

**Reflexivity – an innovative leadership research methodology and
an ongoing means to develop personal effectiveness**

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Thoughts in progress...

Abstract

This paper offers an innovative way to consider leadership that is both relevant to the leadership research community and as a means to enquire and develop one's own personal practice. Instead of focusing on abstract themes, in which their context are often absent, here I have argued that it is the rich detail of human interaction, from the individual's own perspective, that is important in understanding one's own practice and offering valuable insights to others. The nature of reflexivity that I offer is heavily influenced by analogies drawn from complexity sciences as a way of increasing our understanding of ongoing human interaction, namely complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey *et al*, 2000).

The article explores the current problem in leadership research and goes onto consider the nature of reflexivity, as distinct from reflection, how this can then be taken up, the essential differences to other research methodologies and practical means for engaging with reflexivity.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Personal Development, Complexity, Methodology, Narrative

Introduction

Leadership is often spoken about from a distance: in the sense of “what great leaders do”, their successful traits, how they react to situations they find themselves in and so on. However, it is at a distance from the challenges, ambiguities, complexities, uncertainties and emotions of what the leader experiences at, or near, the time of happening. These issues, and others, are crucial to understanding leadership. For example how small details crop up, how they are reacted to, the subsequent affects, how broad organisational themes are interpreted at the micro scale and how those small details come back to affect (even in a small way) those themes in a continual “on-goingness”. In other words, I am stressing the importance of paying attention to the dynamics of leadership. Given the personal experiential nature of these dynamics I am not advocating an approach whereby one stands back and observes, instead I am arguing for the reflexive study of one’s own practice with the aim of both improving one’s own leadership and offering valuable insights for others. In doing so there is an opportunity to narrow the gap between how leadership is researched and written about in academia and its relevance to “frontline” leadership practice. It is therefore an approach that is relevant to both the academic and the practitioner. In this paper I draw analogies to the complexity sciences, and particularly the work of Ralph Stacey.

Given that I am advocating a new approach to leadership research I have felt it important to underpin my argument in several places by going back to “first principles” with references to sociology and philosophy on which to build my case. That said I have also sought to bring this to life with a practical example from my own work, explored in the paper and the Appendix. In proposing this methodology I am appealing to the practitioner who is intrigued to research their own practice, both experientially and intellectually.

The current problem of leadership research and the opportunity ahead

Most qualitative research literature about people in organisations, particularly as to what happens amongst senior organisational groups and teams suffers from drawbacks that affect both the amount of research that is conducted and its ability to get to the nub of human interaction. The research that does exist tends to adopt an Action Research or Ethnomethodological approach where the researcher observes the activity and works with the

participants as part of the process of understanding. However, although helpful, these methodologies fall short in two ways:

- Gaining access to senior teams to research. The issue of exclusion and inclusion is an important element of how such teams work and this extends to observers particularly in a research capacity. In other words, there is a lack of access to “the action”.
- When access has been secured and observation made, the “second hand” accounting for experience cannot describe the highly political and emotional nature of the power relation processes between the parties. As an example, take Samra-Freddricks’ (2003) excellent paper on strategy process. Here she uses an ethnomethodological approach to study the activity of strategizing as a lived experience; this is in contrast as she puts it, “to a ‘reported’ experience in interviews, theorizing the ever-present and intricate nature of the emotional and moral domains of human interaction”. However, although she was present with the protagonists during a year of study, listening and recording conversations, being there during real time interactions, she was there as an observer, detached from the emotional and deeply personal happenings as they affected the individuals themselves.

One way of tackling this problem is by turning the players within the management teams into researchers themselves; researching their own experience as an ongoing reflexive process.

This approach can provide valuable insights that can be explored in academic literature, “trade press” and general articles aimed at provoking thought and debate. In other words; a variety of media and discourse that bridges the gap between management and academia, providing relevant insights for both. It can also help close the gap between management intent and action: the ‘knowing-doing/doing-knowing gap’ described by Pfeffer (2005).

A way of thinking and approaching reflexivity as a methodology

When I talk of reflexive ‘methodology’ and ‘methods’ I do not want to give the impression that I’m advocating a fixed set of rules, like the list of instructions for a model Airfix Kit. In a paper recounting his reminiscences of his ethnographic research career, VanMaanen

(2006) goes further; stating that a standard uniformly applied methodology in such qualitative areas of research would neuter or destroy the inquisitive and adventurous. He argues that for ethnomethodology in particular: "... it remains open to a relatively artistic, improvised and situated model of social research ..." (Ibid, p18). Although Van Maanen is discussing his use of ethnomethodology this is a sentiment that I would argue equally applies to reflexivity. In some respects the temporal nature of reflexivity makes this more explicit.

