obtain questionnaires from more of the companies in the sample. In the chosen reminding phone process it was sought to obtain direct contact with the person that by the company was considered responsible for the further processing of the questionnaire. Reaching this designated person could involve several phone calls and through the process remarks were noted and reacted upon (e.g. sending new questionnaire or stopping phoning the company). The answers did not contain that much variation and the noted text were later distributed into the ten categories shown in Table 2 below. These categories was further collapsed into the fewer general categories shown to the right in the table.

**Table 2**: Categorization of remarks received in the reminding process carried out by phone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Nick-name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not have the questionnaire (a new is sent)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>9.31</td>
<td>10.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proper person does not have the questionnaire (a new is sent)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>7.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will download the questionnaire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire has already been returned (but has not been received)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will locate the questionnaire, look into the matter, a message is given</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't have the time</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have no interest in this area</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>13.20</td>
<td>busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never answers that, don't give this kind of information</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>missing   interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone number does not exist</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not reachable</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not included in the phone campaign</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>Not selected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40.69</td>
<td>40.36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Nick- name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total nonresponse</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>901</td>
<td>901</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>130</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>1031</td>
<td>1031</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nonresponse is classified as "passive" when "the nonrespondent may have wanted to return the survey, but because of circumstances or happenstance, could not" (Rogelberg et al., 2003, p. 1105) and are because of their random character believed not to be creating nonresponse bias (Rogelberg and Stanton, 2007, p. 200). We have explicitly included the labels "polite" and "busy" to this passive group. The categorization "polite" is used as some companies are believed choosing to avoid giving the phone caller an explanation for not returning the questionnaire. Naturally there might have been postal problems, but some companies requested and were sent the questionnaire three times in total - and still stayed in the nonresponse group. We are also considering the "polite" answers as "socially acceptable" although not "socially desirable" answers (Phillips & Clancy, 1972) and thus maybe more planned than argued in the Rogelberg articles. Several other reasons are also believed crucial for nonresponse e.g. vacation period, holidays, workload situation etc. These possibilities have not been systematically investigated in this research.

The "active" nonrespondents choose not to respond. According to Rogelberg and Stanton (2007, p. 201) this group can bear serious nonresponse bias. It is remarkable that companies in Denmark more directly and specifically are expressing their non-interest in this research while the German active nonresponse companies tend to express general norms of the company as an explanation. This could be a cultural difference between Denmark and Germany. You could say that the expressed "non-interest" is somewhat close to being in opposition to the interviewer, while the general psychological reaction when approached by the interviewer (a stranger) would be not to disagree or raise opposition. Rogelberg and Stanton introduce a 15% active nonresponse "best practice" limit. The active nonresponse in this research is on the edge of this percentage (162 nonrespondents of 1031 targeted for the survey). We believe this fact indeed compromises the generalizability of the survey which is why we have looked further into other methods of obtaining more information to elucidate the area of nonresponse.

3.5 Mixed mode methods

When applying another collection method for obtaining data the procedure is labeled as using "mixed mode survey" (Dillman, 2007, p. 217). Dillman is referring to an early study (Hochstim, 1967) that showed how groups of people reported their health as excellent differed by the mode of data collection as there was a drop from 44% for personal interview to 37% by telephone and 30% by mail. A typical technique was earlier adding telephone surveys to postal surveys when contacting different members of the sample in order to obtain data values for the same variables. Later other modes have been employed such as e-mail (Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). These days mixed mode methods often include the possibility of a web questionnaire and Meckel et al. (2005) have conducted such a questionnaire effort on SME companies. The rationale was and is that with parallel mixed mode efforts the respondent will have a choice of mode. For less sensitive questions the mode does not appear to have significance for the answering pattern. Often mixed mode is carried out sequentially and by the additional effort and by using another mode of communication the response rate is likely to grow. The nonrespondents from the first effort (e.g. the postal questionnaire) will to some degree choose to respond to the survey when contacted by phone.

The follow up made in our investigation is utilizing mixed mode methods. However, our (repeated) telephone contacts were not designed to obtain information concerning the variables in the survey. The telephone mode method was acting as a go-between in order to be able to resend the questionnaire in paper form to an interested person in the company. However, the design of the telephone process did supply us with the benefit of obtaining more information about the nonrespondents.

The comparison to known values - the "archival analysis" (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007) - can also be regarded as a type of mixed mode method where the respondents are the same (the sample) and some variables are obtained both from the register and also for validation purposes obtained in the
questionnaire. The "archival analysis" is obtaining the archive data from another source and consequently also through another mode.

Other types of methods for including other sources of data can likewise be regarded as variants of "mixed mode". The inclusion of further information on the nonrespondents must typically be obtained though other modes.

3.6 Inclusion of external data

Generating data from nonresponse is a fundamental impossibility. Logic then leads to a search for sources external to the nonrespondents. This is partly found in the available registers. Another possibility is observation, tracing, or surveillance of behavior. We are using the following operational proxy.

When considering active nonresponse the interest of the respondent is believed to be the key explanation. We are expecting companies with more interest in the subject of ICT and networking also to be more in contact with the regional business development agencies. The interest, beliefs, and experiences of the nonresponse companies cannot be investigated directly. We are applying a view in the other direction as we expect this contact can be observed reciprocally. Our operationalization generates data about contact with the companies from development agencies collected from two sources that proved to be in significant agreement. We are expecting that companies where the development agencies already have had contact in the past will more often be accepting the invitations from development agencies and participate in the survey because of their interest in the development issues. If this hypothesis is supported we may conclude that some not interested companies outside contact are severely more difficult to reach both for development agencies as well as for participation in university surveys concerning ICT.

Table 3: Survey participation and contact with business agency (Denmark only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No contact</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonresponse</td>
<td>413 (88.3%)</td>
<td>28 (75.7%)</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>55 (11.3%)</td>
<td>9 (24.3%)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>505</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship between having the contact and participation in the survey proves significant (Table 3). Because of the small numbers calculation of significance is based upon Fisher’s Exact Test.

4. Conclusion and hindsight

It is possible to obtain a significantly higher response rate among the companies with contact to the business agencies. However, 24.3% is not satisfactory either. In order to improve the response rate we will have in the future to apply further "response facilitation techniques" (as collected in Rogelberg and Stanton (2007, p. 197)) in addition to those already applied in this survey.

While the passive nonresponse can be considered harmless to a survey the active nonresponse caused by missing interest in the subject area can lead to a bias that seriously damages the results. Research will seriously be obstructed in gaining insight into the causes of the missing interest. In the hindsight, we will propose using a two-stage technique where the first stage involves only a very small effort of information activity from the company. The limited information request will still make it possible for the researchers to obtain the same amount of information by additional application of mixed methods (e.g. phone & web) and thus ensuring answers and validity in terms of a reasonable response rate in the first stage. Those companies that are indeed interested in the subject area could be approached for further research of quantitative longer questionnaires. Both groups of respondents as well as groups of nonrespondents could be investigated through participation in qualitative interviews. This could be an avenue to pursuit also for the practical concerns of the development agencies in answering: "How is it possible to reach the hard-to-reach?"

Acknowledgements

The project was carried out as part of the EU Interreg IIIa programme.
In addition to the descriptive research carried out through the survey, additional qualitative interviews were performed for a selection of participating companies. The project also developed demonstration software for moderators of company networks by supporting the orchestration task of transforming an external request into a virtual organization with selected companies and their offerings that in collaboration are able to fulfill the request.

