Collaborative action research: the ethical challenges

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Abstract

This article explores some of the ethical challenges that have been addressed primarily in the research design phase of a coaching doctoral research study. The ethical position of the researcher with a dual role of coach is examined as well as the ethical predicaments for the leaders being coached who are also collaborative researchers in this action research study. This article includes a model for developing a coaching theory from researching individual coaching practice; some important reflections from the early stages of the collaborative action research fieldwork; a model for creating a strong ethical environment for potential use by other practitioner researchers utilising action research methodology; and concludes with some key observations about the ethical challenges experienced by the researcher. The leaders participating in this research are employed in Advance, Mencap and Rethink, all UK voluntary sector organisations.

Key Words: collaborative action research, ethical challenges, coaching, leaders, voluntary sector.

Introduction

Developing as a doctoral researcher is an exciting and stimulating journey. My application to an academic Ethics Committee was one of the first steps on this journey which helped to raise my awareness about the ethical complexities of collaborative action research. Herr and Anderson (2005 p.112) state that "doctoral students should go into the field expecting to face ethical challenges" which suggests the importance of thoroughly investigating the potential ethical concerns at the fieldwork preparation stage.

By the time I had reached the fieldwork preparation stage, some key decisions had already been made about the research design: 1) to research my own coaching practice thereby taking on both the role of researcher and the role of coach simultaneously; 2) the leaders I coach to also take on the role of collaborative researchers in the action research process; and 3) the key data collection method to be research diaries completed by both me and the leaders being coached. The ethical complexities of collaborative action research, the added complexity of these dual roles, and the importance of the research diaries to the research study, suggested that a thorough investigation of the potential ethical concerns at this fieldwork preparation stage was critical.

The final imperative for thorough investigation at this preparation stage emanates from the overall aim of the research: to develop a coaching theory which will help to inform future coaching

practice and research, and provide a model with which coaching practitioners can experiment. It is vital that the ethical issues do not act as a barrier to the emergence of this coaching theory.

Herr and Anderson (2005 p.112) state that "there is no foolproof plan to avoid ethical dilemmas as the [action] research develops" and ".... therefore, much is asked of the action researchers in terms of continuously exercising professional judgment". However, whilst there is no "foolproof plan", my view is that investigating the potential ethical dilemmas (both as a professional coach and professional researcher) forms an important part of research fieldwork preparations, helping to anticipate and prepare for any ethical challenges that may impinge on the research process as it unfolds.

Action research and collaborative action research

The history of action research lies in societal and community based change, and has developed more recently for use in organisations, particularly in the field of education where it has become a key methodology of choice when aiming to improve education practice.

A common factor in action research is the goal for improved practice whether that change is in the community or in professional practice. For example, Stringer (2007 p.8-9) provides the model of Look – Think – Act;. McNiff and Whitehead (2006 p.8-9) provide a model of Observe – Reflect – Act – Evaluate – Modify – Move in new directions (although they talk more succinctly about Action - Reflection). Bassey (1998) also suggests that action research is carried out in order to understand, to evaluate, to change, in order to improve some practice and it depends upon the authority of evidence as well as the monitoring of the change to ensure that it is worthwhile and enabling people to own the change.

In the current study the aim is for a coaching theory to emerge from researching and improving my own coaching practice, and for that theory to be transferable into other leadership coaching environments. In this regard, McNiff and Whitehead (2006 p.1) helpfully suggest that with action research we are "aiming to generate theories about learning and practice, your own and other people's".

In their definition of action research, Reason and Bradbury (2006 p.1) not only emphasise the importance of the theorisation of action research but also define action research as participative in nature: "It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities." However, "in participation with others" raises the question of whether collaborative action research is different to participatory action research. My view is that collaborative action research consists of both critical reflexivity and the participant voice. Therefore collaborative action research includes participation rather than vice versa.

In addition, I consider that participating in research is different to collaborating in research. For example, being interviewed for a research study could be described as participating in research. A role which can involve attending one or two interviews and checking the interview notes for the researcher, i.e. it is not a role which requires on-going participation throughout the study. This is a very different experience from that of the participants in this research study. They are not only being coached, but

they are also writing research diaries reflecting on their experience of being coached. As mentioned above, research diaries (both theirs and mine) are the primary data collection source in this study. These participants will be part of the research team throughout the duration of the fieldwork, for approximately one year. Therefore, it is apparent from this comparison that different words are needed to describe these different research participation roles.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988 p.5) argue that "the approach is only action research when it is collaborative". They describe action research as "a form of collective self-reflective enquiry". That is certainly the case in this action research study and it could be argued that this collaboration process is the most effective way to complete action research. However, an alternative view would be that a broader definition of action research is more helpful to practitioner researchers, provided the aspect of improved practice through action and change remains overtly visible in the research study; limiting definitions may limit developmental progress.

