Research methodology for researching professionals

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Abstract

Rather than concentrating primarily on the *content* of my research, I focus here on the *process* of carrying my research for a professional doctorate. Referring to Bourner, Bowden and Laing's (2000) distinction between *professional researchers* and *researching professionals*, I question whether the methodology used by aspiring academics is necessarily relevant for practitioners, such as me, who carry out doctoral research from within their professional practice. I spell out some of my philosophical attitudes and beliefs and show how these influence my approach to research. I then describe in some detail what I refer to as my research practice, covering key processes such as: absorbing existing information; initiating the production of new information; processing information to create new understanding; and expressing such understanding. I include a very brief description of my findings in order to illustrate the sort of knowledge that emerged from my research practice and follow this by a discussion on quality, limitations and implications. Finally, I challenge the reader to consider their own research practice.

Keywords: Researching professionals, doctoral research, methodology, heuristic inquiry

Introduction

While my initial goal was to write this paper as a highly condensed version of my doctoral thesis, I now realise that perhaps a more useful intention is to write about a single, key theme that has emerged from my doctoral studies over recent years. This theme that I have chosen to write about is *research methodology*. Now that phrase may fill you, my readers, with excitement and anticipation, but my guess is that I am more likely to hear a collective groan in response. I am keen therefore to share the excitement that still stays with me when I consider the question of what research methodology is appropriate for a professional doctorate as opposed to a PhD. Or to put it more personally: what research *practice* have I developed as a researching professional? In doing this I want to contribute to the broad debate about the nature of professional doctorates and to the specific debate about research methodology that may be appropriate to those carrying out high level research while remaining active within their profession.

Bourner et al (2000) help to distinguish between the relatively recent professional doctorate which "appears to be designed to develop the researching professional" and the long standing PhD which is "intended to develop professional researchers." To me this draws the distinction between those of us who remain in professional practice while also contributing to the development of our profession through scholarly undertakings, and those who more or less leave their professional practice in order to devote themselves to academia, albeit in the hope of contributing to professional development at an arms length. Within this context, Chynoweth (2014) raises the question of whether traditional methodological approaches, such as those taken by professional researchers in the social sciences for example, are appropriate for us researching professionals, or whether other possibilities may be better suited to us. Here he makes the distinction between those who research *for* practice, and those who research *through* practice.

In this article I aim to share something of my experience of carrying out my doctoral research. I start by describing briefly what I personally brought to my research both in terms of my personal and professional background, and in terms of the specific question that I wanted to answer. I then discuss my search for an appropriate way of going about my research, taking into account several philosophical concerns, and explaining in some detail the methods I settled on. I use the next section to introduce the concept of my research *practice*: the way of working that I developed over the time of my research. I then briefly outline my findings in order to demonstrate the sort of knowledge that was generated through my research practice. Finally, I discuss this practice in terms of its quality and limitations, and make recommendations for further research.

What I bring to my research

Both my mother and father worked in research throughout their adult lives and I have inherited an attitude towards life that holds the pursuit of knowledge in high esteem. However, I have worked as a professional practitioner for nearly forty years, firstly as an architect, now as a psychotherapist, coach, supervisor and teacher. While I have always brought an analytical mind to my work I have only in the last decade consciously pursued research: at master's level in psychotherapy and now at doctoral level in coaching and mentoring. For many years the written word was not my primary means of learning and communication, relying more on sight, speech and draughtsmanship. Nevertheless, I have found an increasing tendency to learn through reading and to analyse ideas and express myself through the written word.

Since training and working as a psychotherapist and more recently as a coach, I am increasingly familiar with a variety of philosophical concepts and the workings of the mind, both alone and in relation to context and others. In particular, I am currently informed by three key conceptual contrasts or shifts. The first of these is the shift from positivism to phenomenology, i.e. the shift from understanding the world as *objective* reality to understanding it as *subjective* experience. The second is the shift from stasis to process, i.e. the ontological shift from *substance* to *becoming*. The third is the shift from isolation to relatedness, or the "myth of the isolated mind" (Stolorow & Atwood 1992).

