Subjective, Personal Introspection: Autoethnographic Insights from an Action-Oriented Study of a Collaborative Venture

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper and literature addressed - When engaging in research, the research strategy that we choose should be a reflection of the phenomenon of interest, the nature of the research problem, and the research question(s) being posed. The link between the question(s) and the method selected, will determine the types of results obtained and ultimately, the usefulness of the results and the practical application of the study findings. As researchers, we make decisions regarding the paradigms within which we choose to operate. These paradigms reflect how we view the world, how we view reality, knowledge, what we feel is the best approach to investigate the phenomena of interest. How we analyse data and how data are interpreted is a reflection of the epistemological and ontological paradigms under which we are practising. In this paper, I will provide very brief overview of ‘action research’ and ‘subjective personal introspection’ (SPI) – and in so doing, illustrate a methodological approach (the latter) that has the potential to provide a rich ‘emic’ perspective of network practice for those who undertake action-oriented research.

Research method – I will go beyond the conceptual and utilise SPI to develop a ‘narrative’ of my own ‘action-oriented’ research experience within a multisector collaborative venture established by thirteen partner organisations representing the academic, pharmaceutical industry and government sectors. Its approach is both theoretical and reflective rather than a description or analysis of what went on in the collaborative venture.

Research findings and main contribution – Because the focus of the paper is subjective, personal, and introspective, it does not illustrate “findings” about multi-sector collaboration, but rather reflections and insights about the way the research was conducted, from getting access to the founding partners, conducting the research and finally writing it up. Thus, it is a paper about the process of qualitative research from the point of view of a researcher, rather than a description of a particular piece qualitative research perse. From an IMP perspective, the aim is to introduce a novel methodological approach to the study of the network/interaction field and in particular, suggest empirical opportunities for ‘action’ researchers working within an actor, activities and resources context in providing a behind-the-scenes view of how a qualitative research project was conducted.

Keywords subjective personal introspection, action research, qualitative, reflection

Introduction

As a methodological approach, introspection is a relative newcomer to the marketing arena where its application has essentially been restricted to consumer behaviour research. Subjective personal introspection (SPI) involves the generation of rich, impressionistic narrative accounts of the writer's own experiences regarding a particular phenomenon of interest. Historically, this has tended towards consumer behaviour researchers describing their own personal consumption experiences (Gould 1991, 1995; Holbrook 1986, 1995, 2005; Shankar 2000). In its purest form, SPI utilises the researcher as subject. Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) term this researcher introspection. This is in contrast to three other forms of introspection: guided introspection involves the researcher asking participants (informants, interviewees etc.) to introspect; interactive introspection is when both researcher and participants introspect and the data results from their interaction; and syncretic introspection denotes any combination of the three. Despite the differences, all three fundamentally involve "at least one individual providing verbal data on aspects of his/her experience that are consciously available to the introspector but not directly observable by another person" (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993, pg. 340). For this reason, SPI is a very controversial research technique because it involves examining one's own mental and emotional processes related to a topic being researched and collecting these introspections together in the form of a personal narrative or autobiographical essay (Brown and Reid 1997).

For the purposes of this paper, I use the terms SPI and reflection interchangeably, but there are those who, in arguing that "it is important not to be caught in the trap: to grasp reflection as an individual cognitive process that is as a process of introspection" (Høyrup 2004, pg 443), describe critical reflection in ways that would seem to inspire the basis of SPI – i.e., challenging our presuppositions, questioning the reasons for and the consequences of what we do, incorporating the social context into our reflection, and being aware of why we attach the meaning we do to reality, and to our roles and relationships.

As previously mentioned, SPI has only been seen in the consumer behaviour literature and this makes sense given that despite being marketing researchers/academics, we also are consumers ourselves affording us the opportunity to look inward and introspect. Using the same logic, interpretivist, action researchers study phenomena with the full acknowledgement that we are not separate from the research and our presence influences the research process itself - which again affords us the opportunity to look inwards and assess our own experiences working within organizations and/or networks. There is an opportunity to create insightful narratives through introspection based upon those experiences and in so doing, better respond to the encouragement to "interrogate the way in which [our] own perspectives and frames of reference help shape [our] questions and interpretations, as well as, most fundamentally, the very way in which the area of inquiry is framed (Ladkin 2005 pg. 109). I believe that this is critical when conducting action research, because with action research we, as researchers, are the research instruments while with SPI, the researcher is instrument-subject. Although not an action researcher himself, Gould (1995) captures the essence of why I see merit in the incorporation of SPI into (some) action research in describing it is an approach that relies on the 'reflexive mediation' between one's personal and one's research insights with the added power of 'mindful self-observation'. Thus, introspection involving the provision of data about our own experiences and the "ongoing tracking experiencing, and reflecting on one's own thoughts, mental images, feelings, sensations, and behaviors" (Gould 1995, pg. 719) is vital when our presence as a researcher can have an influence on organisational/network practice.