This research is related and indebted to several European projects most significantly the ECOLEAD project and research on collaborative networks (Camarinha-Matos and Afsarmanesh, 2005).

References
Googling Companies - a Webometric Approach to Business Studies

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Abstract: So far Internet studies have focused mainly on using website content for gathering business information, however web hyperlinks have not been exploited enough for business purposes yet. Webometric techniques are based on the exploitation of information contained in the hyperlinks that connect the different documents contained on the Web. Webometrics could be considered as a new discipline that applies bibliometric techniques to the quantitative study of the Web, but also a discipline that progressively develops its own concepts and methodology. So far studies in this field have focused on academic and scholarly web spaces; however this methodology is equally applicable to commercial sites which are more predominant on the Web. This paper is intended to show how webometric techniques could be applied to business and management studies. Therefore, it describes a number of basic concepts and techniques and the way in which they have been applied to these fields so far. Firstly, some studies found that the number of links pointing to companies' websites correlates significantly with the business performance measures of the entity. This finding suggests that links to a website could be used as a timely indicator of business performance. Secondly, the examination of co-links, which refers to webpages that links two business sites simultaneously, have been used for competitive intelligence purposes. These studies are based on the idea that the number of co-links to the websites of a pair of companies is a measure of the similarity between them. For instance, this similarity measure between companies in the same industry can provide information about their competitive positions. Finally, motivations for the creation of hyperlinks to business sites could be analysed through a content analysis approach in order to get confirmation about the business relevance and nature of links. This view complements the quantitative perspective to link and co-link research, providing a brand new approach to business studies.

Keywords: web mining, webometrics, business intelligence, business management, internet studies

1. Researching the Web: why hyperlinks do matter

Since its creation in 1989, the World Wide Web (the Web) has revolutionised the Internet, facilitating the access to information to many potential users. Two decades later, the Web has become part of the daily lives of many people all over the world, causing deep social transformations that social scientists struggle to understand. Moreover, for the past five years, the Web has undergone significant changes by the popularisation of the so-called Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2005). This has provoked a democratisation of the information creation tools in such a way that millions of people have started to participate in a global conversation based on the use of no cost, user friendly, multimedia and Web-based software (Jenkins, 2006). The blossoming of publishing on the Web has made the media more difficult to understand, always in a process of constant change, described by many as chaotic, uncontrolled and of poor quality (Keen, 2007). However, the Web and the Internet as a whole are the largest repositories of information ever known in history.

In 2008, the official Google blog (2008) reported that the number of pages indexed had grown to more than one trillion (as in 1,000,000,000,000) unique URLs (Uniform Resource Locators), Technorati (2009), the main blog search engine, reported to be tracking on the order of 133 million blogs by the end of 2008. Most, if not all, of the human activities, whether they are political, social, educational or economical are reflected on the Internet, and some have developed native online phenomena that would not exist in the offline world.

The available collection of information makes it possible to define the Web as an enormous unstructured and heterogeneous database that, despite its appearance, is not randomly built. This implies that this could be exploited from different perspectives (based on content, structure and user behaviour) in order to study unique online phenomena or offline phenomena reflected in the Web. A basic component of the array of information available is the hyperlink.

A hyperlink is a reference or navigational element in a document to another section of the same document or to another document that may be on or part of a different domain. Hyperlinks represent the hidden structure of the Web connecting different sites and webpages that would stay isolated unless the specific URL is known (Berners-Lee, 1999). They can be regarded as an endorsement of a target page, especially if the creator has placed that link because it points to a useful or relevant...
resource. The creation and exploitation of hyperlinks are not an irrelevant phenomena, but imply significant social repercussions (Turow and Lokman, 2008). It is not meaningless that currently most of the search engines use link analysis as part of their algorithms to crawl websites and to rank the pages (Batelle, 2005).

Google’s market dominance derives originally from the technological lead established by the Pagerank system introduced in 1998 (Brin and Page, 1998). This Pagerank is based on hundreds of factors that have changed over time in order to avoid manipulation, but basically follows two principles:

- Webpages that have more links pointing to them are considered to be more relevant.
- Not all the hyperlinks have the same value. Those links established by relevant webpages are more valuable than others from less well known webpages.

However, hyperlinks are not a perfect source of evidence because many of them have not been created by a thoughtful process in order to endorse or discredit a webpage. Many links are created for navigational purposes within a site; others are just automatically created by content management systems or, in the worse case, they are just spam or lists of URLs created to perform better in the search engines rankings.

Hyperlinks constitute the raw basic material of quantitative research in the Web, as performed by Webometrics.

2. An introduction to Webometrics

The idea of the Web as a distributed database that is exponentially growing over time has been appealing for Data Mining research. There is a great potential for analysis by mining the website content, document structure, site relations, and user behaviour (Benoît, 2002). In this context, Webometrics has developed into a new discipline that studies Web-phenomena from a quantitative point of view.

2.1 Definition

The origin of Webometrics can be found in the field of Information Science. Thelwall, Vaughan and Björneborn (2005: 81) point out that the discipline “emerged from the realization that methods originally designed for bibliometric analysis of scientific journal article citation patterns could be applied to the Web, with commercial search engines providing the raw data”. In fact, the idea that a link pointing to a webpage means a 'vote' to that webpage or document is based on bibliometric methods to rank scientific production (Garfield, 1979). The term Webometrics was first coined by Tomas Almind and Peter Ingwersen in 1997 and seems to be widely accepted by the research community together with the term Cybermetrics. Björneborn (2004) defined both terms by limiting their research areas. Webometrics is “the study of the quantitative aspects of the construction and use of information resources, structures and technologies on the Web drawing on bibliometric and informetric approaches” (in Björneborn and Ingwersen, 2004: 1217), while Cybermetrics does the same but on the whole Internet. Hence, Cybermetrics is more focused on the study of non web-based Internet phenomena, e.g. emails, chat, newsgroup studies, etc. Figure 1 shows the location and overlapping of these disciplines in the general context of Information Science.

Recent developments within the field suggest a move in the scope of the definition into a more general social science research approach instead of an approach that is mainly based on an informetric and bibliometric perspective. Thelwall (2009: 6) defines Webometrics as “the study of web-based content with primarily quantitative methods for social science research goals using techniques that are not specific to one field of study”. Interdisciplinary research is getting more significant by enlarging the types of subjects of study and the techniques used. This evolution aligns with the definition of Internet research given by Hine (2008: 537): “Internet research itself is not a discipline but an interdiscipline, a field or a research network populated by heterogeneous perspectives.”
2.2 Basic concepts

Björneborn and Ingwersen (2004) carried out the first attempt to develop a consistent terminology on the webometric field. Some years later, Thelwall and Wilkinson (2008) proposed a generic lexical framework that, based on the previous work, intended to unify and extend existing methods through abstract notions of link lists and URL lists.

Figure 2 shows a diagram of the Web where the circles represent different types of nodes (websites, webpages, etc.) and the arrows connections between them. The squares within the dashed line rectangle are nodes that are considered for analysis in a given research. They are specially useful to illustrate a specific type of analysis, the so called, co-link analysis.

- **Inlink**: B has an inlink from A.
- **Outlink**: A has an outlink to B.