With these attitudes, habits, perspectives, and experiences (these ways of being-in-the-world or *in-der-welt-sein*) I came to my doctoral programme with a strongly held desire to understand more about the relationship between coaches and their clients: what I have referred to throughout the majority of my thesis as the coaching relationship. There were times when I wondered about referring to it as the *developmental* relationship, in view of the fact that the purpose of coaching is often seen as the client's personal and/or professional development. This compares interestingly with the *healing* relationship, which how psychotherapy is seen. There are moments in my thesis when I reject the very idea of *the* coaching relationship, as if it has some consistency in all its manifestations, and wonder whether it is better to refer to coaching relationship*s* in the plural to emphasise the great range and variety of relationships that develop between the great variety of coaches and clients. Furthermore, you can imagine that I did not want to seek "the truth" about the coaching relationship, as if there were some undeniable facts to be found out. Instead I was interested in my own and others' experiences of the coaching relationship and our thinking, or conceptualising, about it.

My search for method(s)

When I came to *designing* my research (remember I'm an architect) I was acutely aware that I was designing a *process* and not a *product*. This represented something of a challenge: as an architect my mind was predominantly focused on the finished building (the product), and secondarily on the means of construction (the process). In contrast, as a psychotherapist I am predominantly focused on the

communication between my client and myself (the process) and only sometimes on the moment when the client walks away somehow healed (the product). Interestingly, as a coach, supervisor and teacher, I am often located between the two: sometimes focusing specifically on the learning or developmental goals and sometimes more acutely aware of the process whereby we reach them. As a relatively inexperienced researcher, I found myself again pulled between the two: what was the outcome of my research going to be? And how was I going to go about it? Thankfully, I was introduced to epistemology: the study of knowledge, and in particular these questions:

> What sort of knowledge do I want to build?
> Where will such knowledge be found or built?
> Who will create such knowledge?
> How will we/they go about building such knowledge?

Perhaps inevitably I was drawn to following a similar approach to that which I'd used for my master's degree dissertation: heuristic inquiry (Moustakas 1990). Here the emphasis lies on "the investigator's internal frame of reference, self-searching, intuition, and indwelling" (ibid: 12). This is very popular amongst psychotherapists who, having been through years of psychotherapy ourselves, are used to looking inwards and expecting to find answers to some of our questions from deep within. Although developed by a humanistic practitioner it is also relevant to those of us whose practice is also psychodynamic, as it implies that the great majority of the workings of the mind take place in the unconscious (neuroscience now proves this hypothesis to be true). Thus Moustakas provides a detailed account (ibid: 27-32) of how the researcher goes through a process of engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis.

While the emphasis here is on the internal process within the researcher, Moustakas also discusses the value of holding conversational interviews or dialogues with research participants in order to collect data. Here he refers to Buber and quotes Jourard (1968) to emphasise that "dialogue is like mutual unveiling, where each seeks to be experienced and confirmed by the other" and that "self disclosure elicits disclosure" (Moustakas 1990; 47). Furthermore, he draws a useful distinction between heuristic enquiry and traditional phenomenological research:

> "Whereas phenomenology encourages a kind of detachment from the phenomenon being investigated, heuristics emphasises connectedness and relationship." (ibid: 38)

I was also introduced by my supervisor to conceptual encounter, a research approach developed by de Rivera (1981). Here there is much in common with heuristic enquiry in the emphasis on human experience and the central role of the researcher's own experience. However, de Rivera places particular emphasis on the dialogue between the key researcher and their participants and on the creative tension between descriptions of experience and conceptualisations about such experience. He also emphasises the iterative nature of the research process, recognising that the key researcher's conceptualisations of experience are likely to develop as a result of each dialogue, and that subsequent dialogues will therefore be different to previous ones. This is particularly attractive to me as it mirrors the inherently iterative nature of coaching or therapeutic dialogues. I was beginning to find an approach to research, or indeed a research practice, that not only mirrored my professional practice, but was rooted in the same philosophical stances.