In this paper, I will revisit a piece of action-oriented research that I undertook (Rod and Paliwoda 2003) that looked at the development of a collaborative venture among thirteen organisations from the academic, pharmaceutical industry and government sectors, where the research was conducted along an action-oriented line, (in that not only I was feeding the results of my inquiry back to the organisation in an effort to assist in it's ongoing development/management, but also, that I could be considered a pseudo-insider given the fact that upon completion of the research, I was to assume a managerial role within the venture in a stakeholder relations type portfolio). Thus, this paper provides a first-hand, 'insider' account of a qualitative research project, but with a focus on the research process, rather than on the actual case data. As such, there is no real research question. I'm reminded of some recent correspondence with a journal editor, who in informally looking at a paper that I was working on, told me that his readers would be very interested in discovering how the analysis of findings and conclusions being drawn might have been interpreted differently if the research studies published in his journal over the previous two years had adopted an action-oriented approach. Aside from the fact that although impossible, I knew what his intent was, it leads me to the crux of this paper. Having completed my doctoral thesis research a few years ago, can SPI shed any new light on my analysis and interpretation of the data, or at a minimum, on the action-oriented research process? The literature provides the backdrop against which introspections are described. These introspections are decisive, not only comprising the narrative of the research, but also illuminating the deeply personal and subjective nature of qualitative research. Holbrook states "SPI amounts to a form of participant observation or observant participation in one's own life. In effect, SPI constructs a sort of authoethnography via which the author enjoys privileged access to the relevant phenomena of interest" (Holbrook 2005, pg. 45). This notion of 'autoethnography' involves the researcher's lived experiences (Canniford 2005) Because the data are comprised of our own experiences, Jorgensen (1989) states that we are in a position to question ourselves and then articulate our findings in a manner far more critically than would be the case with others.

The next section provides some background on a few relevant issues related to undertaking an action-oriented, qualitative research approach along with a brief introduction to the collaborative venture that was the focus of the initial study. Details of the case will be limited, offering brief insights into the context and nature of the venture, and of the research issues considered, rather than detailed and exhaustive information. The sections that follow reinforce the nature of qualitative research, from my perspective based on my interactions with key individuals involved in establishing this venture through initially gaining access to them, getting on with the research, and writing it up for my PhD thesis.

Setting the scene

Qualitative research issues

A problematic issue that exists in much traditional organisational inquiry has been characterised by separating the inquiring subject from the object(s) of inquiry in a search for the foundations of knowledge, a search for the 'truth', and a quest to explain human action that is unaffected by the uncertainties of time, place and human intention (Schwandt 1993). However, there is no sharp distinction between interpreted and uninterpreted experience since knowledge (even that which is based upon direct observation) is interpreted through prior theory about the importance or significance of what is being observed (Robinson 1993). Schwandt (1993) states that this epistemology is being replaced by hermeneutics; a tradition that emphasises the situatedness, contextuality and contingency of all knowledge and action and that "to live well in this world, to inquire into, understand, and direct moral, political, and social life requires a different kind of knowledge, *phronesis* - practical wisdom." (pg. 20). The underlying ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions of interpretive research encompass multiple constructed realities, the proximity of researcher and what's being researched and their interaction along with the research being value-laden and inherently biased (Lincoln and Guba 1985), resulting in findings that are not evaluated as being either 'true' or 'false', but rather as being useful or not (Shankar 2000). This interpretive orientation indicates the importance of qualitative schools of thought in social science inquiry (Gummesson 2003), (Perry and Gummesson 2004).

'Traditional' researchers criticise applied researchers with losing the objectivity that comes with basic or abstract research, thus making them 'social engineers' rather than investigators (Schensul 1987). Others oppose the firm separation between science and application, especially within the social sciences, where research can be viewed as a cyclic, reciprocal, social process between researcher and researched, where application in degrees should be part of the research process (Van Braak 1975, cited in Nas et al

(1987). These authors argue on behalf of *praxeology* - the science of application, which includes: 1) the thematic application of theory, 2) the study of intervention strategies, and 3) the study of the research process in relation to the use of results. This is in contrast to non-application-oriented 'expert' researchers, armed with all the relevant theory necessary to solve problems, which study organisations and the subjects within, and then deliver potential solutions. Meanwhile, there has been virtually no input to the research process from those who actually experience the organisation from within. Local theory, tacit knowledge and the socially constructed nature of organisational reality have not had the opportunity to play any role in determining not only how to *solve* organisational problems but initially, how to *frame* the problems. This is problematic because as Mangham (1993) notes, a positivist philosophy that utilises the natural sciences-based scientific method is applicable to phenomena that are amenable to precise specification and measurement and which do not appear to assign meaning to their own behaviour. Organisations do not subscribe to these conditions. It is these limitations of positivist organisational inquiry that has led to the development of philosophical and methodological approaches to the study of social science phenomena that fall under the rubric of action-oriented inquiry.

Table 1: Action Research versus Positivist Assumptions

	Action Research	Positivist Approaches	Reference
Ontology	Reality is objectively given but subjectively represented	Reality is singular and objective	Hussey and Hussey 1997); Guba and Lincoln (1994)
Epistemology	Manager/practitioner and academic can both contribute specific and general knowledge	Manager as subject of experiment/study. Academic as detached expert	Susman and Evered (1978)
	Co-production of knowledge, both parties are experts	Academic as producer of knowledge. Manager as consumer of knowledge	Rowan (1981); Slominowski (1994)
Aims	Development of "guides for taking action"	Prediction of events from propositions	Heron (1981); Susman and Evered (1978)
Timing of outcomes	Immediacy of outcomes/ findings	"Wait and see" approach	Susman and Evered (1978)
Time Perspective	Future orientation	Observations of the present and explanations of the past	Emery (1967)
Methodology	Incorporates training to improve performance of managers	Consists only of knowledge production, not its application	Lewin (1946); Heron (1981)
	Cyclical, multi-stage process allows adaptation	No intervention between action and measured outcome	Chein (1948); Heron (1981)
Validation	Occurrence of intended outcomes	Logical consistency , prediction	Susman and Evered (1978)

adapted from Daniel and Wilson (2004)

