Methodologies Used in Researching Integration Challenges of EU Rail Industry in Formation of a Single European Rail Area: Grounded Elite Interviews with Leaders Involved

ISLC 2014 – extended draft

Tomaž Schara, tomaz.schara@telemach.net, is a practitioner senior executive and a PhD student at IEDC–Bled School of Management Slovenia, where Dr. Ian Sutherland is Deputy Dean for Research and Director of PhD Studies at IEDC. The supervisor is Professor Richard Common, Professor of International Public Management, Director of Teaching and Learning, The York Management School, University of York, UK.

My research is about challenges of the EU rail industry integration. The integration process requires leadership in the Multi-Level Governance (MLG) context of EU in its transition from state monopolies to businesses providing services on the integrated market. This is firstly a good source of theoretically and practically relevant research questions; and secondly rigorous grounded research methodologies will bring insight that will go beyond the currently accepted formal and public statements about the phenomena. As reality is a social construct such relevant and rigorous scholarly research contributes to a better understanding of current challenges and further developments, constructing a better reality.

My presentation focuses on the methodology used in my PhD research, reasons for choosing it, issues with using it and the draft outcomes after the first phase of elite interview performed. I write about my experiences with using Elite Interviews sharing experiences from Berry (2002) on the issues of the validity and reliability of open-ended elite interviewing. The emphasis is on socially constructed organizational realities and the importance of multiple perspectives from Kezar (2003), where the goal of triangulation is to provide a parallax view upon events Davies (2001). I use Grounded Theory as described in Corbin & Strauss (2008), guided by the characteristics of critical realism from Kempster & Perry (2011).

As a practitioner entering the field of research I cannot escape the questions about rigor and relevancy. It is the answer about academic rigor that seems less ambiguous to me at this stage of my research, whereas the relevancy question is the one that still troubles me. The key question that I always let stand in front of me is to whom research is or should be relevant. The academic theories, the day life of practitioners in leading businesses or to policy making for political leaders? But in
answering this dilemmas I would rather turn the question around and ask whether creative research can exist at all without it both. Relevancy of any kind (theoretical, practical, and political) stirs the innovative mind to pose interesting research questions and the rigor of research gives its outcomes the relevancy of insight. This supports Kempster and Parry (2011) proposal that grounded theory can bridge the relevance-rigor gap by placing emphasis on the contextual understanding of the social processes of leadership and leadership development.

Using this methodology allows me to pursue the following objectives: a) to capture my research data from the narrative of individuals that are or were actively and personally involved as the actors of the target sample of the researched phenomena; b) get data that would be richer than the officially published documents on integration issues by EU bodies and rail organization, to get beyond formal public statements; c) to be able to compare the captured narrative with the official statements and find gaps between them; d) to get ideas about what is omitted from the official statements.

What I did not cover with the used methodology was: a) to get the official statements and legislative of the EU Parliament, the EU Commission and /or the Rail organizations since these statements are easily obtainable from published public sources as their communicated strategy. The EU Commission also publishes White papers and Impact Assessments based on their research supported by external consultants. As the prevailing methodology they claim they use closed interviews and surveys. This leads to my understanding that such results obtained can only be confined to the borders of the chosen methodology and stirred by the selected questions. No matter how open mindedly these questions are prepared they are biased on their presumptions as well as their perceived and declared objectives. b) Member states ministers and parliamentarians were intentionally left out. I assumed that their positions would be in line with the formally communicated EU and member state policies. Also time constrains and availability would go beyond my resources available for this research.

The target sample is: a) members of the EU Parliament leading parliamentarian commissions relevant to transport; b) the EU Commissioner responsible for transport and infrastructure forming the EU Single European Rail Area; c) Former and current CEOs of rail organizations irrespective from their organizations ownership structure, focus of their organization in operations or infrastructure management; d) lobbyists, regulators, journalists, trade unionists. Their declared interest is to provide a better service to the citizens of EU.

In the first round of interviews my opening statement was: a) Comparing EU vs. US rail systems, both had a modal share of 50% in the 50ies of the last century which dropped down to about 8% against the road transport. It climbed back to about 50% again in US while the EU modal share is about 15% in cargo transport and 6% in passenger transport; b) on distances less than 500 km between bigger
cities passenger transport on rail can compete with air and on distances of more than 500 km rail can compete with road in cargo transport. In both scenarios in EU rail most likely crosses member state borders.

In the second round of interviews with further stakeholders in the formation of the Single European Rail Area I will use the same opening statement to be able to compare these two sets of narratives. I will not seek any statistical relevance but rather triangulate the outcomes of the analysis.

In my approach to analysis I gathered the recordings and then the transcripts about what they said. I added my notes from the interviews on what I saw and heard about how they were saying. Then I read each transcript of each interview a few times, wrote codes at the side of the page and coupled it with quotes in the text. Next step was to holistically compare codes over all of the interviews and joint the overall messages into key themes.

Findings about the usage of the methodology after the first round of elite interviews and their analysis are: a) it is extremely difficult to organize interviews when interviewees do not belong to one hierarchy, thus getting a confirmation for the meeting and organizing the logistics of the meeting itself is a lengthy and tedious process; b) once the interview takes place interviews take 1 to 1.5 hours easily, narrative is very open, critical, emotional even though one clearly understands that they all professionals with high ethical standards and thus probably always loyal to their profession and society; c) some of the interviewees start off with statements that are rather formal and then latter on contradict themselves and become then more personal or even rather passionate in their discourse.

At this phase of my research already some surprising key theme has emerged. Here I would like to mention the connection between leadership and financial aspects of a society’s development. My first literature reviews let me to believe that these two fields of scholarly research are scantily explicitly connected in literature. A somewhat surprising finding. If my further research will confirm this being so this should open a research niche with valuable insights into theory and policy developments that can help understand and drive political decisions.

References:


