

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter describes and justifies my choice of research approach, data collection and analysis techniques.

3.1 Rationale for the Research Approach

As I developed my research proposal I considered various research approaches (Appendix 1). Bell (2005) provides a helpful framework to explore the methodology required for my project. The framework consisted of the following three questions:

1. What do I need to know and why?
2. What is the best way of collecting the information?
3. What shall I do with the information?

3.1.1 What do I need to know and why?

My research question required that I explore the perspectives of senior leaders in the area of their experience of significant career transitions. The purpose being to establish if coaching had a place in the range of support adopted at this time and if so, its perceived value. I was interested in looking in as much detail as I was able within my time constraints to achieve 'depth' rather than 'breadth'. I therefore adopted a qualitative perspective; Bell (2005) writes that researchers who adopt this perspective 'are more concerned to understand individual's perceptions of the world. They seek insights rather than statistical perceptions of the world.' Bell (2005:7). I used a mixture of fieldwork and deskwork.

This approach fitted with my personal coaching framework which, influenced by existential phenomenology, attempts to establish the clients' 'world view' informed by the phenomenological method attempting as much as is possible to avoid prior assumptions and bias, focus on description rather than analysis and avoiding an initial hierarchy of significance upon the descriptions.

3.1.2 What is the best way of collecting the information?

I adopted survey as a research approach. Surveys are usually associated with asking groups of people questions, NCWBL (2006). Robson (2002:228) suggests there is a sense that surveys are more like a research strategy than a tactical or specific method. Sampling is a key concept in using this approach. *Purposive sampling* as described by Robson (2002:264) would appear the best explanation of the approach I have taken in that 'a sample is built up which allows the researcher to satisfy her specific needs in a project'. The approach I took would appear to be in line with the exploratory nature of my research and recognises that 'it will not provide statistical generalisation from the sample to population'.

I elicited the view of three groups of people across the NHS, Local Authorities, a Charity and the Hospitality Industry:

- 9 senior leaders across these sectors who have all experienced significant transitions and who may also appoint and support other senior leaders
- 3 HR/OD professionals across these three sectors who currently, or have previously, commissioned/provided developmental support in organisations and who also have experienced significant transitions
- 3 executive search and recruitment professionals each representing a sector. This group were included to offer a different and wider perspective as I anticipate they witness a greater number of transitions

The choice of participants reflected the sectors that Azurite Coaching has focused on to date with the purpose of developing a clearer understanding of the experiences and expectations of these senior leaders while comparing the findings with the literature. I looked for any obvious differences of perspective within the sample that could be attributed to the sector as opposed to the individual or organisation.

The relatively small number of participants is due to the limited time and resources that were available although this size of study is consistent with qualitative research studies. Conscious of the issues of reliability and validity I was helped by Denscombe's (2003:274) reworking of the classic meaning of **reliability** in light of the researcher themselves being an integral part of the research instrument. The reliability question therefore becomes *if someone else did the research would she or he get the same results*. This helped me understand the need to be clear about my research aim, describing how the research was undertaken and crucially the reasoning behind the decisions for example on the sampling.

In terms of **validity** he identified it was important to avoid oversimplifications, recognition of self as an influence in the research, the need to explore alternative possible explanations, use of triangulation, feedback from participants on the findings and the extent to which the findings and conclusion fit with existing knowledge.

When I wrote my research proposal I was intending only to use a guided or focused interview. Subsequently, as I developed my research objectives I became clear that I also needed a data collection technique that would provide some data to address the value of the focused reflection of the interview itself. I therefore also constructed a short reflective questionnaire using open questions to send to the participants following the interview to address this issue. As Robson (2002:242) argues the task of the researcher is to link research questions to survey questions. The specific research objective the questionnaire was to address was:

To review the opportunity for learning provided through the focused reflection of participants in the interview.