Collaborative action research in this study

Some key facets of this collaborative action research study have been mentioned above:

- Dual role of coach and researcher
- Dual role of leader being coached and collaborative researcher
- Primary data collection method: research diaries completed by the researcher and the leaders collaborating in this study

In addition to these roles and processes, there is one other data collection process involving the collaborative researchers:

- Direct observation sessions in which the leaders receive feedback on the learning from the coaching sessions and I observe and collect research data
- The feedback providers are selected by the leaders (the collaborative researchers) depending on their identified learning needs for the coaching process, e.g. their line manager, a peer, a direct report or a customer

These direct observation sessions are important perspectives external to the collaborative research relationship. The content will be reflected upon in the research diaries and the data collected will contribute to the emergent coaching theory.

The diagram below shows each of these elements for each of the four cycles of this action research study. In the study I use Bassey's (1998) "Eight Stages of inquiry," which were developed for use in an educative environment and were therefore felt suitable to the research topic of how one-to-one coaching can help or hinder the transfer and sustainability of learning.

This article will next examine the two roles and the two data collection methods depicted in Figure 1 below, and discuss them in relation to potential ethical challenges at the fieldwork preparation stage as well as reflecting on experiences during the initial fieldwork.
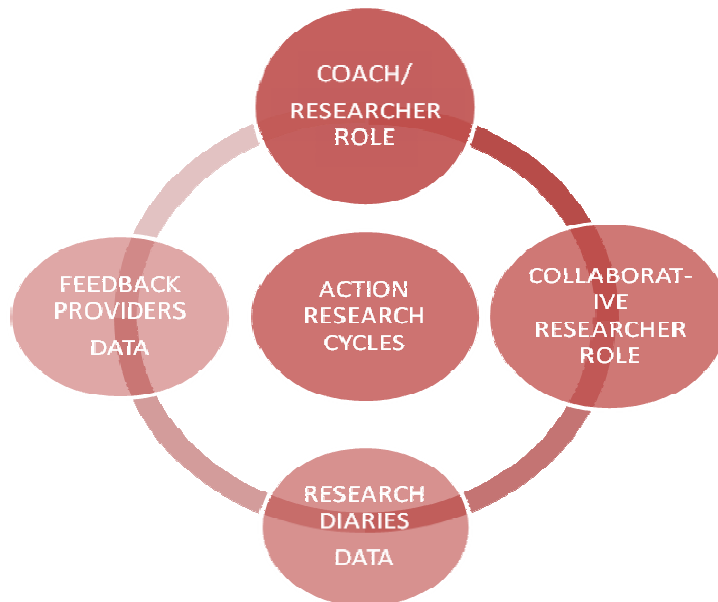
Figure 1: Developing a coaching theory from researching individual coaching practice, through collaborative action research

Potential ethical challenges for collaborative action researchers and possible solutions

As this is a qualitative research study it is logical to use a qualitative model to assess the potential ethical challenges for this study. I therefore turned to Silverman (2006 p.323) and his "Ethical Safeguards" model which has four safeguards and I have taken each of these in turn and highlighted the challenges and possible solutions for the two roles and the two data collection methods mentioned above (as appropriate and relevant):

1. Ensure that people participate voluntarily

The starting point is the standard ethical procedures (surface considerations), for example the distribution of participant information sheets and the signed consent forms which are compulsory in any academic research process. However, giving consent to participate in this collaborative action research study means collaborators are committing to not only a lot of time and energy but also to an emotionally demanding process. I have therefore ensured that the information sheets and consent forms are discussed in person and gone through in detail in order to model best professional behaviour in this regard. I also gave the leaders plenty of time to consider their participation, including time to discuss with their colleagues at work. This ensured that the participants were as clear as possible at this stage about their collaborative role, helping them to make an assessment of what they collaborative experience may be like.

Role modelling a thorough process, which indicated that I was taking ethical issues seriously, was also important because the leaders are responsible for selecting the feedback providers and ensuring an ethically sound process with regard to their voluntary consent.

In this study, I am sharing responsibility for ensuring ethical research practice with the collaborative researchers. In order to attempt to develop a shared ethics environment, I ensured a full and frank discussion took place with each leader about the recruitment and selection of the feedback providers and how their consent was being obtained. Each leader knew to offer to each feedback provider the option of discussing any questions with me direct. I will of course have the opportunity of checking out this voluntary participation when I observe the feedback sessions. At the time of writing these sessions have not yet taken place.

The collaborative researchers have a more involved and complex role than, for example, an interviewee whose sole contribution to the research may perhaps only be a thirty-minute interview. They are making a direct contribution not only to the research data but also the research process and therefore even the standard ethical processes have to be completed in sufficient depth to ensure a high standard of ethical practice. In my experience, my coaching skills have been extremely useful, particularly in facilitating an open discussion about ethics through the use of effective questioning.