Another central feature of both heuristic enquiry and conceptual encounter lies in the use of literature. Traditional approaches to research indicate that literature should be reviewed at the outset in order to establish a gap in knowledge that a research project can attempt to fill, the implication being that it is then set aside while the research is carried out. Moustakas and de Rivera however suggest a different approach. Here the

emphasis is on reading and rereading the literature *throughout* the research process, as an essential part of the iterative process they both describe. The image that I often use here is that of plaiting: where the literature, the researcher's own experience and the dialogues with participants are plaited together throughout the research process in order to give a rich, thick description of the phenomenon in question.

Developing my research practice

So my point here is this: rather than seeing methodology as a process of simply reviewing and selecting a research method, the rules of which I could diligently apply, I have come to see my methodology (my study of methods) as a process that has led to my developing a *research practice*. Here I use the word *practice* to describe an ongoing pursuit of an activity, in much the same way as I would use it to describe my coaching or psychotherapy practice, or indeed my teaching practice, or how some might refer to their meditation practice. Hence it has an element of unconscious or spontaneous repetition leading to habitual ways of being, and recognises that it has become part of my whole way of being in the world. It seems to consist of these four activities:

Absorbing existing information
Initiating the production of new information
Processing information to create new understanding
Expressing that new understanding

Traditionally, researchers have absorbed existing information about their subject through reading written texts (e.g. Creswell 2009). Here we can understand *reading* as the decoding of symbols to establish meaning. In its most basic form it may simply entail the transfer of knowledge from writer to reader, but it can also be understood as including an interpretive element where the reader creates their own meaning from what they read. Similarly, the form of such *texts* is traditionally the written word, but may include diagrams or numerical charts. However, a wider understanding of the term *text* includes anything that can be read, such as in film theory, a film, or in architecture theory, the built environment. At its extreme, we might understand the term *reading* to involve decoding and interpreting far more transient phenomena, such as the expression on someone's face that enables us to read their mind, or the nature of a conversation between colleagues which enables us to read the atmosphere in an organisation. Thus, while the professional researcher is perhaps most likely to rely on research literature, it seems the researching professional has a far broader palette of texts and experiences to draw on, and can read the world through a wide range of day-to-day experiences in their professional lives. Moustakas (1990) for example, suggests people, places and meetings.

Personally, I have found that I read erratically, broadly and spontaneously: professional literature, research accounts, newspapers, journals, blogs, novels, poetry and graffiti, with a view that they may all have something to contribute to whatever subject I am researching. I encourage my students to read in a similar way, and emphasise the value of speed-reading approaches where appropriate. I also spend considerable time *reading* my clients, students, supervisees and colleagues, both individually and collectively, absorbing and interpreting their narratives both spoken and unspoken. I imagine that most researching professionals may do the same.

As well as using existing data, research usually involves initiating various activities that help to uncover or create *new* data. Here the traditional approach for the professional researcher (e.g. Creswell 2009) is to look "out there" in the world: carry out an experiment, record, measure, publish questionnaires or instigate carefully planned interviews to elicit further information. In contrast the researching professional might look elsewhere too. The places I have identified are *in here* and *at the interface*. I use *in here* to refer to what we can learn from seeking further data by interrogating our own experience of the phenomenon, and it can happen

by carrying out what Moustakas calls "self-dialogue" (1990:16). I use *at the interface* to refer to what we can learn from discussing shared experience with others, and can happen by carrying out what Moustakas calls "dialogue with … research participants" (1990:46). This is a way of working with others that is characterised by "co-operative sharing in which co-researchers and primary researchers open pathways to each other for explicating the phenomenon being investigated" (1990:47). This difference in *where* data may be collected seems like one, if not the, most important difference between the professional who is researching his/her own professional practice and the researcher who is researching something beyond their immediate experience.

Having gathered together both existing and new data, the traditional approach identifies a process that is usually referred to as data analysis. Although it's sometimes hard to identify, and often out of consciousness, I believe there is an ongoing process of analysis and synthesis going on in my mind. I have a sense that this requires me to seek sufficient sleep, rest and relaxation in order that it can go on in the background, uninterrupted by conscious striving for understanding. I even suspect that it happens in parts of my mind while other parts are used for "mindless" activities such as simple computer games.

Traditionally researchers have expressed themselves through the written and spoken word, for example publishing journal articles or presenting academic lectures. In contrast Moustakas broadens our understanding of how such expression might be achieved. In much the same way as immersion in our research subject may lead us to reading many more sources than just the written word, so too expression might be achieved through such diverse means as poetry, drawings, paintings or other creative forms.