Indeed, it was Otto Neurath (1944), in commenting on sociology and everyday life, who presented the following nautical metaphor to illustrate how methodology in sociology differed from a traditional science:

Imagine sailors who, far out at sea, transform the shape of their clumsy vessel... They make use of some drifting timber ... to modify the skeleton and hull of their vessel. But they cannot put the ship in dock ... to start from scratch. During their work they stay on the old structure and deal with heavy gales and thundering waves. A new ship grows out of the old one, step by step ... [they] may already be thinking of a new structure, and they will not always agree with one another. The whole business will go on in a way we cannot anticipate today. That is our fate (p47).

In summary, to pin reflexivity down to a discrete number of activities or steps is to miss the point. Reflexivity, as explored in this paper is a way of thinking, acting and thinking about one's acting extended over a period of time. It is a process that is not isolated from experience, or the researcher from the research, it is an attention to, and intensification of the detail of everyday life from which valuable insights can be drawn, both for the individual and as a contribution to wider knowledge.

Reflexivity – a definition and its relation to time, complexity and fluidity

Here I define Reflexivity as the 'paying attention and engaging with one's own experience and the noticing of one's movement of thought over an extended period of time'. It involves an essential unsettling (or putting at risk) of our beliefs and assumptions. In an article on the role and the missed opportunity of "radical" reflexivity within

ethnomethodology¹, the sociologist Melvin Pollner describes reflexivity as “an ‘unsettling’ i.e. an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices in describing reality” (1991). Words such as “unsettling”, “assumptions”, “discourse” and “practice” are important. They allow attention to be paid to the confusing, ambiguous, disturbing and challenging nature of human experience and power relations. Pollner (1991) argues that reflexivity does not lend itself to be separated from the researcher’s own experience, to be studied from afar and fixed conclusions made. This is notably different from other qualitative research methodologies such as Action Research and Ethnomethodology. Although I discuss these approaches in greater detail later I would like to draw the reader’s attention to their spatial connotations (ie the separation of the observer and observed, the formation of boundaries and the treating of experience as a “system”). Here I talk of reflexivity in an ongoing temporal sense. Reflexivity is therefore a critical exploration of personal experience.

It is important to emphasise the importance of time, or the temporal, as this defines my approach to reflexivity and methodology in general, particularly when compared with the predominant spatial metaphors and systems thinking. Here I would like to introduce the notion of complex responsive processes of relating, developed by Stacey and others (Stacey *et al* 2000; Streatfield, 2001; Shaw, 2002; and Griffin, 2002), as an approach to understanding ongoing temporal human interaction. This includes the nature of communication in the form of gesture and response characterising inclusion and exclusion, and identity and power in which meaning emerges. In essence it is an approach in which attention is paid to everyday experience, avoiding the temptation to abstract this detail into organisational recipes and systems. As Stacey and Griffin (2005, p8-9) point out; it enables understanding of organisations as ongoing widespread patterns of interaction between people, influenced by propositional themes and played out in local interactions.

The consequences are that individuals cannot step outside their interaction with others; this is because they too are a part of the ongoing process. Secondly, there is no overall design or blueprint. Stacey and Griffin stress that, in so far as there are plans, blueprints and designs exist; they are present only as a propositional theme to be taken up locally. Therefore, it is argued that global patterns can only be understood within local interactions. In summary therefore, reflexivity, from a complex responsive process perspective, is different from

¹ Which I now believe should now be considered as a separate methodology

other methodologies, and offers ways of undertaking research offering new and distinct insights into organisational life.

This leads me to quote directly from Stacey and Griffin when they state:

This means that the insights/findings of the research must arise in the researcher's *reflection* on the micro detail of his or her own *experience* of interaction with others. It follows that the research method is subjective, or rather a paradox of *detached involvement* (Ibid, p 9).²

I would just like to pick up again on Melvin Pollner description of reflexivity as “an ‘unsettling’ i.e. an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices in describing reality” (1991). He similarly argues that it does not lend itself to be separated from the researcher's own experience, to be studied from afar and fixed conclusions made; these are notable differences from the points I will raise later when discussing Action Research and Ethnomethodology. Although Pollner lists “assumptions”, “discourse” and “practice” as implied discrete areas the on-going experience is frequently confusing, disturbing and challenging. It is worth stressing how, on the one hand, human experience does not lend itself to splitting and categorization, but on the other to note how frequently this is done. For example the issue of one's assumptions, Cassell *et al* (2009), in a recent paper on qualitative management research, stated that assumptions should be made transparent. Furthermore, this should be an issue that deserved “time and space” and “classroom debate”. In an article on reflexive enquiry in organisational research, Cunliffe (2003) highlights the importance of “engaging in at least one self referential loop by interrogating the impact of [one's] own assumptions”. In both cases there is a separation or external process that is required from ongoing experience.