*Figure 1*: Webometrics and Cybermetrics in the context of Information Science (Björneborn and Ingwersen 2004: 1217)

*Figure 2*: Diagram with different types of links existing in the Web.
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- **Self-link**: C has a self-link.
- **Page or site isolated**: K is isolated as it does not have any inlinks or outlinks.
- **Reciprocal links**: I and J have reciprocal links.
- **Transversal link**: A has a transversal outlink to H. This type refers to a link that joins to different areas of the Web that are not well interconnected.
- **Co-inlinks**: 1 and 4 have a co-inlink, as B links both of them simultaneously.
- **Co-outlinks**: G has a co-outlink, as 1 and 3 are linking to it.

This paper basically focused on inlink and co-inlink analysis, as most of the webometric research on business is based on these two concepts. Co-inlink analysis is referred simply as co-link analysis later in this paper.

### 2.3 Methodology

Before reviewing the application of webometric techniques to business research, this paper offers a general overview of the methodology. The application of bibliometric techniques to the Web had derived from the similarities between hyperlinks and academic citations, considering that both point from a source document to a target document. Nevertheless, important differences exist.

In this paper, we briefly describe three main types of techniques based in the use of commercial search engines to gather raw data. For a more systematic approach, a complete and didactic reference is Thelwall (2004; 2009).

#### 2.3.1 Web impact analysis

Web impact analysis provides evidence for the impact or the spread of ideas, brands, organisations, etc. on the Web by measuring and analysing the URLs retrieved by commercial search engines in response to a specific query. This approach is especially useful as an exploratory approach for further research, although it has some significant drawbacks. For instance, one such problem is the extent to which the keyword used matches or does not the subject under research. This technique is the only one in this paper that is not based on the analysis of hyperlinks, however as it is the most intuitive one is appropriate to introduce the subject.

The main problems come from keywords that are too common or have different meanings, resulting in a wide variety of results that do not necessarily match the issue under study. In this case, it is necessary to filter out false matches. However, this is not always possible due to search engines limitations (see section 2.4).

**Practical example**: To carry out a basic impact analysis of two commercial banks in the UK, queries ["Royal Bank of Scotland"] and [Barclays] could be searched on Google, Yahoo! or Bing (MSN). Nevertheless, the number of matches is so high that the researcher might need to refine the search in order to focus on a specific issue concerning the companies. For instance, to explore the effects of the financial crisis on the banks, queries could be formulated such as ["Royal Bank of Scotland" AND "financial crisis"] and [Barclays AND "financial crisis"].

#### 2.3.2 Link impact analysis

Link impact analysis is based on the comparison of the number of webpages or websites that link to a set of webpages or websites under research. The purpose of this type of research is, according to Thelwall (2009: 28), “to evaluate whether a given website has a high link-based web impact compared to its peers”. Also inlink counts can be an indirect gauge of other attributes of the organization represented by the website. For instance, this has been traditionally used, within the academic field, as a potential estimator of research performance (Smith and Thelwall, 2002). This method is more accurate than the previous one because false matches are surely avoided. However, other problems need to be taken into account, e.g. the search engines set restrictions on search of inlinks (see section 2.4), or the company is using more that one corporate URL.

**Practical example**: Following up the aforementioned example, to carry out a link impact evaluation of the two companies, the queries that should be used on Yahoo! (the search engine with the best array of functions for this purpose) would be as follows: [linkdomain:rbs.com -site:rbs.com] and
The results would be the estimated total number of links that point to the specific domain except the links that come from the same domain or self-links.

2.3.3 Co-link analysis

Co-link analysis could be classified as a type of link relationship mapping techniques (Thelwall, 2009). These are based on the link data that interconnect a set of websites in different ways in order to draw a diagram that illustrates the relationships between them. In particular, co-link analysis is based upon the number of webpages that link at the same time two webpages or sites belonging to the group of entities under study. This description fits the concept of co-inlink previously explained. As we mentioned before, co-link is often used as equivalent to the co-inlink concept. It is the case in this paper.

Co-links are analogous to the bibliometric concept of co-citation (Small, 1973). Co-link analysis has also been demonstrated to be a useful tool to reveal the cognitive or intellectual structure of a particular field of study (Zuccala, 2006). This method is particularly useful when websites interlink each other very rarely. It is the case of commercial websites that scarcely link the website of a competing company, especially when they are in the same industry (Vaughan, Gao and Kipp, 2006). The explanation to this could be that companies seem to avoid diverting web traffic to competitors (Shaw, 2001). Moreover, as Vaughan (2006) points out, co-link data are more robust than inlink data as the former are less easily manipulated. Multidimensional scaling and network diagrams are often used to show the data gathered and to interpret results.

**Practical example:** The query \[\text{linkdomain:barclays.com -site:barclays.com} \text{linkdomain:rbs.com -site:rbs.com}\] would retrieve the estimated total number of links that point simultaneously to both domains except the links that come from the same domain or self-links.

To conclude this section, some final considerations need to be done. Due to the origins of the discipline, so far the majority of webometric research has been carried out in the academic field. Thelwall, Vaughan and Björneborn (2005: 113) acknowledge this situation and point out that “This is ironic given that the Web is dominated by commercial sites”. Webometrics is progressively enlarging its scope, focusing upon political websites (Foot and Schneider, 2006; Park and Thelwall, 2008), social networking (Thelwall, 2008b; 2008c; 2008e) and commercial websites (see section 3).

2.4 Collecting data using commercial search engines

Search engines are crucial for webometric research, because their databases are the source of information that cover most of the Web. Despite the fact that personal web crawlers can be used to automatically download pages and extract their links, commercial search engines have been used extensively for research especially when large areas or potentially the whole Web are the object of the study.

In order to perform a better research using commercial search engine data, it is fundamental to get a good understanding of the industry context, the advanced functions offered and the limitations.

A feature of the search-engine market is the oligopoly of three search-engine operators Google, Yahoo! and Live Search (Microsoft) which, from a global perspective, share the majority of the generalistic search-engine market. In specific areas of the Web the are other players such as Technorati for searching blogs. Search engine industry is under a constant process of change and innovation. This issue has been treated by many papers in recent years (Bar-Ilan, 2004; Vaughan and Thelwall, 2004; Lewandowski, Wahlig and Meyer-Bautor, 2006; Evans, 2007; Thelwall, 2008d).

As already mentioned, commercial search engines are the only source of data that covers the entire Web. However there are some significant limitations derived from the use of commercial search engines:

- Search engines do not index the entire Web (Sherman and Price, 2001; Bar-Ilan, 2004; Thelwall, Vaughan and Björneborn, 2005).
- Ranking systems eliminate similar or identical pages in their results, in order to avoid providing useless information (Gomes and Smith, 2003; Thelwall, 2008a).
Crawling and reporting algorithms are commercial secrets and, therefore the exact criteria used to rank the information is unknown (Thelwall, Vaughan and Björneborn, 2005).

The total number of results offered by search engines are estimates as they use algorithms that prioritise response time rather than exhaustiveness (Björneborn and Ingwersen, 2001).

Results can be subject to national or language biases (Vaughan and Thelwall, 2004).

The results can fluctuate and change over the time. In addition, only a few number of pages are accessible (usually just a maximum of 1000).

Commercial search engines are the best and unique source of information we have for certain types of webometric research, however they are not designed with this academic purpose and the results are not as exhaustive as we would desire. At this moment, Yahoo! is the search engine that is more useful for webometric research (Thelwall, 2008d). Yahoo! inlink data can be gathered in two different ways, through the general Yahoo! search engine and through Yahoo! Site Explorer. Despite the latter specializing in web structure information, complex queries can only be submitted through the general Yahoo! search engine interface.