I try to write daily: morning pages (Cameron 1993), teaching plans, client notes, scholarly articles or parts of long-term plans for a published book. I find the act of writing is creative in itself as I seek to find language that expresses or clarifies the emergent thoughts within. I have also developed an approach to managing the process of writing longer documents. Here I use a spreadsheet application alongside a writing application. The spreadsheet lists the chapters, headings and subheadings together with target, and actual, word counts for each sub-section or paragraph, with totals and sub-totals accordingly. This is an active document which is used throughout the writing process enabling me to structure, and re-structure, my writing, and keep tabs on progress.

I talk with people, again finding that the processes of actively listening, responding and attempting to express myself to them, all contribute to the ongoing process of enquiring into experience, seeking clarity and developing understanding. And these are not just scholarly dialogues, but professional conversations with clients, fellow teaching staff, friends and family. I also talk to myself, often while pacing my room or walking around, and although this may sound "mad", I find it invaluable.

Findings from my research practice

My purpose here is to share some of my findings in the hope that they will be of some interest in themselves. But more than that, I want to give an indication of the nature of the findings that my research practice has led to. But first I want to question that word *findings*. Here the implication is that they were there to be *found*, as if they were, for example, archaeological remains that needed layers of historical debris to be carefully removed in order for them to be exposed. And yet that is not my epistemological stance: instead I believe my research participants and I co-create this understanding, this knowledge, and that the word *creations,* or even *co-creations,* might more accurately take the place of *findings*. This is why I like the word *conceptualisations* or simply *concepts,* which can be defined as understandings that come from experience, reasoning and/or imagination.

So my first concept is that there is no such thing as *the* coaching relationship, but, of course, many and varied coaching relationships. Indeed, I think it fair to suggest that every coaching relationship is unique, as it is co-created by the unique individuals and organisations that create it. Secondly that when we try to understand these relationships we can see that they are often complex, chaotic and concealed.

Thirdly, that in order to cut through the complexity, chaos and concealment, we need some sharp tools, in order to reach the clarity that lies within. Analysing my research data has led to six key concepts that can be used as such tools. These are:

The *dynamics* of a coaching relationship
The *mood* of a coaching relationship
The impact of the *coach's personality* on a coaching relationship
The impact of the *client's personality* on a coaching relationship
The *scope* of a coaching relationship
The time, or *temporal*, factors in a coaching relationship

Discussion of my research practice

Having described my emerging research practice and shared some of the concepts that my research created, I need to reflect on whether or not such a way of working can be seen as of sufficient quality to be recognised as scholarly or doctoral. I also need to recognise the limitations of my research practice.

I believe the implication of what I have written here, is that researching professionals, those of us professional practitioners who are also engaged in research, can benefit from committing to an ongoing process of research methodology. Such a process entails the study of research methods, not simply to find a suitable instruction manual to follow in order to answer a specific research question, but to find a way of engaging with our selves, our experience, the experience of those around us and our wider world, with a view to creating knowledge - a personal research practice.

An online search for "developing a personal research practice" led to little literature, the emphasis lying primarily in the *craft* of how to carry out research, rather than the practice of being a researcher.

Conclusion

Writing this paper has resulted in me using the term *research practice* to describe the way of being in the world that I have developed since starting my doctoral studies. However, it has also left me wondering what I really mean by this term. Am I simply describing the craftsmanship of carrying out research? Or am I referring to something more? Craftsmanship might be seen as involving some particular skills (often manual) with certain knowledge, perhaps of materials and how they behave or change through various processes. Practice on the other hand might be seen as involving not only skills and knowledge, but also beliefs and attitudes. With a research practice I am not just using my skills and knowledge to create further knowledge, but am also drawing on my deeply held attitudes and beliefs about knowledge, and its creation, and its use, and its value, and my part in it.

Having been fearful at the outset of this article that I might be writing something that seemed dry and boring to you, I now remain hopeful that you will have found this interesting and that it might stimulate some musings on your own approach to research, and maybe the development of a sense of your own research practice.

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