However, this seems too simplistic; firstly there is an implication that assumptions come preformed and secondly, that they exist separately from the ongoing nature of human relations between people.

I would like to dwell on this for a moment longer and to explore the implication of this “splitting” and categorization has on how we talk about experience. To do this I would like to draw on the work of Raymond Williams. Although better known for being a Marxist Sociologist, it is his reflexive thought that I would like to consider here (Williams, 1977).

² Author's own emphasis is in italics.

Williams points to the tendency of description and analysis habitually being expressed in the past tense and the difficulty this causes in seeing the ongoing human activity as anything but a fixed separate object. For example he says: “the strongest barrier to the recognition of human ... activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products” (Ibid, p128). He then points to the tendency of engaging with these static forms as a means of currency in communication, particularly when he notes: “Analysis is then centred on relations between these produced ... formations and experiences ... so that now only explicit forms exist, and the living presence is always, by definition, receding”. Williams uses the chemistry based analogy of “solution” and “precipitate” to explain his thought, pointing to the tendency to think and communicate via the latter rather than the former (Ibid, p134).

He explains the implications for reducing the fluidness of experience into static forms. In summary, there are consequences, for example in missing the: “... complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts, and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion” (Williams,1977, p129). If Williams points to what is lost in forming and working with abstractions in the present, he also illustrates the implications this has on the possibilities that are yet to come when he states: “And from the abstractions formed in their turn by this act of debarring – the ‘human imagination’, the ‘human psyche’, the ‘unconscious’ – new and displaced forms of social analysis and categorization, ...are more or less rapidly developed” (Ibid, p13).

Looking at this from a different angle John Dewey, from a pragmatist tradition, discussed a similar issue in *Democracy and Education*. Dewey makes the following point: “Experience, in short, is not a combination of mind and world, subject and object, method and subject matter, but a single continuous interaction of a great diversity of energies” (Dewey, 2007, p127). It is here that Dewey explains that we need to go back to the concept of experience, particularly with respect to process. In citing examples from the act of eating to the playing of a piano he states that there is no distinction between subject matter and method in a well functioning activity. However, it is when we come back to reflect upon experience we inevitably distinguish between the two, particularly one’s own part and the object to which we are directing our attention. This separation, when looking back, is so natural that Dewey explains that we are only too quick to attribute this as a separation in existence and not a distinction of thought.

Developing the notion that reflexivity is distinct from reflection and implication for ambiguity

The term “reflexivity” is often used synonymously with “reflection”; indeed, Alvesson and Skoldberg do this intentionally at the beginning of their book *Reflexive Methodology* (2009, p 8-10), only later drawing the important distinctions between the two.

Drawing on Heidegger’s work, Cunliffe and Jun (2005) state the following of reflection:

[It] is a “going towards” objects or willing something into truth by representing it as we think it is. This means an objective observer reflecting on a situation to understand what is really going on and to develop theories that explain that reality (Ibid, p227).

The same is true for the concept of reflection, as explored by Schön (1983) in his well known text “The Reflective Practitioner”, with its “mirror” type simile separating experience from the understanding of experience. This can also be seen in his earlier work on reflection with Argyris (Argyris and Schön, 1974), which seeks to consider experience in isolation with the concept of single and double loop learning. Here they claim that single loop learning focuses on those currently accepted values; whilst double loop learning questions the foundation on which those values are based.

Cunliffe and Jun explain that this form of thinking seeks “closure and categorization” and is a form of thinking that does not seek to question underlying assumptions. With reflection again there is a spatial separation, that of stepping outside and looking in. Little attention is paid to the temporal; either with respect to one’s assumptions that have led to that point, or indeed, being open to future possibilities. This approach contrasts with a reflexive methodology Cunliffe and Jun, (2005) are glimpsing when they say:

[We are] concerned with understanding the grounds of our thinking by opening ourselves to the hidden nature of truth. This does not mean developing an accurate description of reality, rather emptying ourselves of acceptable ways of thinking and opening ourselves to other possibilities. In particular, it means engaging in the reflexive act of questioning the basis of our thinking, surfacing the taken-for-granted rules underlying organizational decisions and examining critically our own practices and ways of relating with others (Ibid).