A questionnaire (Appendix 6) as a method to address this issue seemed appropriate, Denscombe (2003:145), in that:

- It was economical as sent via email
- The recipients were able to read and understand the questionnaire
- The social climate would be open enough as the recipients had already participated in the interviews and would be familiar with the research question
- The questionnaire would request reasonably straightforward information in light of the preceding hour-long interview. It would be 'crisp and concise', as suggested by Denscombe (2003:152), focusing on three specific areas of reflection
- The number was not large but nonetheless this was time effective
- Prior involvement with the participants and their expectation of the questionnaire supports a good response rate

Robson (2002:251) identifies non-response as a very serious issue for researchers using postal self-completion questionnaires. In line with his framework for securing a good response rate my approach to address this was to:

- Explain the purpose and content of the questionnaire in my introduction at the time of the interview
- Secure commitment of the participant to completion the questionnaire at the end of the interview
- Send the questionnaire to the participant in person by email immediately after the interview along with gratitude for their involvement to date and a reminder of the ethical protocol they had agreed
- Send a courteous email follow-up if necessary reminding them of my timescale
- Reinforce that I will send them a copy of the conclusions and summary of recommendations

Denscombe (2003) suggests there are four basic criteria for evaluating a research questionnaire. Will it provide?

1. *full information*; in this case it will elicit information on one aspect of the research but this may also add to the wider data collection
2. *accurate information*; in light of the previous contact with the participants I will have the opportunity to compare and contrast the results from the questionnaire with the interview notes
3. *achieve a decent response rate*: this has been discussed above
4. *adopt an ethical stance*: As described above there would be a reiteration of the ethical protocol already discussed and agreed with the participants

NCWBL (2006) suggests that interviewing involves questioning or discussing issues with people. There were structured factual aspects of the interview that I could complete in advance covering gender/role/sector but the remaining input was collected through a guided or focused interview (Appendix 4). Bell (2005) describes this as a framework that is established by selecting topics on which the interview is guided. Although some questions will be asked, the respondent is given the space to focus on their area of interest. The interviewer therefore requires the skill to keep the interview on track and address the research aim. This approach seemed consistent with the coaching relationship I attempt to develop in my practice and to be an appropriate approach for this research question.

Researching the process of interviewing more deeply I became interested in the style of interviewing and the issue of personal involvement. This interest was also stimulated when considering the different approaches for interviewing and coaching conversations. Denscombe (2003:171) citing Oakley (1981) sets out a line of reasoning which suggests this is influenced by the aims of the research and if one is specifically to help or empower the people being researched as opposed to dispassionately learning from them. He describes a style of interviewing where the researcher becomes fully involved as a person with feelings, experience and knowledge that can be shared with the interviewee as 'unconventional'. He argues the researcher would need to be able to make this work and make sure the logic of this

approach is shared with the participant concerned as otherwise it could be considered as bad practice.

Holstein & Gubrium (1995:12) citing Douglas (1985) describe creative interviewing as a set of techniques for moving past the mere words and sentences exchanged in the interview process enabled by establishing a climate of mutual disclosure. Douglas argues that the 'cultivated neutrality of the standard survey interview' suppresses this. Holstein & Gubrium continue in their argument writing that if interviewing processes are seen as products of interpretive practice, they are neither preformed nor ever pure. They are 'practical productions'. From a social construction perspective, they suggest, citing Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks et al (1974) that the interviewer and participant are inevitably implicated in meaning making and therefore it would be impossible to free any interaction from contamination the fear of the more traditional interviewing approaches.

Having reviewed and considered the above the interviewing style I chose to adopt was one that looks to empower and create a climate of mutual disclosure. This approach was consistent with my coaching model the learning from which reinforces the importance of balance and making sure the interviewer's views do not dominate what will be a learning conversation. In addition it reinforces an earlier point in Chapter Two about coaching facilitating learning and that learning comes through the construction of meaning, Harri-Augstein and Webb (1995) and van Oudtshoorn (2005)

From Bell (2005) I am aware of the timing difficulties and complexities of making a commitment to participants to provide a full transcript of their interview for their approval. As she advises, I made a commitment as set out in my ethical protocol (Appendix 2) to check out with them in advance anything that will be used as a direct quotation.