2. Making people's comments and behaviour confidential

This study includes the collection of personal data and reflections in the research diaries which are likely to be of an extremely private and confidential nature emanating from the leaders' coaching discussions. A key surface consideration is to ensure that nothing is attributable to one individual in any published material.

As I am using a collection of data from five different sources, it is anticipated that any data analysis and coaching theory which emerges from this private and confidential data will not be attributable to any one individual. However, I do need to acknowledge a potential risk of attribution and put a control in place to manage this. One possible control is to ask the collaborative researchers to read relevant sections of the thesis to check for their own anonymity. However, this runs the risk of participants potentially recognising each other especially as two people work for the same organisation. The risk will need to be assessed at the time and this control discussed with the collaborative researchers. I will encourage the leaders to have their ideas on other potential solutions as part of the collaborative research process. Normally, these discussions would be confined to the researcher and her supervisory team but the collaborative nature of this study means that the leaders' ideas will also be included.

In addition, I have already had a discussion with each leader about giving permission to be named as a collaborative researcher but have suggested that they wait until the draft thesis is available for them to read and check if they are happy about the confidentiality of their contribution. As with the potential solution mentioned above, this may only be possible should all four collaborative researchers agree to this.

With regard to the feedback providers, it must be remembered that they are contributing to the research in two ways: primarily to provide feedback on the leaders' learning for their reflective work in their research diaries; secondly, to provide any feedback on how the leaders' behaviour or otherwise

may or may not have changed since the coaching sessions commenced. These comments, when collated together with other feedback providers, will potentially be non-attributable in the same way as the diary data.

The key issue for me about confidentiality is that we are not researching the ability of the individual leaders to transfer and sustain their learning, but how coaching can help or hinder the transfer and sustainability of learning. Even though the leaders are very much part of this research process, the focus is my own coaching practice and the emergent coaching theory which relies on the collective data analysis process and will be written up as such. Whilst this focus does not in itself prevent breaches of confidentiality, it will help to ensure that individual data is not used inappropriately in any published work.

3. Protecting people from harm

With regard to the data collection from feedback providers (see Figure 1 above), two key ethical challenges have transpired in the research process: 1) how the leaders select their feedback providers for the direct observation sessions; and 2) agreeing an appropriate process for these sessions which protect the leaders from harming any internal relationships within their organisations for the sake of the research process.

In relation to 1) above, in the first action research cycle I have not applied any pressure about who specifically to select and how many people to select for the feedback provider sessions. In addition, I have used my coaching skills to facilitate the assessment of any risk associated with selecting specific individuals including any potential harm to their relationship with any of the individuals they are considering. Also, whilst there is a time pressure in the research timetable for selecting these feedback providers, I have ensured these discussions commenced at the beginning of the coaching/research relationship to allow the maximum amount of time to consider and select people who the leaders feel are appropriate.

In regard to 2) above, in the first action research cycle, I have supported them on selecting an appropriate process for the feedback provider sessions. Using my coaching skills again, I have facilitated them to identify where their strengths lay in terms of leading these sessions and how they feel most comfortable approaching this task. For example, they may prefer more of an interview style as opposed to a facilitated discussion.

My role during these sessions will be primarily as researcher, directly observing and only interjecting should I need to clarify something or need something additional for the data collection process. However, we have discussed the scenario of a session becoming confrontational or aggressive with the potentiality of damaging a relationship. I have therefore agreed with the leaders that should they wish me to take on a coaching role at any point in the session, then they should indicate that they would like me to provide a coaching intervention by inviting me into the discussion. This is an interesting shift from the leaders being the collaborative researchers to me being the collaborative researcher in this situation, i.e. the leaders are leading.

4. Ensuring mutual trust between researcher and people studied

Building and maintaining trust is a key factor in the coaching relationship and whilst I am the coach as well as the researcher, I remain as one person in whom trust can be built in both roles simultaneously. This is one area where the dual role of coach and researcher can be advantageous with trust transferable across both roles.

McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2003) describe the power relationship in action research as 'educative influence' and the position of power in action research as purposely aiming to influence other people's lives in an educative way. They do not see the power relationship as coercive, they see it as positive, helping people "to learn and grow freely". If it is as McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead suggest, the responsibility lies with me as the researcher to ensure ethical practice at each stage of the research process.

This responsibility implies a less equal relationship with the collaborative researchers. Although, I dispute that an equal relationship between me and the collaborative researchers is the goal because someone has to take primary responsibility for the research process in order to ensure completion of the doctorate. It therefore makes sense for the person who is aiming to achieve the doctorate is the person who takes on that primary responsibility. My view is that such an unequal relationship does not mean in itself that there cannot be mutual trust between me and the collaborative researcher. However, a covert approach or an abuse of that unequal status could result in a lack of trust.