Although they remain caught by notions of “surfacing” and examination as if separating the observed from the observer, they are usefully making a distinction between reflection and reflexivity indicating the importance of ambiguity and those confused feelings that we as people experience. Here I would like to draw on Donald Levine, from a book that explores the loss of capacity in the modern world to deal constructively with ambiguity. He makes a valuable contribution when he states:

In their quest for precision, social scientists have produced instruments that represent the facts of human life in one-dimensional terms. They have defined concepts with rigour in order to represent dominant traits and tendencies univocally. They have constructed scales in order to measure the strength of specified variables on one dimensional continua. Investigations that rely on such instruments produce representations of attitudes and relations that strike us time and again as gratuitously unrealistic. For the truth of the matter is that people have mixed feelings and confused opinions, and are subject to contradictory expectations and outcomes, in every sphere of experience (Levine, 1985, p8).

In quoting Levine I am stressing the mixed and confused feelings people have in paying careful attention to the lived experience of being alive within the present, as opposed to the distant memory of dealing with atomised reflections. These feelings range from fear, intense excitement, boredom, a visceral intensity, insecurity and so on. These are feelings that would have faded if one was not to pay careful attention at the time of happenings. These are experiences that are all too often relegated to a passing comment at most management research, but that occupies the unsaid reality of practice.

Reflexivity within the wider qualitative family of research methodologies

I would now like to return to methodology and to explore other approaches within the family of qualitative methods, particularly ethnomethodology and action research.

Firstly I would like to turn to action research. Reason and Bradbury (2006), who have done much to develop the methodology, stress that it is not one fixed method, a point they stress when they say: “We describe action research as a ‘family of approaches’, a family which sometimes argues and fall out ...” (Ibid, p xxii), a point which emphasizes the contested, interactive and essentially contextual nature of the methodology. Those adopting action

research tend to be sceptical of the predominance given to academic learning at the expense of achieving pragmatic results and change within the area of investigation.

Given the varied approaches of action research, Eden and Huxham (1996) have sought to define it from the perspective of what it seeks to achieve. These include (p78-80):

- A utility to the client that develops as the research is undertaken (i.e. it is not reliant on a final report handed to the client).
- It needs to have implications beyond the immediate focus of research, which I take as being a way to address the requirements for research to achieve a level of generalisability. However, they warn against the problem of abstraction, namely of producing meaningless, jargon-ridden research that has little relevance to the practitioner's community.
- It needs to result in practical change and the development of theory from the conceptualization of experience.

It is relevant to note an almost evangelistic tone (or at least an explicit expectation to do "good"), for example, they stress that it should be "empowering" for the client. When referring to practitioners who later go on to read the research and make connections with their own experience, they state that it should "promote excitement" (Ibid, p80).

Stacey and Griffin (2005, p28-29) point to the similarities between action research and reflexivity from a complex responsive processes perspective, these include: the limitations in taking a positivist stance of researching social phenomena; focus on relationships and participation; seeking to explore every day experience; and the exploration of emergent experience. However, there are important differences. In order to explore these I would like to introduce a research paper that uses action research as its methodology. Referring back to Huxham, he published an account of research undertaken into New Public Management (2002). Here Huxham used action research to explore the practical issues that managers face to implement policy to make a difference on the ground. In the research he points to the inability to understand in advance how their endeavours can (and were) being thwarted by factors that were particular and inherent within the situation and context. I am not going to discuss further the content of their research here.

However, I would like to make two observations. Firstly, what I would interpret as Huxham's anxiety is the split between the object and the subject of the research in actual research practice. Note for example:

It was unclear how we would recognise the subject we were studying. Action research of this sort demands that the theory is derived emergently from the data. So far as is practical, the aim is to suppress pre-understanding in order to promote the emergence of new and creative insights (Ibid, p297).

However, in just a few lines he goes on to make the case of how difficult this is in general, and specifically with respect to this research study of which he has had previous experience. The second point I would like to make is how data is interpreted and theoretical concepts are developed, an issue that Huxham stresses is the most challenging aspect of action research. Here he quotes Jim Thomas when he states: "Interpretation of data is the defamiliarization process in which we revise what we have seen and translate it into something new, (distancing ourselves from the taken-for-granted aspect of what we see) ..." (Ibid, p304). The question for me is: what does this tell me about action research in comparison with reflexivity? In essence it can be summarised as:

- *Separation of process*; there are attempts to establish "boundaries" around investigators pre-existing knowledge and how information is dealt with through the research.
- *Spatial, not temporal*; the distancing of the researcher plays down the ability to see the ongoing temporal nature of contradictory, confusing and ambiguous experience.