Action Inquiry – An Introduction

Susman and Evered (1978) argue that as research methodology becomes more sophisticated, there is an ever-widening gap between theory and utility for the purposes of organisational problem solving, and that this 'crisis' is rooted in the limitations and inappropriateness of a positivist approach to studying human organisations. With the increasing recognition that organisational research is limited in scope and ultimately, in impact, by blindly adhering to this narrow view of what constitutes valid, scientific inquiry, newer, more holistic approaches to examining organisational phenomena are being promoted and put into practice. One such group of related methodological approaches has been termed action research or action inquiry.One of the major obstacles to the acceptance, and utilisation of any newly introduced concept, is arriving at a consensus definition about what that concept actually purports to be. Action inquiry is no exception, as researchers with different objectives tend to emphasise different aspects of these research strategies. Recent attempts to illustrate what the various action inquiry strategies have in common, as well as how they differ, show us that ideology and process distinguishes one approach from another (Ellis and Kiely 2000). Although its origins are somewhat disputed, social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) is generally credited with coining the term ‘action research’, as a means of generating knowledge about a social system while at the same time, attempting to change it. He conceived of action research as a cyclical inquiry process consisting of diagnosing a problem situation, planning action steps, followed by implementing and evaluating outcomes (Elden and Chisholm 1993). There are other authors who suggest that action research goes even further back than Lewin. Educational researcher John Dewey’s demystification, domestication and democratisation of the scientific method, in which he saw it as essential that ordinary citizens could join with professionals in respectable programs of enquiry and reform (McTaggart 1991) is also acknowledged as laying some of the foundations in the action research area.

Taking Lewin as the starting point, contemporaries of Lewin soon began breaking action research into different sub-categories, depending upon their relative emphasis on the key phases identified by Lewin. This resulted in Chein *et al (1948)* identifying four kinds of action research: diagnostic, participant, empirical and experimental (cited in McTaggart 1991). The diagnostic element was later built upon by Rappoport (1970) who defines action research as simply a strategy for using scientific methods to solve practical problems in a way that contributes to general social science theory and knowledge. Gadourek (1972, cited in Nas et al 1987) views action research more from the participant viewpoint looking at is role as a heuristic principle for decision-making problems of managers, administrators and public policy personnel. Describing action research as one form of cooperative enquiry, Hart and Bond (1995) cite Reason’s choice of the term ‘new paradigm’ research as: “A way of doing research in which all those involved contribute both to the creative thinking that goes into the enterprise - deciding on what is to be looked at, the methods of the inquiry, and making sense of what is found out - and *also* contribute to the action that is the subject of the research. Thus in its fullest form, the distinction between researcher and subject disappears, and all who participate are both co-researchers and co-subjects. Co-operative enquiry is, therefore, also a form of education, personal development, and social action.” Focusing on the goals of action research, Robinson (1993) cites a definition developed by Kemmis: “Action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and social justice of: (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situation in which the practices are carried out.” She concludes that in examining the various definitions of action research, three main goals can be derived. Thus, action research involves a) the improvement of practice, b) the improvement of practitioners’ ability to improve their practice, including relevant practice contexts, and c) the generation of knowledge about practice and the improvement process.

A key facet of action research is its cyclical nature of diagnosing, action planning and taking, evaluating, and specifying learning. This key facet of taking action is one that traditional quantitative organisational research does not include. By ignoring local theories-in-use and multiple perspectives of organisational groups, this results in missed opportunities for:

- Uncovering implicit action-related assumptions and beliefs and stakeholder differences therein,
- Distinguishing between contextual factors that are and are not integral to the conceptualisation and implementation of action, in addition to identifying the influential causal contextual factors, and
- Using the contextually grounded framework of local theory as one interpretive frame for inquiry findings (Greene 1993).

Israel et al (1992) further support this in their assessment of the six necessary conditions in conducting action research. They state that action research is participatory, cooperative/collaborative, a co-learning experience, involves system development; an empowering process and it achieves a balance between research and action. Because of the socially constructed nature of reality, a scientist's (researcher's) theory about one's world is no more valid than a layperson's. Therefore, as has been discussed in earlier definitions, one of the key components of any sort of action research is the collaborative nature of investigation. This is nicely summarised by Schensul and Stull (1987) in their book on collaborative research where they state "no individual, no single theoretical framework, no single disciplinary or sectoral approach is able to address effectively the serious issues."

In summary, the term 'action research' has been interpreted many different ways but there are themes that are common amongst most of them and to which most action researchers subscribe. These are that research output results from "an involvement with members of an organisation over a matter which is of genuine concern to them" (Eden and Huxham 1996a) and that rigorous research can lead to theory-development where theory is grounded in action-oriented data that is both meaningful and useful to both academics and practitioners alike (Eden and Huxham 1996b).

Action Inquiry – How it Works

As was shown in the previous section, action inquiry operates on a number of levels, and can be used in a number of different contexts including management, marketing, organisational design/development, education, community development and medicine. Schensul (1987) for example, lists several advantages over other forms of applied research. These include:

- Bringing together diverse skill sets and knowledge bases,
- De-mystifying the research process, thus allowing those who will utilise the results the opportunity to understand and shape the data collection process(es),
- Building a research capability in the community/organisation that can extend beyond and operate independent of the external researcher,
- Increasing the likelihood that the research results will be used by non-researchers, and
- Improving the quality of the research through access to the community/institution and to key bodies of knowledge.

