In For The Long-Haul:

Conducting Qualitative Longitudinal Research on Leaders Knowledge

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This paper presents the author’s experiences of and reflections on conducting qualitative longitudinal research on leadership. The primary purpose is to provide a more intimate knowledge of this method for researchers intent on following a similar path. In doing so, it addresses a number of perceived gaps in the leadership and research methods literatures. Firstly, while longitudinal studies are commonplace in the social sciences, very little research on leadership utilises longitudinal data (Riggio and Mumford, 2001). This absence of longitudinal approaches is even more apparent in the context of qualitative studies of leadership (Day and Sin, 2011). Secondly, while the research methodology literature presents ample guidelines for conducting qualitative research longitudinally (Farrall, 2006; Holland, 2007; Holland, Thomson and Henderson, 2006; Saldana, 2003), personal, reflexive accounts that document the reality of following
these are in short supply (Hassettt and Mäntymäki, 2013). As a consequence, longitudinal studies that claim to capture the changed nature of particular phenomena from one period to the next, neglect the parallel, iterative developmental trajectory of the researcher over the course of the study. Indeed in an entire book on the longitudinal method, Saldana (2003: 33) says little on the topic, save the advice to: “reflect on your own life and how you have changed through time and how you are changing as a researcher”.

The insights reported upon here are based on an exploratory, qualitative study into leaders personal knowledge (Cooper, 2013), an aspect of the knowledge-related and leadership literature where, to date, there has been a dearth of empirical research (Pauleen and Gorman, 2011). Longitudinal in design, the research captures the temporal, non-deterministic nature of this knowledge, the evolving process through which these leaders became ‘knowledgeable’, and the criticality of context in understanding how changes in both knowledge content and process evolve over time. The study is unique in at least two respects: Firstly, there is the extended timeframe afforded to the data collection phase. As a ‘prospective’ longitudinal study that involves repeated data collection from the same subjects over a period of time (Hassettt and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2013), over ten years lapsed between the first and second-round interviews for the twelve respondents. Longitudinal studies of this duration are
relatively rare in view of the associated time commitment involved (Day and Sin, 2011). Secondly, there is the emergent nature of the research design. The original data set was based on a purposive cross-sectional sample, however, due to a series of unanticipated events, the research project was not completed. Revisiting the data some ten years later, in the midst of the ever burgeoning knowledge economy (Uhl-Bien, Marion, McKelvey, 2007), tracking how and why these leader’s knowledge changed in the intervening time period appeared as a worthwhile research opportunity. To paraphrase the words of Mintzberg and Waters, in this research endeavour, “what was realised was not what was originally intended” (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985).

The central findings presented in this paper reflect the extended time frame and the emergent nature of the research design. The extensive time devoted to this study, and the prospective nature of the longitudinal inquiry that entailed interviewing and re-interviewing the same respondents provided dual benefits: a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the phenomenon investigated and a deep immersion in, and understanding of the actual process of doing longitudinal research. Drawing on this experience, this paper presents a comprehensive set of design issues for qualitative longitudinal research across seven key areas: (1) understanding the foundational principles of QLR: time, change and process; (2) developing the research design and framing the research questions; (3) collecting data: interviewing and re-interviewing; (4) managing and
analysing a complex data set; (5) understanding the researcher-respondent relationship; (6) presenting the research findings and (7) reflecting on what has changed for the researcher in the intervening time period, how these changes have manifested and why they have occurred?

The emergent nature of the research design presented a number of challenges for the researcher. Amongst these was the struggle to meet the requirements for ‘rigor’, as designated by an external doctoral review panel, whilst remaining true to the underlying characteristics of an interpretivist paradigm that encourages openness, flexibility and honesty with respect to the design choices one makes. In honestly recording these decisions the account provided here recognises a pivotal, yet often unacknowledged point in any research journey; where the temptation to ‘repackage’ the choices made (to make them more ‘presentable’ and palatable), arises alongside the ethical drive to ‘come clean’ and ‘own up’ to the true nature of the path followed. Elaborating on this aspect of her journey, the author supplements her discussion and reflection of the seven critical research design issues with reflective insights into her personal learning. Indeed, having asked her respondents, “If given the chance to go back in time, what would you do differently, what advice would you give someone else starting out, and what advice would you like to have been given?” she poses the same questions of herself. In doing so the paper captures that which is often camouflaged in writing up one’s research, the
anguish, endless confusion and struggle that one endures in an ever-increasing attempt to make sense of an overwhelming amount of data. These challenges, the author points out, are amplified in the context of a qualitative longitudinal data set.

In summary, this paper makes a number of contributions to the theory and practice of doing qualitative longitudinal research in the management/leadership domain. Firstly, it presents a comprehensive framework for qualitative longitudinal inquiry that identifies seven critical design issues that extend to aspects of research practice with respect to both the researcher and the researched.

Secondly, in documenting her experience of both the mechanics of conducting qualitative longitudinal research and her personal reflections on this process and how it impacted upon her as a researcher, this paper contributes to the nascent conversation on process-related issues (Sergi and Hallin, 2011). As Hassett and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki (2013) have recently observed, there is a distinct absence of accounts that accentuate and bring to the foreground researchers’ own experience and reflections on designing, conducting, managing and studying longitudinal research (Hassett, and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2013: 3). In moving into this domain, this research also answers recent calls for qualitative research that takes a more reflexive (Finlay, 2002), autoethnographic (Pace, 2012) or storytelling approach (Gabriel, 2013)
In acknowledging the emergent nature of the research design and how it impacted on the research process and the researchers understanding of practice, this paper contributes to a discussion in the research methods literature which argues that the pursuit of ‘good science’ oftentimes confines to the margins, or discards entirely, that which is real and honest about our research endeavours; the ‘lived experience’ and the ‘messiness’ of actually doing it (Cole, 2013; Donnelly, Gabriel and Özkazanc-Pan, 2013). In some respects, in the pursuit of rigour, we loose our relevance to the wider community of practice that is our fellow researchers.

This paper concludes, giving voice to practice, rendering the largely invisible visible’, telling the stories behind the stories, the tales of the trials and tribulations of doing [research] and being [a researcher] (Donnelly, Gabriel and Özkazanc-Pan, 2013), as opposed to repackaging what we do in the name of good science, ‘keeps us honest’ in our research endeavours. In greater pursuit of this, we need to refocus our agenda for ensuring rigor in qualitative inquiry, placing as much emphasis on ‘thick peformance’ (Sergi and Hallin, 2011) as we have heretofore placed on thick description (Geertz, 1973). The author suggests that qualitative longitudinal research has immense potential in meeting these challenges.
References


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