Nevertheless, collecting data can be a very time consuming process if using the web interface. This problem could be overcome by specialized software based on the application programming interfaces (API) developed by search engines and other services on the Web.

3. A webometric approach to business studies

Internet research applied to companies can provide new insights on Competitive Intelligence (CI) in order to help companies generate and maintain a competitive advantage (Porter, 1980). CI consists of a systematic plan to obtain and analyse information about competitors and general trends in the industry (Kahaner, 1996). The abundance of information available in the Internet generates new opportunities and challenges for businesses that need to monitor changes around them in order to compete in better conditions.

In the last decade, a few Web hyperlink analysis have been conducted for CI purposes with promising results (Reid, 2003; Tan et al., 2002). For example, Reid (2003) proposed a link analysis method which analysed a particular website, but not the global context of the Web. Over the last 5 years, Vaughan and colleagues have investigated the relationships between inlink counts and business performance measures as well as the application of co-link research to companies’ websites.

3.1 Do inlinks and financial variables correlate?

Vaughan and colleagues’ research on commercial websites has explored quantitative relationships between inlink counts and business performance variables. Vaughan and Wu (2004) made the first attempt to prove the hypothesis that the number of inlinks to commercial sites correlates with financial variables. This study tests the hypothesis in two groups of Chinese companies. Group 1 is made up of China’s top 100 Information Technology (IT) companies and group 2 is comprised of top 100 privately owned companies.

The IT industry was selected because companies in this industry, by the nature of their activity, are likely to be leaders in utilizing the Web for commercial purposes. Experience has shown that different industries, have distinct patterns in the use of web technologies and therefore only homogeneous companies are likely to be comparable. Group 1 constitutes a homogeneous group of companies in terms of business activity, whereas group 2 is not homogeneous.

The financial variables available were: gross revenue, profit, export revenue and research and development expenses (for group 1); and, gross revenue (for group 2). Inlink data to each company website were collected using major commercial search engines at that time: Google, AltaVista, AllTheWeb and MSN Search. Also, the variable website age was used based on previous evidence (Vaughan and Thelwall, 2003) showing that inlinks to a website correlated with the age of the site, this is, older sites receives more inlinks. This data were retrieved from the Wayback machine in the Internet Archive (www.archive.org).

Spearman correlations in Table 1 show significant relationships between inlink counts and the three accounting variables. Results suggest that inlinks could be considered as a complementary performance indicator of a company. Vaughan and Wu (2004: 494) suggest that the strong correlation
found with research and development expense “could mean that companies that invest more in research and development have a better Web presence and that their sites are more visible and attract more links to them”. No significant correlation was found between inlink count and export revenue. However, export revenue only represents a small fraction (around 8%) of the gross revenue and therefore it seems not to be of relevance as a global performance indicator.

Table 1: Spearman’s correlations between business performance measures and inlinks (Vaughan and Wu, 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gross revenue</th>
<th>Profit</th>
<th>Research and development expenses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inlink count</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inlink count / Website age</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All correlation coefficients in the table are statistically significant at .01 level.

In relation to group 2 consisting of heterogeneous companies, there is no significant relationship between inlink count and gross revenue. As previously mentioned, this group is made up of companies belonging to different industries. Vaughan and Wu (2004: 494) conclude that “link count can be an indicator of business performance only when homogeneous group of companies are being compared”.

In a second paper, Vaughan (2004b) studied the same relationships for the top 100 IT companies in China and the top 51 IT companies in the United States (US). Spearman’s test in Table 2 shows significant correlations, lending support to the conclusion raised in the previous study. It is worth noting that the two sets of correlation coefficients are very similar in spite of the remarkable differences between both countries.

Table 2: Spearman’s correlations between business performance measures and inlinks (Vaughan, 2004b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Inlink count &amp; Gross revenue</th>
<th>Inlink count &amp; Profit</th>
<th>Inlink count / Website age &amp; Gross revenue</th>
<th>Inlink count / Website age &amp; Profit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All correlation coefficients in the table are statistically significant at .01 level.

In a third study (Vaughan, 2004a), all Canadian and United States IT companies were examined. This time, in order to raise more general conclusions, the whole population of the companies in the industry was analysed. Also a new variable, the number of employees, is used to measure the size of the company. This variable is intended to oversee the effect that a larger company will tend to have larger revenue if the rest of the variables remain constant. Apart from confirming previous evidence, the results in Table 3 demonstrate that there is still a significant correlation, even after considering the company size.

Table 3: Correlation between business performance measures and inlinks (Vaughan, 2004a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Inlink count &amp; Number of employees</th>
<th>Inlink count &amp; Revenue</th>
<th>Inlink count &amp; Revenue per employee</th>
<th>Inlink count / Website age &amp; Revenue</th>
<th>Inlink count / Revenue per employee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All correlation coefficients in the table are statistically significant at .01 level.

More recently, new research has sought to confirm this evidence by exploring different types of industries.

Romero-Frias and Vaughan (2009a) analysed the top 50 international banks by using two different webometric techniques, inlink analysis and co-link analysis. The banking industry was selected due to
its economic significance in the financial crisis context and its high level of internationalization. Two sets of inlink counts (December 2008 and June 2009) and a set of financial variables for the year 2007 (including total assets, total liabilities, total revenue, net income, earnings before tax and return on assets) were taken into account in the study. Spearman's test showed that a majority of the correlation coefficients were significant at the .01 level. Only return on assets was found not significant.

Findings show that inlink counts could be used as a gauge of the banks' financial position and financial performance measures in absolute terms. However, there is no evidence when we refer to relative financial measures, such as return on assets. This could be explained by the absolute nature of the figure "inlink counts", as it accumulates all links pointing to a webpage since its creation. This is similar to the nature of financial position variables and, somehow, to the financial performance measures as revenue or total income tend to increase over time based on previous performance.

These results are also consistent with the results reported by Romero Frías, Vaughan and Rodríguez Ariza (2009). This study extended previous research by finding evidence of significant correlations between inlink counts and financial variables in several industries in the United States. The study analysed five different industries (commercial banks, construction of buildings, general merchandise store, utilities and mining), as well as the companies in the Dow Jones Industrials. The following economic variables for the years 2005-2007 were collected: number of employees, total assets, net income, total revenue, EBITDA, return on assets (ROA) and return on equity (ROE). Inlink data were retrieved from Yahoo! in January and May 2009. Due to the non normality of the inlink variables and other financial variables, Spearman's test was used. Correlations for the Dow Jones set of companies were not significant, confirming the evidence that only homogeneous companies in terms of activity are comparable (Vaughan and Wu, 2004). Significant correlations were found, to different extents, for all the industries, except for the Construction one. The Store industry had the positive and highest correlation coefficients with all the financial variables, including ROA and ROE. Utilities was the second industry regarding the level of correlation and the number of variables that were correlated, followed by the Banking and Mining industries.

In comparison to the results of Romero-Frías and Vaughan (2009a), correlation coefficients for the US banking industry are higher than for the global banking industry. This could be explained by the homogeneous competitive conditions that exist in the US market versus the heterogeneous markets where the top international banks operate. For instance, the extent to which the Internet is used for commercial purposes in the different countries could also be an explanatory variable.