I would like to briefly turn to ethnomethodology, a term coined and developed by Harold Garfinkel (1967). Garfinkel describes ethnomethodology as "the investigation of the radical properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent accomplishments of organised practices of everyday life" (Ibid, p11). As Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009, p78-82) illustrate, attention is paid to the exploration of how the microprocesses of social interaction go on to develop the shared social everyday world, and the development of assumptions and rules. Also, there is acknowledgement of the importance of reflexivity; in recognising that the researcher and the object of research are influenced and have been influenced by each other.

There are also important differences, the nub of which is captured in Garfinkel's own words when he says of the methodology that it is "directed to the tasks of learning how members' actual, ordinary activities consist of methods ... from within actual settings ..." (1967, pvii – viii). The reference to a "within" speaks of an assumption that there is an inside and outside, there is a location for research that is separate from interpretation. In other words, there is a spatial system for investigation. Also, in what Garfinkel describes as "indexical expressions", the methodology seeks to identify and separate units of meaning. Here there is an implied "reality" that is to be discovered, rather than an ongoing exploration and development of understanding with others.

An array of methods

I would now like to consider the techniques used. This is not a definitive list that must be worked through in a logical sequence. Instead I am illustrating several approaches that have been helpful to me and might be helpful to others embarking on a similar journey.

To do this I would like to consider my own research into policymaking (Warwick, 2010) using a reflexive methodology. My research, over a period of three years comprised of four interlinking projects including several narrative accounts, typically three or four per project. The Appendix to this paper includes one such narrative and a discussion of literature that enables me to gain more insights to the happenings. During my research, although only a small number of narratives would appear in each project, I developed a habit of regularly writing notes and recording conversations. Before I would attend a meeting, which I thought could be important, my attitude and alertness would change.

The best way to describe it would be to say I was present in two minds; the first, as a manager and someone who needed to achieve a particular result, the second as a researcher, interested to see how things would develop and how the interactions between people would play out. I now look back and think this was an intense experience, which contributed to a heightened awareness of my actions and the actions of others, an intensity that grew further as I would later work with the narrative. With voice recordings, where these were taken, I would pay particular attention to the language people would use, the words, the utterances, the emphasis and the pauses.

For me a common theme of my narrative would be an intricate description of the environment: cups and saucers; wood panelled rooms, flashing lights; sweet smoky smells; and so on. The inclusion of the environment would rapidly take me back to the scene enabling me to work with the material with an increased intensity. From iteration to iteration, irrelevant detail would become eroded. Occasionally, like hard granite outcrops, they would remain and would form part of the argument, as was the case of the untidy room in the Appendix.

Over the three years there have been a number of important conversational settings that have shaped my research. These have included:

- Meetings with fellow researchers as a community, typically running over a couple of days. For me these were the most intense conversational settings. These were the opportunity to engage with the narrative raw material, for me to receive (and give) feedback on the depth of engagement with literature (both in range and depth) and how sense was starting to emerge.
- Many conversations with people as part of my regular work; in many respects this was the raw material, engaging with people either in groups or individually, as set piece events (e.g. meeting or workshops) or informally.
- New networks; it would be wrong to focus just on conversations at work and as part of the course. During the three years I have found myself in new conversational settings and groups that have introduced me to new writers. Without this wider interaction there could have been a temptation to become too focused on a narrow range of literature and ways of thinking. Instead I have been able to be more challenging of my assumptions and those of others and to introduce a wider breadth of literature to my argument.
- Active engagement with literature that included: management scholars, “trade press” within the policy making community, philosophy and sociology. In other words, over the period of time to increasingly situate my research within a body of knowledge that was being moderated by my reflexive experience. This is different from more conventional research that seeks to separate a formal literature review.

However, the discussion extended beyond those conversations above, and included a growing intensity in the act of writing. In a paper recounting his reminiscences of his ethnographic research career, VanMaanen (2006) introduces his concept of “textcraft” (p14) to mean the hard intensive labour that represents much of the work done by the researcher that is rarely discussed. He points to how typically textcraft is discussed uncritically, without attention to all the other things that happen and influence one’s life. For me this is particularly the case; mixing work life, family life, reading and a myriad of other “distractions”. Nothing was isolated; a point that VanMaanen makes that is relevant when I think of my writing. In commenting on the uncritical examination of textcraft he states: “As such, it suppresses the social and contextual aspects of writing that includes reading others, discussing our ideas of content and styles with colleagues, the various shaping roles that are played by critics, reviewers and friends, ... and others in a language whose grammar, tone, voice, genre and figures of speech literally encode collectively” (2006).