This particular volume (Schensul 1987) on collaborative research summarises well the key contentions of action research in that it represents a dialogue between academic researchers and practitioners or policy makers in which a more profound understanding of important social problems (or simply pressing organisational problems) arises - thus resulting in greater insight into ways of addressing these problems, combined with the ability to test these insights, which contributes both to social welfare on the one hand and to theory building on the other. Mills (1993) makes the theory-generation component of action research more explicit in noting that an action inquiry-based study should attempt to provide:

- Insightful distinctions that tell something new about the phenomena,
- Clear definitions of new concepts at the theoretical, operational, or concrete example levels,
- A cumulative glossary of these ideas within a specific project,
- The interrelations of ideas into patterns or linkages, and
- Findings that are helpful in problem solving within the same broad domain, thus providing some guidance in developing theory.

The principles of action research are also seen in the writings of non-action researchers as well. Such critical social theorists as Fay (cited by Mathison 1993), who note that research must:

- Be translatable into the language of experience if it is to speak to the felt needs of social actors (i.e., the local theory, tacit knowledge and emic perspectives of organisational insiders),

- Provide a critique of the dominant ideology that allows certain social practices to exist (i.e., thus subscribing to the more critical participatory action research model whose mandate is to emancipate oppressed groups and challenge the norms of 'Western' society), and
- Demonstrate viable alternative arrangements (Mathison 1993).

Notwithstanding the numerous distinctions and refinements that occur under the rubric of action research, the key aspects of how action inquiry is defined and its operations can be simplified. This simplification is shown in Figure 1, in a simple 2 x 2 matrix developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (from McTaggart 1991).

Figure 1. Rubric of Action Research

	Constructive	**Reconstructive**
Discourse (Among Participants)	1. *Plan* Prospective to action (constructed action)	4. *Reflect* Retrospective on observation (reconnaissance and evaluation)
Practice (In the Social Context)	2. *Act* Retrospective guidance from planning (deliberate & controlled strategic action)	3. *Observe* Prospective for reflection (documentation)

Source: McTaggart (1991)

Having introduced the notion of action inquiry in a broad sense, this paper will now turn its attention to specific issues within this domain.

Action Research – Specific Issues

In beginning a discussion on specific issues in action research, a good place to start is in examining the 'scientific' basis of action research. Aguinas (1994) did this and illustrated the similarities between action research and the scientific method in an article that attempts to close the philosophical and methodological gap between the two. Analysing their common roots and assumptions, he focuses on multivariate causality and the use of control groups in field versus laboratory intervention settings and the use of qualitative versus quantitative data. Perhaps because he focuses on the classical action research model, which is structured much more like a traditional experimental design, he succeeds in noting the similarities. However, Aguinas (1994) does more to further the cause of those who see no similarities between action research and the traditional scientific method by including notes that illustrate how the classical action research model is much different from the newer, emergent forms of participatory action research. Here, the work of Susman and Evered (1978) is made more salient when noting that action research and scientific method generally use different descriptive language (connotative and metaphorical versus denotative), ontologies (constructivist versus positivist), anf epistemological objectives (action guidelines towards desired outcomes versus prediction and control). This also results in researchers choosing to utilise different methodologies (sense-making versus induction and deduction), different criteria and methods of confirmation (evaluation of intended consequences versus logical consistency, prediction and control), and finally a different basis for generalisation (analytical, context-bound versus statistical, universal and context-free).

Therefore, the question should be asked is action research long on action and short on theory? According to the contributions to the special issue of *Human Relations* (volume 46, no. 10, 1993), Bartunek (1993) states that current action research is making a great contribution to scholarship in that there is increasing dialogue between action researchers and participants. However, in this same issue, citing Peter Sederberg, Mangham (1993) distinguishes between the procedural and substantive ideologies of contemporary science. The former are sets of explanations and prescriptions about how to construct explanations whereas the latter encompass sets of explanations and prescriptions directly concerning the world. It is this substantive component that Mangham (1993) laments is under-examined in much of the current research being conducted under the banner of action research. He sees the main task of action research as being the defining and negotiating of reality that occurs between participants. Thus, he feels that too much action research focuses on legitimating itself as being worthy and scientific rather than dealing with substantive issues - almost as though in breaking with traditional positivist science, action research is experiencing separation anxiety and still feels the need to impress its older, more established rival. Peter Reason (1993), echoes these sentiments in stating: "When we engage in action research we are engaging in a human process of building communities of inquiry. We have moved away from the attempts at rigorous external control, which was the basis of traditional research, and while we may wish to hold to some empirical checks, we put our trust much more in the human process of critical curiosity, on what I have called 'human inquiry.' One of the criteria of validity, or quality, or this kind of action research is that it takes place within a community of inquiry which is capable of effective communication and self-reflection." (pg. 1268).

Commenting on the newer, more 'emergent' features of action research, Chisholm and Elden (1993) and Elden and Chisholm (1993) illustrate a number of dimensions of action research that can be placed on continua. They first note that action research is beginning to examine more complex target system levels - with increasing complexity occurring as one goes from groups to organisations to society and trans-societal systems. Action research also spans the entire spectrum of organisation in systems - from the tightly to the loosely organised. Action research change objectives span the entire spectrum - from improving organisational performance and generating social science theory to the more critical action research that attempts to raise consciousness explore new approaches to social problems and emancipate or empower groups that have traditionally been oppressed. Therefore, the action research process itself can range from being largely a predetermined closed process to an emergent open process. This follows closely on how the role of the researcher is seen - from dominating the action research process to collaboratively managing the process with system members.