It is worth remarking that correlation does not mean causation. The large number of inlinks that a company's website attracts does not cause the better financial performance. Although it is clear that a positive web image may constitute an intangible asset for a company and therefore can generate future incoming resources, it is more feasible that a bank that is doing well financially is able to maintain a high profile on the Web, maybe through the development of e-commerce practices. As the economy becomes more and more digital and information-based, companies are prompted to monitor if their web presence is in accordance to their financial importance. Web presence measured by inlink count could be an appropriate gauge to evaluate intangible assets related to the Internet.

3.2 Co-link analysis

Web co-link analysis for business information started by focusing on a single industry (Vaughan and You, 2006) or on a specific sector within an industry (Vaughan and You, 2008; Vaughan and You, 2009).

Based on the results of the past studies, Vaughan and You (2006) applied co-link analysis to map business competitive positions of 32 telecommunication companies. The hypothesis under examination is that the number of co-links to the websites of each pair of companies is a measure of the similarity between the two companies. This means that the more co-links the two companies have, the more related they are from the point of view of the sites that link to them. 32 companies were selected according to the following criteria: companies from different parts of the world, from different sectors within the telecommunications industry and top companies in terms of revenue. Co-link data were collected in order to reflect the business relationships in two markets, the global market and the Chinese market. With this purpose, global Yahoo! and Yahoo! China, the top search engine in China at the time of the research, were used respectively to collect the data. The symmetrical co-link
matrix obtained was analysed by using multidimensional scaling (MDS), which generated a map showing the relative positions of the companies in the industry. An MDS map depicting the relative positions of companies in the global market is shown as an example in Figure 3.

![MDS mapping result based on global Yahoo! data](image)

**Figure 3:** MDS mapping result based on global Yahoo! data (Vaughan and You, 2006: 619)

The companies are clearly clustered into the sectors of the telecommunications industry as labeled in Figure 2. The companies that are not grouped into clusters present specific features which explain their positions. The authors concluded that the maps obtained are consistent with the competition landscape of the industry. Findings suggest that co-link data do contain information about the relationship among companies. Vaughan and You (2006: 618) assert that: “Highly co-linked companies are highly related in their products and the market. Since related companies are competitors (they serve the same market needs), it follows that co-link data can be used to map the competitive position of companies.”

A more recent paper (Vaughan and You, 2008) proposed a method that combines page content mining (keyword) and Web structure mining (co-link data) to achieve a more detailed picture of a particular sector within an industry. The WiMAX sector of the telecommunication industry was chosen specially because this acronym is used only to refer to this particular technology and therefore it avoids the problem of false matches. 39 companies were included in the study and two sets of co-link data were collected (with and without keyword) using the MSN search engine. By adding the keyword WiMAX to the search, only webpages that mention that word are retrieved. This implies removing pages that co-link the two companies for reasons other than the companies’ activities in this particular sector. The maps obtained by applying Multidimensional Scaling are shown in Figure 4.

The first map, without the keyword (left), shows clusters of companies in terms of their overall competitive positions in the telecommunication industry. Three main groups are identified: “WiMAX chip”, “WiMAX equipment” and “comprehensive” companies that offer a wide variety of products and services. The second map, with the keyword (right), is able to present companies in five main groups that reflect their competitive positions within the WiMAX sector. This map shows a more detailed analysis on the relationships between telecommunication companies but only from the point of view of the WiMAX services they provide. Authors compared their analysis of the sector with results obtained by an independent market research, finding their conclusions a great match. This study proves that by adding a keyword to the query in the search engine, the information obtained about the relative positions of the companies in the sector is more accurate and meaningful.
The methodology developed in these papers has also been tested and verified in other countries and other industries. Romero-Frias and Vaughan (2009a) analysed the evolution of the top 50 international banks through co-link analysis, finding the existence of 3 main clusters of banks: Asian, European and the so called English-speaking banks that include banks from United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. Vaughan, Tang and Du (2009) studied China’s chemical industry and electronics industry. Finally, Romero-Frias and Vaughan (2009b) extended the use of co-link analysis into the banking industry in the US in order to test the feasibility of combining page content with co-link data to monitor financial crisis.

Parallel to these studies on homogeneous sets of commercial websites, research on heterogenous websites has been carried out to test the triple helix theory on the Web (Stuart and Thelwall, 2006; García-Santiago and de Moya-Anegón, 2009). In this line, Romero-Frias and Vaughan (2010) extended co-link analysis to websites of heterogeneous companies belonging to five stock exchange indexes. The companies selected are the biggest in their respective economies and therefore have a significant web presence. In addition, they are also likely to receive more attention from users, competitors, government and other economic agents. When applying co-link analysis to companies belonging to different industries, the interpretation of co-link as a similarity measure does not stand only for competitive relationships, but for a wide variety of interactions, such as alliances and other linkages between distinct industries. The main conclusion of the study indicates that the degree in which the industrial activity is information centered determines the position of the companies in the MDS maps of the different indexes. The so called information centered industries include mainly IT, media, and financial companies, among others. Co-link analysis could reveal the extent to which certain industries are involved in an ongoing process of business model transformation.

3.3 Content analysis

Qualitative research is a necessary complement to quantitative research because it provides confirming evidence about the relevant nature of the links being analysed. First study on commercial websites was carried out by Vaughan, Gao and Kipp (2006). This study examined three items from a set of webpages: country location of linking webpages, types of sites that created the links and motivations for linking. They analysed 418 links to US companies and 390 links to Canadian companies randomly taken from inlinks to companies studied in Vaughan (2004a). The results conclude that the vast majority of links to business sites are business related, supporting the relevance of link impact analysis for data mining purposes on commercial sites. Regarding motivations for linking, findings show that most types of links came from online directories (22.5%), list of companies (19.6%) and news articles (12.4%). The predominance of inlinks described as directories and list of companies, besides the fact that only 2 out of the 808 links studied pointed to competitors, indicate that co-link could be a fruitful direction to study business competition, as already explained in the previous section.
Content analysis has also been carried out to study the motivations for co-link creation. Vaughan, Kipp and Gao (2007) used content analysis of co-link pages to examine whether co-links had business purposes and why co-links were created. 495 co-link pages to 32 telecommunication companies (the same as used in Vaughan and You, 2006) were classified. 68.5% of co-links were created by commercial sites and 57.6% of co-links pointed to related products or companies. Also, these authors (2007: 447) conclude that “co-links to homepages are more likely to connect highly related businesses and to show a true business relationship between co-link companies.”

4. Concluding ideas and future research

This paper has offered an overview of the webometric methodology to perform quantitative research of the web phenomena. The increasing importance of a hyperlinked society highlights the relevance of this approach to business studies. So far, most of the research on commercial websites has been carried out from an information science perspective, but there is a promising and wide field to explore different types of business issues by using information extracted from the Web. Additional work still needs to be done in analysing different industries and regions and in developing business applications to benefit from the findings up-to-date. It would be useful to monitor the Web periodically to analyse how web variables and economic variables correlate over time. Moreover, explanatory models based on multivariate regression need to be explored.

To conclude, the use of alternative sources to collect web data represent a new horizon for researching in social sciences. In this line, an improvement in the possibilities offered by search engines is to be expected, in particular based on a semantic analysis of internet contents and in the development of more powerful APIs.