An important feature that I describe with respect to an experiential form of reflexivity is that of risk, by which I do not mean risk in terms of personal safety or risk management. Instead I mean the intense experience of risk felt in the moment of happening, or unsettling to borrow Pollner’s term. This is in contrast to putting myself in a situation where I could observe risk. An example in my research included attending a complex surgical operation. This was complex from two perspectives; the procedure itself and how it integrated with a number of other activities that needed to occur over the UK. It was here, in paying very close attention to the unfolding events, that I became aware of the interconnectedness over a wide spread of geography and time. Time was experienced, not in relation to the clock, but contingent on a web of possible connected opportunities and choices that were becoming manifest in the playing out. It was in the experience of attending the operation, and becoming emotionally absorbed in the detail, that I became increasingly alert to how we as a group were weighing up with others the events that were unfolding. In those few hours there were many possibilities that could have opened up and closed which, when one looks back in hindsight, would fade from view.

To consider the operation in terms of a singularity would not be consistent with this experience. Putting myself at risk in this situation enabled me to become aware of the multitude of contingent events that were possible, ambiguous, not yet formed and that would roll out over the course of the evening. In other words I was becoming awake and

open to the possibilities to notice and to think differently in a way that would change and contribute to my practice of policymaking and service design. For example, here are a few notes of my experience of unsettling risk that went onto affect my practice of policymaking:

- I was not absenting myself in the present by thinking that I was “somewhere else”. I was paying attention to the smell, the noise and quietness, what I was seeing and how people were reacting together. In a way I was amplifying the intensity of my experience. And as I was doing this I became aware of, and wrote of, other people’s reaction to me in the operating theatre and afterwards. In doing so it felt that I was becoming a part of a community, not just standing on the sidelines.
- To take seriously my emotional response, from being dizzy and disorientated as I entered the theatre for the first time and seeing the donor, to knife to skin, to the incongruous conversations that I occasionally overheard.
- To pay careful attention to the conversations that took place within the operating theatre and on the phone to other hospitals. I was developing a sense of the dynamic web of interactions that were developing rapidly, both during and after the operation.
- Noting the sense of exhaustion afterwards in the bus back to the transplant centre, interrupted by the occasional phone call about the destination of the organs alongside distracted half-hearted conversations on the day ahead.

At this point I would like to take the opportunity to explain the following final words in the title of this paper: “... develop personal effectiveness”. The development or change to one’s personal effectiveness is often, but not always, an improvement. By adopting the approach outlined above power dynamics can be altered, personal awareness of strengths and weaknesses can change. It is therefore important to be aware of this possibility.

Does the degree of subjectivity undermine this research and what does this say for validity?

A concern that is understandable to the current approach to management research is that reflexivity, as I have described, is subjective and therefore lacks relevance or generalisability

in other sectors. Before I tackle this point head on it is worth remembering how many bookshelves in airports and high streets are full of individual accounts and autobiographies, mostly written after the events, from politicians and successful business leaders. This suggests that there is little evidence that readers fail to see a degree of relevance or interest that they can relate to.

It is worth considering the nature of subjectivity and to do this I would like to draw on the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, who was influenced by the philosopher George Hegel. It is Bourdieu's contention that subjectivity is a process of ongoing interaction with our objective world. This means that a tendency towards a reaction(s) is formed in response to a "recognized" situation(s) that has been shaped from a history of objective interactions in what Bourdieu terms *habitus*. In other words, our reaction and interaction with our world is bound and defined by our joint social history. Although our response is not fixed like an automaton we do act in a limited way that is conditioned by previous experience; we act in other words in a "reasonable way" And, as experts within our communities we do this in a way in which it is difficult for us to notice, at least in an un-reflexive sense. There is therefore an unnoticed paradox between fixed patterns of interaction and an emerging spontaneity as people relate with each other.

This way of thinking helps us to avoid the false split eloquently captured by the fictional character Forrest Gump. In a scene where he is grappling to make sense of his life that brings the dialectic to life he states: "I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floatin' around accidental-like on a breeze. But I, I think maybe it's both, maybe both happening at the same time." It enables us to explain how an individual can be affected by what she or he socially encounters, but in the encounter accepting that the social game is affected too, perhaps in a minute way, by the actions of the individual; both moving in a paradoxically predictable/unpredictable way.

It is in this interaction between our subjective and objective reality that we develop an experienced mastery or contextual expertise. It is therefore far from just "one person's views" it is an account that casts its net within a wider social fabric.

It is worth emphasizing that this discussion of *habitus* and subjectivity runs across the nature of human experience and by definition includes other social research methodologies discussed in this paper.