As previously mentioned, just as SPI involves critical reflection, so too must action research. Action researchers are encouraged to employ 'critical subjectivity' in that we must notice our frames of reference, as well as our political, racial, cultural and/or gendered orientation and we should question our routinised reactions to people and events (Ladkin 2005). Marshall (2001) takes this accounting for subjectivity further by attending to 'inner' and 'outer' arcs which entails paying attention to how we perceive, make meaning, frame issues, make assumptions as well as reaching outside ourselves perhaps by actively questioning or raising issues with others in order to 'test' and develop our ideas. The bottom line is that critical subjectivity in the case of action research and critical reflection in the case of SPI both involve noticing the way in which our consciousness moulds and contributes to the context of the inquiry (Ladkin 2005). Having reviewed the action research literature, this paper will now return to the action-oriented case study on which this paper is based.

Institute of Pharmacoeconomics

The action-oriented case study on which this paper is based was conducted as part of my doctoral research. In 1994, the Universities of Calgary and Alberta and the Government of Alberta in Canada established a steering committee to explore the feasibility of creating an Alberta-based Institute of Pharmaco-Economics. A key founding principle was embraced – collaboration among academia, government, and industry would be vital to its success. It was this founding principle that was for me, personally, perhaps the most interesting phenomenon to study. Since it was deemed to be a necessary precondition for success, I really wanted to explore why. In 1995, seven multi-national pharmaceutical companies embraced the proposal and as a result, thirteen organizations, representing the government, academic and industry sectors, came together to create the Institute of Pharmaco-Economics (IPE) and became its founding partners. Two years into its operations, discussions were held with senior management about the possibility of studying IPE as an example of multi-sector collaboration to see what insights might be gained. As such, the purpose of the research undertaken was to explore the perspectives of the founding Board of Directors of the Institute of Pharmaco-Economics (IPE). This research also sought to confirm the existence of various factors reported in the literature as influencing collaborative venture success as well as to determine whether there were additional success factors within the context of a multi-party, multi-sector collaborative venture. The intent of the research was also to investigate multiple internal perspectives by exploring each sector individually and by obtaining organisational perspectives from each of the partner organisations representing the three different sectors. In so doing, I felt that a truer picture of what constitutes multi-party, multi-sector collaboration could be obtained.

In this manner, it might be possible to see whether the collaborating partners were actually 'practising what they preached' – insofar as insights from the personal interviews could be compared to what was being expressed in the various draft business/communications plans that were being made available to me. Were the written materials from IPE a genuine reflection of the perspectives of the founding partners? To use the terminology of Chris Argyris, it would be an opportunity to compare instrumental (task-related) and interpersonal (relationship-related) 'espoused theories of action' with 'theories-in-use' i.e., comparing what they claim was guiding their actions with what was in fact guiding their actions. Looking at the perspectives of IPE's Board of Directors and analysing these potentially contrasting theories constitute powerful heuristics of reflection and learning (Lipshitz 2000). A novel and theoretically interesting aspect of IPE was that it provided an opportunity to gain insights into how collaboration can arise and persist, not only with partners representing different sectors, but with the founding partners from one of these sectors all coming from the highly competitive pharmaceutical industry. A major objective of this research, in addition to learning more about multi-party, multi-sector collaborative ventures, had been to assist in relationship-building among partners through the discovery and incorporation of their perspectives and interests into the ongoing development of this unique collaboration. Because there was a strong possibility that I would assume a 'stakeholder relations' type of role within IPE, the convergence of researcher and Board members into a joint process of meeting both research and collaborative management objectives constitutes what I had coined 'action-oriented inquiry'.

Having now described the action-oriented methodological approach and the collaborative venture itself, the remainder of this paper will illustrate my subjective personal introspections on various topics related to doing this thesis research. These introspections are based both on personal retrospective reflection as well as on analysis of my case study journal, which was created as part of my data collection, and analysis. Revisiting my case journal is, itself, another qualitative methodology known as qualitative diary research (QDR), whereby a researcher-driven diary acts as a repository of information comprised of thoughts and reflections, comments, notes, problems, issues, questions, key words, and action plans (Patterson 2005). This is important because as Holbrook (2005) states: "SPI does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it requires inputs of the author's memories – recollections that are potentially susceptible to mental lapses. Because such memories are inherently suspect, they gain enhanced trustworthiness if they can be supported by relevant historical materials – memoirs, memorabilia, and mementos of various kinds (pg. 46).

Making My 'Pitch'

Why would an organisation agree to a request from a researcher to study them? In my case, I believe that it was very much a reflection of good timing. By virtue of having a background and ongoing interest in pharmacology and health sciences, I had become aware of IPE and knowing that it was a fairly unique example of this type of collaborative effort, I initiated contact with key people in order to explore the possibility of using them as the focal case in my thesis research. I had read about IPE and it's unique composition of founding partners and felt that there was an opportunity to research a rather novel organisation. Because at that time, I had become familiar with the joint ventures literature, I used this in my “pitch” to IPE’s CEO. I feel that I made a rather compelling presentation. Firstly, I knew that the CEO was in this role as a temporary measure until a permanent CEO could be recruited. Knowing that he would not step down for at least a year, I basically offered my services as an action researcher, where one of my objectives would be to work to try and determine how best to keep this collaborative venture going, given the failure rates reported in the literature with far less complex collaborations. I knew that IPE was looking to initiate a doctoral fellowship program and so I developed a proposal that not only fit the funding criteria but that also catered to the desire of the, then, CEO to have as much help as possible in managing this collaboration through its early stages. A powerful motivator for organisations in granting access for a particular study is the possibility that they might gain some benefit from it (Scott, 1965, p. 275). From my case journal, I wrote: “The management of IPE saw my role as a researcher as being an excellent way to not necessarily intervene and then evaluate [as per a typical action research project], but rather to be able to get a sense of “where we’re at”, to be able to take the pulse of the partner organizations and almost be in a position to get an informal progress report. How are we doing? What things do we need to consider? Are there any concerns? These types of questions were not posed directly but answers to them are a by-product of my inquiry. This is why I view this as an action research approach. It satisfies both the academic and the practical - lessening the gap between theory and practice.”