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Mixed Methodology Approach to Place Attachment and Consumption Behaviour: a Rural Town Perspective

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Abstract: This paper discusses the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in examining the influence people's attachment to their environment had on a number of consumption behaviours made by residents of a regional town in Western Australia. It discusses the concept of place attachment; its relationship with community attachment and the subsequent perceived value ascribed to living in the regional town of Narrogin, Western Australia. The use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods provided an opportunity to take a macro perspective in quantifying major place and community attachment influencers in the consumption decision-making process, while understanding the meanings and sentiment behind these concepts from a micro perspective. In-depth interviews were undertaken with thirty-two residents of Narrogin. These interviews used a photo-elicitation technique in which residents were given a camera and required to take photographs of important places, people and aspects of their lives. The photos were then used as prompts for personal interviews, as respondents discussed the meaning, sentiments and stories behind the chosen photographs. The interviews provided a richness and depth to our understanding of the value of respondents' attachment to Narrogin. The use of this technique as a forerunner to the quantitative phase is discussed and recommendations for future use are detailed. The second phase of data collection involved a telephone survey of residents from Narrogin and its surrounding area (Shire of Narrogin). This was designed to test a model and a number of hypotheses developed from the literature and the qualitative phase of the research. The model presented place and community attachment as separate, yet related constructs affecting the perceived value ascribed to living in Narrogin. Value was seen as a mediating construct between place and community attachment and consumption (shopping and staying in Narrogin) decisions. Shopping decisions included shopping for everyday grocery items, white goods, farm equipment and machinery and various services including educational, medical and aged care. Exploratory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modelling were used to examine the prescribed model. The results identified different attachment weightings for the town and shire communities. In general, the model was a better predictor for the shire residents than it was for town residents. The results suggest different types of management strategies are required for businesses providing for the needs of town and for shire residents based on respective residents different attachment weightings. The paper discusses the use of the photo-elicitation technique in the in-depth interview stage of the research and its contribution to the development of the model as presented in the quantitative phase. Operationalising the constructs in this study has been, and still is, challenging for researchers. This paper provides valuable insights into the operationalisation process by utilising the combined methodologies approach. Uncovering stories, meanings and emotions can be integrated with an objective epistemology of attachment.

Keywords: mixed methodology; photo-elicitation technique; structural equation modelling; place attachment; community attachment; rural sustainability

1. Introduction

People are ready to participate in different sorts of activities regarding their place, depending (among other things) on the level of sense of place.

(Shamai 1991: 349)

This paper reports the finding from a study examining the influence people's attachment to their environment had on a number of consumption behaviours in a regional town (Narrogin) in Western Australia. It further develops the current understanding of motivations underlying a selection of economic and social decisions made by town and surrounding farm residents that, in turn, affect the life and sustainability of the town. The main purpose of the work was to increase our understanding of the factors that influence consumer behaviour in a rural town. Specifically, the relationships between people's place attachment to their town and its surroundings and a number of social and economic choices were the focus. The research contributed to the existing literature on place and community attachment and consumption value by focussing on choices made in the wider context of 'in' (versus 'out') shopping and people's anticipated length of stay in a rural town.

Place attachment is a complex construct and research is needed to further understand its nature (Kleine and Baker 2004; Milligan 1998; Williams et al. 1992). While the construct has been used to understand attachment with recreational sites and tourist destinations (Kaltenborn 1997; Milligan...
Given the need to maintain the human, economic and social capital of towns in rural districts across Australia (Cocklin and Alston 2003), research on residents’ attachment to their town and its subsequent impact on consumption choices is timely and appropriate. Perceived value in this context provides opportunities for local retailers to understand consumers’ motivations and, by using this knowledge, develop loyalty among local residents. The study aims to provide insights into the way that local demand can be developed, thereby providing a practical contribution to solving some of the sustainability issues that are of concern in many regional areas of Western Australia.

By viewing place attachment in conjunction with consumption value, the intention was to quantify the relationship between the dimensions of attachment and perceived value and their subsequent contribution to residents’ decision-making processes. This approach broadened the use of consumption value theory by applying the concept to decisions relating to ‘where to shop’ rather than simply, ‘what product (brand) to buy’. To date, the consumption value model operationalised by Soutar and Sweeney (2001) has examined value perspectives in a retail environment, an ongoing service situation, a tourist destination context and internet purchases (Soutar and Sweeney 2001; Silcox 2001; Williams 2004; Yeo 2005). This research extended the value model to the decision (choice) to shop locally in a rural town.

In addition, the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods provided an opportunity to take a macro perspective in quantifying major place and community attachment influencers in the decision-making process, while understanding the meanings and sentiment behind these concepts from a micro perspective.

The first stage of the research was exploratory and designed to:
- explore and describe the meanings, sentiments, memories, and personal attachment to aspects of life experienced in Narrogin and its surrounding district by local residents
- explore and describe physical, institutional, human and social features of the home or town environment that contribute to a person’s sense of place
- describe common and contrasting meanings, memories, and personal attachment descriptions between town and farm residents resulting from their home and locality environment
- gain an understanding of some of the relationships suggested in Sweeney and Soutar’s (2001) value model within the context of living and shopping in Narrogin, Western Australia
- develop attachment and value dimensions, with appropriate language, that could be used in the quantitative research phase

Based on the findings obtained from the qualitative research, a number of research questions and hypotheses developed that were tested in the second (quantitative) phase of the present study. More broadly, the objectives for the second stage were to determine:
- the relationships between the various place and community attachment dimensions and consumption value in the study’s rural context
- whether these factors were related to people’s decision to buy a number of everyday shopping items (including grocery, banking, and post office services) locally (i.e. purchasing from the town itself, not out-shopping)
- whether these factors were related to people’s decision to buy household items, such as white-goods, electrical goods, furniture and soft furnishings, locally (i.e. purchasing from the town itself, not out-shopping)
- whether these factors were related to people’s decision to buy major purchases, such as cars, tractors, locally (i.e. purchasing from the town itself, not out-shopping)
- whether these factors were related to people’s decision to stay in the town (as measured by residents’ future intentions to stay in the town)

The qualitative phase was pivotal to the study for a number of reasons. Functional aspects of place attachment can be attributed to place specific physical features (Kaltenborn 1997). An understanding of these physical features was obtained by spending time in the locality and discussing local attractions and landmarks with residents. It allowed the researcher to “focus on the context that may
**shape the understanding of the phenomenon**” (Creswell 1994: 10). Within this context, it was important to learn the local language, and the qualitative research phase provided such an opportunity. An in-depth face-to-face interview technique was used to explore the emotional dimension of place attachment. Williams et al. (1992) suggested that some researchers have treated place attachment too much like a commodity and that, in doing so, the emotional and symbolic understanding of place attachment had been lost. The face-to-face interview approach was chosen (rather than focus groups) due to the nature of place attachment. There was a need to understand the ‘essence’ or ‘spirit of place’ (Kruger 1996; Milligan 1998; Relph 1976). This ‘essence’ can be manifested as the emotional aspect of place attachment, and as such, was better captured in a personal interview setting.

Qualitative research and, specifically, the face-to-face interview, provided an appropriate environment in which to explore these emotional and symbolic dimensions, adding a depth and richness to our understanding. Further, a review of the literature found no construct or framework for place attachment that was replicable within the present study. Consequently, qualitative exploratory work was necessary to develop an understanding of place attachment and its impact on consumption value.