This brings me on to the issue of validity. In looking through the above list of experiences and the explanation of complex responsive processes, it could be argued that this approach is somewhat inward looking, lacking in reproducibility and relevance. To this, I would firstly state that, at their roots, I would again see similar traits in other qualitative methodologies, however here they are made explicit. Aram and Salipante (2003) consider the issue of validity in the context of management research, particularly the challenge of reconciling relevance (namely, the particular at the expense of the general) with rigour (this time, the general at the expense of the particular). In the following section on the issue of validity they state:

The goal of bridging scholarship is to produce pragmatic science, work that is high on both rigour and relevance. Concepts abound that cast validity as rigour. High levels of such validity rest on careful conceptualizing and design, and on self-critical reflexivity in the face of operational and interpretive choices. However, while necessary, these are inadequate for the achievement of pragmatic science. Achieving relevance calls for a concept of validity that rests on utilization of knowledge in the world of practice. The ultimate standard of such validity is adoption in communities of practice³. A bridging scholarship shares ... intent of producing know-how but seeks to produce it for communities beyond those immediately engaged in the research (Ibid, p202-203).

In the above paragraph, drawing on action research methodology, they illustrate (but do not depend upon) conceptualization and design. With this in mind I agree with Aram and Salipante when they point out the utilization of knowledge as contribution to validity in practice within a professional community. Within my research I have involved, and continue to involve, my professional community in my developing research in order to contribute to the validity of my research and its content. It is from this that a contribution to knowledge develops and offers the potential to continue.

³ Here “communities of practice” is used in a general sense, and not as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991).

In summary

I have become keen to promote a different way to think about management research that bridges the relevance gap between academia and the practitioner. For me this means moving the debate from seeing human activity in organisations as an “intellectual singularity”, or a straightforward algorithm, of cause and effect to one more closely resembling the “messiness of what we all face”.

The management scholar, Russell Ackoff, at an important point in his own personal journey from seeking solutions via the application detached operational research towards the complexity of integrated systems stated the following in a then provocative paper titled “the End of Operational Research”:

[M]anagers are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of complex changing problems that interact with each other. I call such situations *messes*⁴. Problems are abstractions extracted from messes by analysis; they are to messes as atoms are to tables and charts ... Managers do not solve problems, they manage messes.

Although his response to this dilemma is a reformation of a time bound systems based approach that he was critical of, he does highlight the nature of the problems I am keen to engage with. I have argued that an experiential temporal form of reflexivity can enable the practitioner/researcher to become open to the contingent web of possible connected opportunities and choices that become manifest in the playing out of the present in a way that contributes to an individual’s practice and offers insights to others.

The title of this paper concludes with the words “Thoughts in progress ...”. I am interested to hear the views of practitioners and academics on the approach I have outlined here. If you have any thoughts or comments please write to me at: robert.warwick@nhsbt.nhs.uk.

⁴ Author’s italics

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Appendix – a narrative and discussion

I am going to start Project Three with a description of the launch of [the] Report. It was 9am and we gathered in the reception [W]e went downstairs into a larger basement room used for press conferences with low ceilings which made it seem even more cramped. After the usual milling around talking, we sat down. The Chairman ...and a few others sat behind a large impressive desk. There was a neat backdrop, bottled water and microphones. We were sat on rather uncomfortable chairs arranged in a few untidy rows, which became more untidy as people moved around to talk with each other.

The Chairman, followed by Ian, a senior person ..., began to speak. Sitting at the back of the room the haphazard arrangement of people sitting on chairs in the foreground was in marked contrast to the neat backdrop and large desk from where the presentation was coming from. The case for improved ... was made and the recommendations were presented. The recommendations were presented in a confident and direct way. Other than recognising that all the fourteen recommendations were important if the ... increase in ... donation was to be achieved there was no recognition of how the recommendations would mesh together or fit within the wider healthcare picture. They were presented as clear and discrete areas of work that had been carefully thought out in the work of the [policy group]. This is not a criticism, I would have done the same and I certainly would not have pointed out how difficult it would be. Confidence and clarity were as important as the content, if people in the room and beyond were to be convinced that the changes were to be made. The presentation finished and we left, walking out ... on a cold January morning.

There are several things that I would like to point out that have only struck me as I have written this:

- The clear and confident manner in which the [policy group] report was presented. There was very little to hint at the arguments and tensions that were so evident behind closed doors. There was also very little to indicate attention paid to the ambiguity of the recommendations and the potential for conflict that was woven within them. Rather, the recommendations were presented as if they

were a toy model ... kit, with clear instructions and pre-fabricated items to be glued together.