I believe that my success in both gaining access to the CEO and subsequently the entire Board of Directors and convincing him of the merit in conducting an ‘action-oriented’ study of the institute and ultimately, conducting the study with a view to then working *for* the institute upon completion of my doctorate is based on the notion of ‘political entrepreneurship’. Based on their own autoethnographic reflections as action researchers, Björkman and Sundgren (2005) argue that a major factor behind the success of their action research projects is political entrepreneurship. They describe political entrepreneurship as being comprised of a repertoire of capabilities - the capability to find red-hot issues for one’s own research and to engage organisational members, to use the inside of the organization in the research efforts, to use and diffuse the research results and to work on the positioning of one’s relational platform. When I reflect on my experiences with IPE and I look at my case journal I see that I had been successful in framing the research project in a way that was of tremendous interest to IPE’s Board of Directors. In addition, my feeling is that in speaking with me so early in the life of this institute, they viewed my research as an opportunity to maximize the return on their investment through candid discussions about how to achieve this as well as with the knowledge that because I might assume a formal role within the institute, my interests and commitment were long term rather than simply restricted to the completion of an academic piece of research. This raises the issue of how I viewed my ‘role’ in this research and what I saw as being my responsibility. In some ways I recall the need to almost assume a schizophrenic approach in that I was conscious of the (perceived?) need to be one thing to those individuals with whom I interacted at the Institute and another to my supervisory committee at the university – even though this was positioned as a piece of ‘action-oriented- research, I still felt the need to present myself to my committee as more detached, objective, and ‘academic’. To whom was I answerable? Again, my feeling was that I had two ‘bosses’ with two somewhat different deliverables. I was answerable to the institute in that I felt I had a responsibility to do what I could to facilitate their continued operations while answering to the university in producing a thesis that met with all the academic criteria and standards. I’ll now turn to some of my thoughts related to the collection and the analysis of my data, which had been gathered from interviews, observations, field notes, and archival documents.

The Data

Case Studies, interviews, observation and conversation

Johnston et al (1999) state that: “Case study research consists of a detailed investigation that attempts to provide an analysis of the context and processes involved in the phenomenon under study. No attempt is made to isolate the phenomenon from its context, but instead, the phenomenon is of interest precisely because of its relation to its context. By taking a more systematic and theory-based approach to case study research, case studies may provide a useful, yet underdeveloped tool". Similarly, Stake (1998, 2000) states "the case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied". The case study is a research strategy that focuses on interpretation and understanding the dynamics present within single settings (Eisenhardt 1989). Many researchers emphasise the term 'case study' because it draws attention to the question of what can be learned from the single case (Stake 1998). Patton (1987) advises that: "Case studies become particularly useful where one needs to understand some particular problem or situation in greater depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information – rich in the sense that a great deal can be learned from a few exemplars of the phenomenon in question…Regardless of the unit of analysis, a qualitative case study seeks to describe that unit in depth, in detail, in context, and holistically". There are various ways of describing the type of case study being employed and based upon the desired outcome, this case study is multi-dimensional. Using Stake's (1998) terminology, my case study was *intrinsic* in that there was a desire to gain a better understanding of the particular case and it was *instrumental* in that it was chosen in order to provide insights into multi-sector collaborative ventures with a view to refining or developing theory. Using Yin's (1993, 1994) terminology, my case study was also *exploratory* in that I hoped to develop a series of propositions for subsequent research, it was *descriptive* in that it presented a description of the phenomenon of interest within its context, and yet it was also *explanatory* in that it presented data which suggested certain cause-effect relationships. By using a holistic approach, by attempting to understand the experiences and perspectives through the eyes of the Board members, the case study methodology enabled me to explore and interpret the ideas of a very unique collection of individuals; each representing not only their particular organisation, but also the sector in which their organisations operated.

An experienced researcher recognizes that interviews are "interventions", affecting people, and that a "good" interview "lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience not only to the interviewer but also the interviewee" (Patton, 2002, p. 353). In interviewing, I usually found no difficulty in getting people to talk. But on reflection, and in going through my case journal. I'm reminded of a few other issues. Firstly, I'm reminded of how some of my interviews with the industry partners almost felt like job interviews. I was conscious (or at least had the feeling) that in some ways, I was being assessed as a possible recruit for the company. My interviewees were all senior executives within multinational pharmaceutical companies and here I was, completing a PhD in Marketing, having previously completed undergraduate and Masters degrees in pharmacology/medical sciences, so on occasion, the conversations would veer off in the direction of my interests, future plans etc.. I also sensed this to a lesser degree with some of my government interviews but never with the interviews with academic partners.