3.1.3 What shall I do with the information?

My research approach gave me three sources of information for the analysis as I did not receive documentary evidence from participants:

- deskwork findings from the literature review
- fieldwork transcripts of interviews with the senior leaders, the HR/OD professionals and the executive search organisations
- questionnaires relating to a specific aspect of the research

I was attempting to achieve some triangulation, looking for opportunities to crosscheck the results across the information described above.

Literature review: As described in Chapter 2 I focused my literature search on the relationship between career transitions, learning and development and coaching in this context. The latter will build on earlier reading and experience of the use of coaching in an organisation to support the concept of 'learning organisations' including empowerment and personal learning capacity, Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005), Field (1997).

NCWBL (2006:65) and Bell (2005) provide helpful frameworks for the analysis of data, documents and text and particularly the need for critical examination. The need for me, as the researcher, to establish if, in my opinion, the research is well designed and whether the data collection instruments were suitable for purpose is well made.

The interview: The interviews with the three different groups were critical to my research and needed considerable preparation. Using a guided or focussed interview that Bell (2005:162) suggests 'provides the advantage of a framework established beforehand and so recording and analysis are greatly simplified'. I piloted an interview plan in January and February and revised the interview plan accordingly.

Mindful of Bell's advice I intended to use an initial exploratory discussion and the pilot to establish themes and prompts for the interviews and to reflect on

my experience as a researcher. The expectation was that the identification of themes would support my note taking leaving more focus for capturing new issues and themes. To support this and to make sure I didn't miss key information I asked permission to tape the interview and after the interviews used the recording to check against my notes. I did not intend to have the recordings transcribed as they were solely to provide a check to my notes.

This approach was consistent with my experience of myself as a listener and note taker. As in coaching I remember information by seeing the big picture, the client's story, focusing on patterns and meanings and on the relationships between the facts. I make a note of detail, as this would be more difficult for me to recall in the way I describe. Based on my experience of working with people typically in these roles my expectation of the interviewees was that they were likely to express their experiences in a way that I could recall in the way I describe.

The work put into developing the interview framework considerably eased the analysis. Following each interview data was sorted into the identified themes and entered into a data analysis sheet. Field notes were checked against the interview tape. As any additional themes emerged these were added to the database to extend the list. Then information was reviewed looking at similarities, groupings, clusters, categories and items of particular significance, Bell (2005:227).

The Questionnaire: the responses to the open questions were collated by question and then, as with the interview data, similarities, grouping and categories identified.

3.2 My Role as Worker/Researcher

NCWBL (2006) are clear about the need for 'reflexivity', work that includes self-criticism and alerts the individual to the human subjective processes, warning the work-based researcher that knowledge is relative to their own perspective. I recognise my attachment to what I do as a coach, to my

personal experiences of transitions and my view that people deserve support at the time of transition to maximise their learning and performance. I would therefore, need to be alert to my bias particularly through my questions, analysis and judgements.

In terms of my experience and understanding of the context in which I undertook this research my significant transitions include: moving from my own restaurant and hotel business to a Local Authority and then to the NHS, within organisations at a senior level were the transitions to a NHS Board Level Director, to a Chief Executive and then to an interim Chief Executive in a turnaround situation. As a Chief Executive I commissioned professional coach/mentoring from day 1 of my appointment. My chosen coach had many years of experience as a Chief Executive which was one of my requirements of a coach at that time. He was someone who would recognise the significance of the transition I had to make as a first time 'Accountable Officer' and the expectations of me in a complex system.

As a Chief Executive I recognised the benefit of providing colleagues with protected time and a confidential environment to support their personal development. As a coach I supported a number of new Board level Directors and clinicians. Their feedback supported the need for a range of support at this time and the value of their coaching sessions.

The ethics of professional social research identify the need to ensure the field should not be left more difficult for subsequent researchers, for example, running interviews efficiently to time and keeping to agreements. As a coach I work within the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (www.emccouncil.org) code of conduct and understand how important trust is to the development of an effective relationship. Despite this being a short-term relationship my personal credibility is essential to the development of my business and interviewees are potential commissioners of coaching. All this was set out in my Ethical Protocol (Appendix 2).

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