- The way that the recommendations were presented as being crisp and clear with neat discrete boundaries. They were presented as being static and immovable features which were to be venerated. There was little hint at how they were to be made sense of, understood and flexed in order to fit them in with the rest of the NHS.
- The amount of movement in the room where people in front of those presenting shifted their chairs to talk with their friends and colleagues, the chatter that interrupted the presentation and the scattering of paper, bags and coffee cups that littered the floor. This being in contrast with the neat presentation from the Chairman and Ian. Also the observation that people's attention was drawn to Ian and the Chairman, but absent from the melee in the rest of the room.

I believe that these are important observations to consider in more depth. They are important for two reasons. Firstly, they were nearly overlooked, and secondly, they were overlooked because, in my experience, they are so common.

I would like to start the discussion by looking briefly at Foucault. Foucault, like Norbert Elias, was keen to see power in a relational context, rather than in a purely metaphysical sense. Previously, power has often been seen as a quality possessed by an individual, that could be used to restrict the behaviour of others and to do what the powerful wanted (Burkitt, 1993). The implication for Foucault and Elias's approach is that power is not so much an object of possession, to be used in an absolute sense, but more of a shifting relation between people. I would like to discuss Foucault to begin to make sense of what I experienced in the presentation I have described.

In 'Disciplinary Power and Subjection', Foucault (1976) discusses "manifold" relations of power which permeate and constitute the social body. I see a challenge being offered when he states:

Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjection at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours etc. In other words rather than ask ourselves

how the sovereign appears to us in his lofty isolation, we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc (Ibid, 1976, p233).

Here Foucault offers the opportunity to shift the gaze from those with the apparent power, and by implication seeing power as absolute property, to the myriad that are affected and effect power, in the multiple relationships between each other and those, in the case that I have described, at the “top table”. The sovereign, as metaphor for the Taskforce’s report, was presented in such a way as to suppress noticing the complex power relations that were in the wider room. Foucault works with the concept of agonism (Foucault, 1986, p221), which I understand as being a form of political theory developed largely by Nietzsche, which focuses on the potential benefit of some aspects of political conflict and is sceptical of the effort to eliminate deep seated divisions in society (Burkitt, 1993). Agonism was an issue that concerned Foucault throughout his working life, leading to a focus on resistance towards his later years (Pickett, 1996). Agonism is dependent upon both power relations and freedom between people; they are not opposite, but integral to each other.

I am going to discuss this in relation to the following quote from Foucault:

The relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot be separated. ... At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of “agonism” – of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face to face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation (Foucault, 1986, p221-222).

As power is therefore not a property or an absolute, it needs to be considered in the wider net of relations. The sense of theatre I have described at the Taskforce launch had its roots in a “sender/receiver” style of communication (Stacey, 2007, p274); here there is an assumption that by clearly articulating thought in, say, a presentation, one can package and convey a message to a group of people. And, should there be feedback to suggest it has been misunderstood, another round of communication should put that right. This systems

based “command and control” approach, masked the net of complex relations in the wider room. Take the four lines of recommendation ten for example ...

Despite the sense of theatre and “sender/receiver” mindset of the communication which implied that the report and its recommendations were non-negotiable, how could this be considered in relation to what I have discussed?

On the issue of agonism, I would like to point to the following. I was sitting next to John, a professor Next to him was a chief NHS medical person. John later recounted that they had a brief conversation where this person asked how many more surgeons they would require. John, off the top of his head, thought of a number. This number has now been ingrained in official policy. Both John and this person were there of their own free will. However, both knew of the constraints within the ... recommendations. Neither constraint or freedom were present in isolation, both were there together. Subsequently this helped form a context whereby the ambiguity of the recommendations was made sense of. Indeed, it was made sense of within a far wider network of relationships than the Taskforce could have envisaged.

The [group] realised that if the recommendations were to be accepted by the Minister and the communities, then consensus amongst the ... members was seen as being critical. To achieve this there was considerable ambiguity built into the recommendations. As we move into implementation there is a legacy that needs to be understood. The recommendations were presented as being the agreed unanimous position of the ... members. However, the vagueness of the recommendations sought to mask a contradiction. The legacy handed down from the [group] was the potential for conflict wrapped in agreement. In the few months since the [group] published its report this hidden conflict has been like an open wound, too painful to touch and too difficult to talk about. What did this actually mean? Given that a group of specialists, working in parallel to the [group], had not agreed how this was to happen, the clarity on the face of the recommendation masked, from a different angle, a constellation of ambiguities and inter-connected conflict laden puzzles.