Another aspect of the interviewing that I noted in my case journal was the fact that a number of my 'grand tour' questions were taken by interviewees as being interchangeable or synonymous, or that answers to questions that I had posed (in terms of how I was envisaging some of the very basic codes or conceptual categories that would emerge from the analysis) were actually being responded to in different querstions . For example, asking them to speak from an organizational perspective (not personally), I posed questions about what motivated them to become involved in the collaborative venture, what sorts of issues did they consider before becoming involved, what did they hope to achieve/accomplish by becoming involved, what were some specific organisational objectives, what were the benefits of membership in the venture, what would be some indicators of success, how would their organization feel that it had benefited from participation in this venture etc. The responses to some of these questions were that they'd already responded or I got responses that ultimately ended up appearing under codes that weren't necessarily directly linked to the question. It made for interesting analysis in that my coding of the transcribed interviews meant that I would often be looking at responses that I coded as "motives" when my question might have been about asking them to define their indicators of success.

In the conduct of action research, it is acknowledged the presence of an observer can affect the dynamics of organisational behaviour. My initial belief that I would act as a neutral researcher and observer at IPE began to change shortly after data collection commenced. I could not hold myself detached from what was going on, and what is more, I did not wish to. Even before I began conducting interviews or attending meetings, people initiated conversations with me, giving me their point of view about what was going on, and what they felt needed to happen. In my innocence, at first I accepted these opinions on face value, but later realised I was probably being lobbied. Some people, knowing that I may very well join the venture upon completion of my PhD, sought my opinion and approval, used me as a sounding board to put forward their candid views, or saw me as a vehicle for relaying this information back to the management of the venture. There was some frustration within the Board of Directors regarding the pace of progress given the major change in Institute leadership in addition to the turnover of board representation with some of the partners, which was viewed by others as questionable commitment. On a number of occasions, I had to hide what I knew about people, because information had been given to me in confidence, or I had to code some of the data in such a way as to make it more abstract and less personal.

The Role of Theory

A qualitative research approach involves a multitude of assumptions, methods, and kinds of data. The sources of my data were my informal meetings and background interviews with key personnel on the original steering committee as well as senior personnel within the Institute. In addition, I had access to archival documents from the Institute, including the minutes of meetings, Board meetings, and draft communications and business plans. I was able to attend several Institute functions, but most significantly I had access to the Institute's Board of Directors. When an action-oriented case study is undertaken, researchers may have a wide range of ontological, epistemological and methodological beliefs (Heron and Reason, 1997). When I began my thesis research, I had my own preconceived notions, which were challenged in the course of the interviews I conducted. The emergence of a stakeholder theory interpretation in my study of IPE came about through a reflexive relationship between theory and my interpretations of the way the IPE's board talked about the whole collaborative nature of the institute given the large number of partner organizations coming from the three different sectors. By virtue of my PhD coursework and background reading on joint ventures, I had initially gone into this research with a head full of transaction economics, resource dependence, and social exchange theoretical perspectives, all the while looking at how these various theories might explain the way IPE had come about and was currently being organised/managed. None of them really seemed to offer the 'total' explanation I was looking for until I "discovered" stakeholder theory. IPE was, to a large extent, an organisation with a diverse set of stakeholders but whose stakeholders themselves also having a diverse set of stakeholders. A stakeholder theoretical perspective didn't preclude certain aspects of transaction cost economics, or resource dependence or social exchange theory from providing some insights into this multi-sector collaborative effort, but once stakeholder theory emerged from my reflections and interpretations of the data, the whole theoretical structure began to take shape. By the time I became aware that stakeholder theory had salience with IPE, I had completed my interviews and was deep into analysis and interpretation of findings and so my evaluation of its applicability was not questioned. My awareness that stakeholder theory was an appropriate lens through which to both study and 'practice' multisector collaboration emerged through the process of immersing myself in the analysis of what I was being told in my interviews. I extended stakeholder theory so it would offer a better illustration of what I had experienced in my study of IPE.

Data analysis

Throughout the series of interviews, informal meetings, and analysis of archival documents, I generated a detailed, "thick" description regarding the issues of the case and the process of multi-sector collaborative venture creation and management. This information was to be used to analyse, interpret and theorise about the phenomenon of interest. The data would be used to illustrate, support or challenge the theoretical assumptions and the conceptual framework that I had developed prior to gathering the data. To begin with, the raw data needed to be reduced into manageable and meaningful components. As the data was an accumulation of ideas, perspectives, suggestions, opinions and theories, the challenge was to sift through this material and make sense of it – to reduce and code it. This necessitated repeated listening to the actual tape-recorded interviews, both as a means of re-visiting the interview as well as to check that the transcriptions were accurate. It was also necessary to re-read the transcriptions of the interviews and this was done repeatedly before any coding took place.

Coding

Because there was *some* structure to the interviews in that there was a core of five or six ‘grand tour’ questions posed to each respondent, and because I had previously developed a literature-based ‘checklist’ of frequently-cited factors that influence collaborative venture outcomes, my analysis was made less onerous. Being able to organise the interview data, based upon responses to specific questions and in the context of the conceptual checklist led to the development of the specific sector cases (academic, industry and government) and because each sector case was based upon the same categories of information, this better enabled cross case comparisons (Yin 1994). Thus, initial coding was based on tagging excerpts of text that corresponded to predetermined categories – that is, excerpts that corresponded directly to specific questions posed. In this manner, I was able to broadly code all interviews with such codes as: *motives, objectives, expectations, indicators of success* etc. In this way it would be easier to compare across cases (sectors). This approach and level of coding depended upon an understanding of what was meaningful in the data i.e., predetermined conceptual categories based upon the questions being posed. A ‘deeper’ level of coding was pursued by looking at the data and coding according to the identification of emergent themes and/or patterns that were not predetermined by either the questions posed or by the conceptual framework that was derived from a review of the relevant literatures.