The quantitative stage used a descriptive research design. This stage involved a questionnaire, which was distributed by telephone to Narrogin Town and Shire residents. As a result of the qualitative phase, a model and a number of hypotheses were developed. Such models are often better examined through quantitative approaches (Creswell 1994) and this was thought to be the case in the present study. In the case of place attachment in particular, much research has focussed on ‘place’ specific descriptions and experiences that relate to one place, mainly through qualitative analysis. The literature has called for a more systematic approach that would allow the generalisation of place results from one place to another (Shamai 1991). In order to understand the strength of the social embeddedness of economic actions, such as location-of-spending behaviour, more accurate measures are necessary (Cowell and Green 1994), suggesting a positivist approach. In addition, a relatively large sample enables a more sophisticated analysis of the interrelationships between a number of independent variables (Hair et al. 1998).

The research design combined qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. In general, there has been a call for both methodologies in disciplines of a sociological nature (Pawson 1996), while several writers have specifically called for an integration of these methodologies in the examination of place attachment (Kaltenborn 1997; Rowles 1990). Rowles (1990: 116) suggested that, “while in-depth ethnographic studies are essential for grounded insight, the time seems propitious for such studies to be complemented by more systematic inquiries into the meaning of place.”

### 1.1 Narrogin

The study was undertaken in Narrogin (a rural town in Western Australia), and its surrounding hinterland. Narrogin is situated in the wheat–sheep belt of Western Australia and is located 190 kilometres south–east of Perth, the State’s capital city.

Narrogin is located in the centre of the central south region of the state of Western Australia. It has a population of approximately 6,000 people within the Town’s and the Shire’s local government boundaries (ABS Statistics 2004) and it is a primary service centre for the surrounding agricultural region. The town has busy retail and service sectors. The town has four banks, a building society, two supermarkets, a regional library, a newspaper and a radio station; a regional hospital supported by two medical practices and a range of other health professionals.

Narrogin’s role as a service centre for neighbouring smaller towns, combined with its access to natural resources (water, fertile land), have contributed to its development. Maintaining the natural capital of the area is a current challenge and one that potentially threatens the town’s sustainability (Tonts and Black 2003). Research into the dynamics of political, social, human, produced and institutional forms of capital in Narrogin continues at various levels and information about the town residents’ and farmers’ place attachment will assist in developing a better understanding of Narrogin’s integrated structural layers.
2. Photo-elicitation

Hull IV (1992) used photo-elicitation to examine suburban residents’ perceptions of an image created by the physical features depicted in an array of photographs of scenes from their neighbourhood. He found place attachment was higher when there was a good fit between the perceived image from the photograph and a respondent’s own self-image, (operationalised as preference for a place). It seems that photographs are helpful in place studies. Indeed, photo-elicitation was felt to be ideal for the present study as it can uncover the feelings and emotions that lie behind a visual scene, revealing (in this case) residents’ image of Narrogin, and how this image was influenced by the physical aspects of the town and surroundings.

Photographs seem to motivate respondents to respond to visual prompts with more descriptive and insightful comments than they do without such visual aids (Carlsson 2001; Heisley and Levy 1991; Heisley, McGrath and Sherry 1991; Hull IV 1992; Loeffler 2005; Samuels 2004). The photograph captures the outside image of what a respondent is sensing and experiencing inwardly, providing a prompt for the respondent to drive the interview with their own words, language and values. As Collier and Collier (1986: 125) suggest, “[photo] representation of critical area[s] of the informant’s life can trigger emotional revelations otherwise withheld, can release psychological explosions and powerful statements of values.”

Further, it is often through narrative that a sense of place is formed and fixed with meaning, so a conversation about place is appropriate (Dixon and Durreheim 2000). Photographs have been used as visual projective techniques in a variety of disciplines, including tourism (Jenkins 1999) and education (Kaplan and Howes 2004; Loeffler 2005). Consumer researchers have used photographs to investigate attachment to ‘favourite things’ (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), ‘Thanksgiving rituals’ (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) and ‘home and interior design’ (Firth 1995). Firth’s (1995) study used respondent generated photographs to examine place attachment. In this case, the results of a free-sorting task were analysed by the Repertory Grid Technique (Kelly 1963), which is useful in uncovering respondents’ values and meanings when asked to explain choices made between objects (e.g. photographs), particularly in difficult to articulate situations. The technique has been used to explore perceived value and value that was latent in direct question interviews (Gutman 1991; Zeithaml 1988). Consequently, the technique was used in the in-depth interview phase of the study.

Respondents were initially sent a disposable camera and a letter outlining the study requirements and they were asked to take photographs of places, people and things that were important to them in their lives in Narrogin. Subsequent in-depth interviews discussed the respondents’ meanings, sentiments and stories behind the chosen photographs. The interview structure followed the ‘focussed’ interview format (Sampson 1988) that had a general question outline to guide the interview, but allowed the flexibility to adapt and probe within each interview situation. Respondents were prompted to talk about other places that were important to them that were not shown in the set of photographs. In addition, respondents were asked “What would you miss most if you left Narrogin?” This question was included to create the setting of ‘loss’ that often leads people to realise the relationship that exists between them and a place (Dixon and Durreheim 2000). In addition, information was obtained about respondents’ demographic and lifestyle backgrounds.

In relating what was important about living in Narrogin, respondents used the physical (natural and built) environments and the social and interpersonal relationships that formed within those physical settings as frameworks in their stories. This influenced the inclusion of both place and community attachment constructs in the model that was examined in the quantitative research stage.

In terms of attachment to place, the built environment was symbolised by pictures of the home, the town hospital (often because it was a place of work and held strong self-identity and social memories) and various town buildings. Public facilities were a consistent feature in respondents’ photographs, with the recreation centre, medical suites, senior citizens centre and schools being sources of pride, companionship, work and self-identity, as well as symbols of safety and town well-being. Often these facilities were the setting for social gatherings and subsequently held fond memories of friendship, enjoyment and social bonding. This was also evident within the natural environs of Narrogin, including picnic areas and parks. Of note is that place was identified with, and attached to, in its own right; not simply in a mediating role for social and community attachment.
The social fabric of the town was evident across many of the photo collections - particularly with town residents. The positive lifestyle qualities of Narrogin were evident, with safety, peace and quiet and an intense sense of community spirit underlying the stories derived from a range of photographs. Childhood memories and family gatherings created a nostalgic feel, with respondents creating their stories around photographs of the picnic areas, memorial park and churches. Club membership was also an important aspect of the social fabric, including activities such as gliding, repertory and tennis.

Respondents also exhibited a notion of caring about the town and the environment within their narratives. The intimacy with which they could relate their stories often connected with a feeling of nurturing the town and, in the case of farmers, nurturing their land (Steel 2000). Respondents were asked to choose their three most important photographs and describe how they felt when they looked at them. This technique was adopted from Hull IV et al.’s (1994) research and revealed similar emotional responses to Hull IV et al.’s (1994) classification. Feelings of peace, calm, nostalgia, uniqueness, freedom and safety were evident in the responses, with the emotional link between place and person being evident.

The interviews emphasised the attachment process in three ways, namely:
- attachment to a contextual setting allowing some activity to take place (place dependence)
- the place becoming an extension of oneself with it being “incorporated into one’s concept of self” (Krupat 1983: 343)
- the care and maintenance of the place for long-term life of the place (Steel 2000)

Further, respondents’ relationships with Narrogin were clearly evidenced by functional, social and emotional themes.