This responsibility also implies that there are non-surface issues to consider in the process of identifying ethical challenges and possible solutions. I consider that managing this power relationship in action research requires a good understanding of the self to ensure a high level of ethical awareness. Reflexivity can play an important role in understanding the self in the context of ethical awareness. Hartog (2002 p.233) states that reflexivity enables "practitioners to act with greater integrity" by "turning the focus of attention from the outer experience and activity inward to the subjective processes of perception ... judgment and action".

Creating a strong ethical environment

In the section above, both surface and non-surface considerations have been taken into account in an attempt to create a strong ethical environment for this collaborative action research study.

Surface considerations are standard protocols such as informed consent and confidentiality. Several notable institutions have produced ethical guidelines such as the Social Research Association, the Economic and Social Research Council. The Department of Health have published a Research Governance Framework and the Government Social Research Unit have produced and Ethics Checklist. These all provide useful guidance on implementing surface considerations and the section above describes some practical advice on implementation specifically within a collaborative research environment.

The key non-surface considerations detailed above are: managing the power relationship in action research with understanding yourself as a key component.   These considerations are relevant in all aspects of a collaborative action research study and at all stages in the process. The ability to be authentic at all times, to be your 'real self' (McElroy, 1990) seems, in my view, to be of paramount importance in collaborative action research. Reflexivity is mentioned above as a helpful approach. In this study, I utilise coaching supervision as well as doctoral research supervision to assist with this self analysis process. Coaching is a psychology based profession which requires an understanding of human psychology and behaviour including, very importantly, your own as a coach. Therefore, coaching practitioner researchers should be able to capitalise on this knowledge and understanding. As a practitioner in the role of researcher I would highlight the importance of both coaching and doctoral supervision as being specific components of the research design. In my view, this supervision is central to creating a strong ethical environment.

In addition to surface and non-surface considerations, I suggest that the researcher needs to identify and analyse the ethical issues specific to their collaborative action research study. In my view, this situational analysis will ensure that any specific issues have been analysed and solutions found to attempt to resolve any ethical challenges. For example, the ethical challenges surrounding the feedback provider sessions described above.

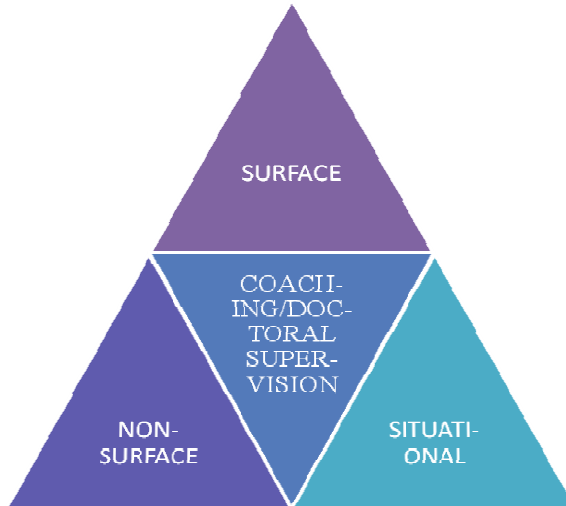This is outlined in diagrammatic form in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Creating a Strong Ethical Environment for Collaborative Action Research in Coaching

Key Observations

In analysing the ethical challenges of collaborative action research, the following two key observations have arisen:

1) My level of commitment to ethical practice has been challenged because of the pressure of having to submit a doctoral research project. For example, I have had to balance the need for feedback provider data with the risks to the leaders in pushing for certain feedback providers. I have therefore had to remain as impartial as possible during the discussions about the selection of feedback providers and keep focused on the wellbeing of the leaders by not putting them in the way of potential harm. Fortunately, this has resulted in quality choices across the board but could have resulted in some or all leaders not having any feedback providers. This challenge has helped me to reconfirm my commitment as a researcher to ethical practice, aligned with my commitment to ethical practice as a coach, putting the client's needs at the centre.

2) In this research study I am bringing together two worlds: the world of leadership and the world of research. Therefore there is a need to implement a mix of research and management techniques to establish a firm ethical base for the research. The use of risk assessment and risk controls (both established management techniques) has helped in managing some of the ethical challenges with the collaborative researchers.

Conclusion

This article has been focused on the responsibilities a researcher has to the research participants which, in this case, means the collaborative researchers. However, Etherington (2004 p.211) reminds us that "the principle of self respect shows that we not only have a responsibility towards participants in research but also towards ourselves". She points out that this can be "challenging" but that "as researchers we need to find ways to balance caring for participants while also meeting our own needs in the research". The reflexive work both as a coach and a researcher in the suggested model above is helping me to not only feel a responsibility towards others but also to myself, particularly when dealing with the ethical challenges outlined in this article.

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