In analysing the data, because of the sheer number of pages of transcribed interviews, I used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). As such, all of the broad and detailed coding was done using QSR NVIVO software. I feel that CAQDAS is a bit of a misnomer in that the software is simply a tool for organising and sorting the data. It replaced the need for scissors and highlighters and post-it® notes. Thus, it does no analysis per se; rather the researcher is still responsible for analysing the data and making sense of it. NVIVO utilises a *code-and-retrieve* process that consists of using the software to label passages of text according to some coding scheme. These coded passages are tagged or labelled in order to represent some conceptual category. Some of these codes existed *a priori* based upon the questions that I posed e.g. objectives, expectations, indicators of success etc. Other codes were created inductively as themes and/or patterns began to emerge in the data. While coding, NVIVO was used to write memos as a means of recording emerging ideas and preliminary thoughts about the relationships between codes. NVIVO is more than a simple *code-and-retrieve* program in that it also enables the researcher to represent relations among codes, to build hierarchical arrangements or higher-order classification and categories of codes and because of its more sophisticated search and retrieval functions, it could be used to search results and memos and treat them as data that could be fed back into the system (Richards and Richards 1998). As these emergent codes accrued, it was possible to search back through the transcripts looking for instances of certain words or phrases - always checking how the codes related to what was being said. This was the first step in the analysis – a series of decisions regarding which sections of text to code, what conceptual category under which to code these passages, and repeating the process in order to alter, refine and/or delete these conceptual categories.

But what I have just described in the previous three paragraphs reads very ‘clinical’, very ‘sterile’ when, in fact, it is a fascinatingly subjective and personal exercise. Not surprisingly, these paragraphs come out of my written thesis where I was assuming my more ‘detached’, ‘objective’ researcher persona for one particular audience. For me, simply reporting what the interviewees said was not satisfying enough because I ruminated much over what I was hearing in the interviews and I wanted to know ‘why’ they were saying what they did so I began to make notes to myself questioning a) whether what I was being told in these interviews was the official ‘party line’ organisational perspective i.e., I was getting a rehearsed, politically-correct “I’ll give you an idealised what you want to hear” response or b) was I getting personal viewpoints that didn’t necessarily come with an ‘official’ academic, industry, or government slant. Even at the earliest stage of the research process, I attempted to analyse the data I collected on this level.

Closure

Reflecting on the Implications of the Research

Traditional action research seeks to evaluate the results of some sort of organisational intervention. Since my research had been established along an action inquiry orientation, my presence in seeking the perspectives of the various participants on issues of importance constituted an intervention of sorts since it caused the Board of Directors to take stock, and think about the issues that might influence how IPE could and would move forward. The research was designed as an exercise, not solely to gain insights from the participants that would benefit me in my attempt to make a theoretical, methodological, or empirical contribution to the literature, by analysing these insights in the context of existing theory about collaborative ventures, but also as an exercise that would lead to actionable findings that c/would have an immediate impact on the operations of IPE. As I made my preliminary results of the research available to the Institute, there was an opportunity to incorporate the findings into practice. Whether the findings were integrated into various actionable directives within subsequent business plans or internal communications was beyond the scope of that particular piece of research, but I made the point that the research that was conducted had a practical element that was envisaged as contributing to how best to make that particular collaborative venture succeed.

Action-oriented research is starting to make an impression in the literature because of its dual objective of theory development/ theory refinement and contribution to practice, where the action orientation endeavours to decrease the gap between theory and practice. The rigour versus relevance debate will continue among academics, but in reflecting on some of the contributions that my thesis research made, I was able to demonstrate that using an action inquiry methodological approach, it was possible to conduct research that actually informed senior management of IPE as well as individual partner representatives on the Board of Directors about issues relating to the ongoing management of their collaborative venture while introducing the notion of stakeholdership and a stakeholder theoretical perspective in collaborative venture development and management - thus meeting the dual objective of theory development/refinement and informing practice such that the gap between theory and practice could be lessened through the generation of both ipsative or context-specific theory for the interviewed Board members and nomothetic or general theory in support of the academic aims of my research. My suggestion of using a stakeholder perspective serves both purposes since stakeholder theory was being offered as a possible nomothetic theory for the study of multi-party, multi-sector collaborative ventures as well as ipsative theory for those key individuals involved in the ongoing management of IPE. Whereas most research within the field of inter-organisational relationships has focussed primarily on issues of formation and governance, much less attention has been devoted to the actual management of these relationships. Upon reflection, the action inquiry orientation of my research demonstrated that the ‘researcher as insider’ could enable frank discussions about issues that should be considered and addressed by those in a position to manage and guide the venture.

Concluding Comments

This has been a first-hand account of a qualitative research project, focusing not so much on the data itself, but on the way in which the research was conducted. By incorporating a subjective personal introspective ethos into the telling of this story, it has enabled me to go back and re-live that particular time and to think more deeply about some of the important and interesting facets of conducting action-oriented research. This paper is thus both theoretical and introspective, and is brazenly about qualitative research from the perspective of a researcher, rather than a qualitative research paper about an example of multisector collaboration. Even though this paper represents my reflections and introspections in having conducted a qualitative study in one fairly distinctive collaborative venture, I hope that I’ve widened the forum for incorporating SPI beyond the consumer behaviour context to the context in which action researchers incorporate introspection in their study of actors, activities and interaction.

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