3. Implications for questionnaire development and quantitative phase

The in-depth interview research confirmed the impact of both place and community attachment on value creation when living in Narrogin. Attachment was embedded in the local culture, with underlying themes of place-identity, place dependence and intimacy dimensions. Social bond and sentiment were also pivotal to the attachment process, separate yet related to place attachment. These findings confirmed and extended prior research that examined the relationship between place and social bonds (e.g. Mesch and Manor 1998). Narrogin’s town and shire residents displayed similar sentiments on broad themes to those found in past research, with differences evident when examined at a micro-level. Value was attributed to Narrogin in the form of emotional, social, functional and value for money concepts.

A great deal of meaningful data covering the relationships between Narrogin, its natural and community environment, farm land and the respondents themselves were collected and collated. These results, coupled with place literature, suggested that a model could be developed that showed the relationship between place and community attachment, the value of living in Narrogin and the likelihood of shopping and staying in Narrogin. Given these observations, it seems reasonable to develop and test such a model in both the town and the shire.

A questionnaire was developed to obtain the data needed to measure the constructs contained in the suggested model. The questionnaire consisted of several sections. Screening questions were used to ensure that respondents had lived in Narrogin for more than six months, as this has been suggested as the minimum time required for attachment (or non-attachment) to occur (Cuba and Hummon 1993). In addition, a screening question asked whether the respondent was of Aboriginal or Torres-Strait Island descent because, as was noted earlier, such respondents were likely to have very different views about place attachment. The questionnaire was divided into sections that asked about:
- place and community attachment
- consumption behaviour
- the importance and satisfaction of features of Narrogin
- the probability of staying in Narrogin
- general demographic questions
4. Results of quantitative phase

The final data set included 305 respondents, most of who resided within the Narrogin town district (83%), which includes an area of 12.6 square kilometres around the town’s centre. The remaining 17 percent of the sample resided in the Shire of Narrogin, which includes an area of 1,618 square kilometres that surrounds the Narrogin town district. The sample for the Shire of Narrogin was exhausted before the initial shire quota was achieved. Therefore, the number of responses from the town area was increased. The sample was generally representative of the populations of the Shire and the Town of Narrogin, although the 15 to 29 age group was slightly underrepresented, as it was difficult to gain access to teenagers. The sample had a high degree of commitment to Australia, Western Australia, the W.A. country and their home or farm.

Reliability measures were satisfactory for all of the attachment and place value scales, although the low alpha coefficient for the functional value construct (0.61) suggested that respondents had difficulty in translating the functional aspects of goods or services to the concept of a place. Either people did not relate to their attachment to Narrogin in a functional manner or the items used need to be revised for such a context.

The in-depth interviews supported the use of the functional dimension to the attachment to Narrogin. However, the nature of the interview process (requesting respondents to take photographs of their favourite places) may have increased the emphasis on the infrastructure and utilities of the town, thus generating stories and conversation on the functional aspects of Narrogin. Nevertheless, there was significant evidence to support the further investigation of the functional dimension. Public facilities such as the hospital, recreation centre, medical suites and schools were a source of pride, companionship, work and self-identity as well as symbols of safety and town well-being. In terms of the functional value construct, both measurement and methodological issues need further consideration. This was an important consideration when blending the two methodological approaches.

The final model did not explain more than 20 percent of the variance in any of the included spending behaviours. It is clear that long-term attachment, value for money, and affective intimacy/friendship are not the only variables that influence the decision to buy products or service locally or the decision to remain in Narrogin. This was particularly true for the Narrogin town residents. When examining the sub-sample of shire residents, however, the model explained more than 20 percent of the variance in a number of spending situations, including food and gift purchases, automotive purchases and associated spending, banking and postal services.

5. Discussion

A number of outcomes were resultant from the structural equation modelling. The following discussion summarises the outcomes relating to place and community attachment.

5.1 Place attachment

This study introduced the concept of affective intimacy from the work of Steel (2000). This dimension was incorporated into the place attachment construct in response to the sense of caring and nurturing toward the town of Narrogin evident from responses in the qualitative phase of the research. The example of the group of farmers banding together to resurface the tennis court in Highbury, even though many did not play tennis, depicted the nature of community spirit in the area. The dimension of affective intimacy was influential in explaining the shopping behaviour of residents from the Shire of Narrogin of selected goods and services and in the decision to stay in Narrogin (particularly in the two to five year time frames) This dimension is worth further investigation as an element of attachment, particularly in a regional environment.

The examination of place attachment in previous research regarding recreation and tourist sites, place-identity and place dependence constructs have shown distinct dimensions of place attachment (Kaltenborn 1997; Warzecha Lime and Thompson 2000; Williams 1995; Williams and Vaske 2003). However, this was not the case in this study. No clear distinction between the two dimensions was evident. A possible explanation is that the everyday, physical relationship that exists between ‘the home’ and a person does not exist between ‘the tourist site’ and a person. This is because a place of residence is very different to a tourist/recreational setting. Additional dimensions, such as the
importance of work, recreational activities, clubs, shopping, and friends come into play with the everyday, long-term attachment existing between a place and its resident. This may result in blurring or confusing the distinction between place dependence and place-identity over time. As a further explanation, it is possible that the identity construct measurement items provided little variability across the sample and therefore did not significantly contribute to the model. The qualitative research, in the first phase of this study, did support the identity and dependence measures, but further research on the operationalisation of these concepts is needed.

While this research made a significant contribution to the way place attachment can be measured and viewed in the place of residence context, the findings from this study suggest that when focussing on place of residence, further research on the measurement of place attachment is required. An understanding of place attachment assists in managing environments effectively, contributing to a sustained and vibrant community.

5.2 Community attachment

Community attachment was highly correlated with the place attachment construct. Community attachment was operationalised in this research by social bond and local sentiment dimensions. However, the social bond items did not fit the data well. These statements do not seem to reflect the feelings of people when living in a place as opposed to visiting a place for leisure purposes. In hindsight, it is reasonable for a person to go to a place to visit because that’s where friends go. However, when choosing a place to live, people establish friendships after choosing a place to live based on reasons other than friendship.

The social context of being with friends and family was apparent in the qualitative analysis of this study, revealing a sense of community spirit in Narrogin. This social context did not extend into the quantitative research findings to the same degree, presenting a challenge to the traditional community attachment items used in this context. This observation supports recent literature questioning the traditional community attachment measures (Cross 2004). Future research should focus on testing additional measures of social bonding and sentiment, which could include the strength of network ties, which was prevalent in the qualitative findings. The local sentiment aspect of community attachment correlated with place dependence and place-identity items to form the previously referred to ‘long-term attachment’ factor in the final model.

The qualitative research phase uncovered individual stories, memories and descriptions that were evident of the depth of emotional bonding between residents and the Narrogin area. These were distinct from the quantitative phase of the research, which found the general or group level of the meaning of place with the residents of Narrogin. For instance, the strong attachment respondents had to their home (“We are finally getting it all in order. We are having my brother’s reception here”), yet when examining the place attachment model, one dimension of place attachment was the ‘long-term attachment’ factor, which consisted of ‘not wanting to leave Narrogin’. Whilst the strong desire to stay in Narrogin is an important factor for predictive purposes in a selected range of instances, to further understand this dimension reference back to the qualitative information is required. What is it about their home, or the Narrogin town that makes residents want to stay? As suggested by Kaltenborn (1997: 187), “a paramount challenge for the development of place theories is improved integration of the key elements of phenomenological and positivist approaches” as was the aim in this research.

Operationalising the place and community attachment processes has been, and still is, a challenge for researchers. This study has provided valuable insights into the operationalisation process and the relationships between the concepts. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in this research has enhanced the understanding of measurement issues of both place and community attachment constructs.

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