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REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONER CASE RESEARCH: ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

This article examines the career of a professional marketer. It builds the narrative from that of a student to a practitioner, onto a learner and finally to that of a reflexive practitioner. It utilises an action research methodology employing a hermeneutic and interpretative approaches. The stance taken is that of critical theory, that is to say with an objective ontology and subjective epistemology, however, it is written in the post-modernist style. In a sense, it is an emic ethnographic investigation into the field of marketing. It does possess autobiographical elements in order to apply the action research methodology but it is not in itself an autobiographical study.

Keywords: reflexive practitioner, action research, critical theory, ontology, epistemology.

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РЕФЛЕКСІЯ У ПРАКТИКІВ БІЗНЕСУ: ОНТОЛОГІЧНА І ЕПІСТЕМОЛОГІЧНА ОРІЄНТАЦІЯ

У статті кар'єру професійного гравця на ринку розглянуто як розвиток від студента до практика, учня і, нарешті, до рефлексуючого практика. Використано методологію дослідження дією з використанням герменевтичного й інтерпретаційного підходу. Дослідження проводиться в рамках критичної теорії, тобто з об'єктивною онтологією і суб'єктивною епістемологією, проте подано в постмодерністському стилі. У певному сенсі – це етнографічне дослідження в області маркетингу з автобіографічними елементами, але в цілому це не автобіографічне дослідження.

Ключові слова: рефлексуючий практик, професійний гравець на ринку, дослідження дією, критична теорія, онтологія, епістемологія.

Рис. 1. Таб. 1. Літ. 25.

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РЕФЛЕКСИЯ У ПРАКТИКОВ БИЗНЕСА: ОНТОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ И ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ ОРИЕНТАЦИЯ

В статье карьеру профессионального игрока на рынке рассмотрено как развитие от студента к практику, учащемуся и, наконец, до рефлексующего практика. Использована методология исследования действием с использованием герменевтического и интерпретационного подхода. Исследование проводится в рамках критической теории, то есть с объективной онтологией и субъективной эпистемологией, однако подано в постмодернистском стиле. В некотором смысле – это этнографическое исследование в области маркетинга с автобиографическими элементами, но в целом это не автобиографическое исследование.

Ключевые слова: рефлексующий практик, профессиональный игрок на рынке, исследование действием, критическая теория, онтология, эпистемология.

Introduction. Interpretive social science theory describes and interprets the way many people conduct their daily lives. It contains concepts and limited generalisations, but does not dramatically depart from the experience and inner reality of the

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people studied (Neuman, 2000). The term for the study of interpretation is hermeneutics, named after the Greek God Hermes who was the messenger of gods. Socrates, in common with most Greek thinking at the time, regarded words as a vehicle for ambiguity and possibly dishonesty and trickery. Given marketing's low and disreputable status (Brown, 1993), it may be that Socrates is the rightful true patron saint of the salesperson's art and craft.

The author aims to interpret and gain insights used to build a framework so that a theory can evolve. Hermeneutics originally concerned the ancient religious texts and hence designed to give meaning to unfamiliar and alien (Moustakas, 1990). Whilst the reader may not consider marketing "alien", the postmodernism does not seem to include the shifting structures of capitalism (Morgan, 2003). Indeed some writers regard postmodernism as the cultural arm of multinational capitalism (Stephanson, 1989). The popular protests in Wall Street and London in 2012 following the deep global recession perhaps reflect not so much "alien" as "alienation".

However, the key point that the authors wish to make about interpretation is that it grounded in something that we possess in advance — "Vorhabe" (Heidegger, 1962), our own understanding of the context that colours the picture that we are seeing. Interpretation is not something that one does, it is something that one is directly involved in (Gallagher, 1992). Praxis (Schwandt, 2002) is the name given to the engagement embedded in communally shared understandings and values and it depends on their everyday linguistic usage (Dunne, 1993). Hence, the 2 categories of reader of this thesis will necessarily both receive slightly different interpretations of what we are saying because their "vorhabe" and as their experiences are also different. This may or may not be desirable, but it is most certainly unavoidable.

The decisive test for both categories of readers is located in the standards of "Truth Claims" (Habermas, 1976), that broadly include whether the thesis is convincing, honest, original and leads to increased understanding. In order to understand any narrative, the necessary and supplied perceptions, as given, are specific in terms of locations, dates and political, economic, social and technological background. This is necessary but the authors will endeavour to omit the purely anecdotal by using the twin principles of reflexivity and Occam's razor.

Methodology. Methodologically, there is a circularity in this. The author's own interpretation is based on his own praxis and therefore his "vorhabe" will be a heavily influence. The concept of reflexivity, that questions not only the process but also the objective or the question, allows some of these bindings to be cut — but only some. It should go without saying, that under no circumstances should we allow ourselves to drift into an ego-orientated narrative (Frank, 1995; Thayer-Bacon, 2003).

How does the author improve his professional practice? The technique that the authors apply is action research, this is the theory of how through a continuous cycle of action, assessment, reflection and subsequent amended actions a process, a system or an organisation can be steadily improved (Schon, 1983). However, the research methodology the author follows is of the living thesis paradigm (Whitehead, 2000; McNiff, 2002; Wong, 2003).

Jack Whitehead (2000) believes that judging action research reports is in terms of whether the author shows that they are offering explanations, rather than only observations and descriptions of practice by living out their declared values. From there the

author very much needs to communicate what the author has learned so that both the theory of marketing and the experiences of marketing professionals enhance the authors' contributions to the body of marketing knowledge. Pym states: "through the denial of feelings, imagination and the human spirit, concealed assumptions, rigid sterile and inappropriate methods of inquiry and the enlargement of trivia into problems of consequence, we, you and I preserve our employment prospects to the detriment of our souls, our fellow men and society" (Pym, 1993).

In a sense, this study is an emic ethnographic investigation into the field of marketing. Burawoy (2004) characterised 2 types of knowledge: instrumental knowledge is concerned with solutions for either practical or theoretical problems. On the other hand, reflexive knowledge is more about questioning the ends. The focus of instrumental knowledge on deriving an answer rather than querying the question is a weakness identified by Paul Feyerabend in his seminal book "Against Method" (1988). Reflexive knowledge recognises that it is not value neutral so that critical evaluation once again depends on "vorhabe". Hence, the epistemology of what we call critical theory is essentially subjective. A criticism of marketing is that there is too little reflexive research in this area and the research conducted in the instrumental area is focused almost entirely on academic issues with little relevance to marketing practice (Piercy, 2002).

There has been some application of action research in marketing (Gummesson, 2004), but it has not been a rich field of enquiry, and there had been no previous literature in the area of marketing action research (Kates, 2004).

For example, an attempt to look at work practices in one organisation and then applying the generalised findings to another organisation seemed successful (Thompson, 2004). The interesting thing about this particular work was the application of one paradigm, critical theory, to the first organisation and a different paradigm, realism, applied to the second. This gives rise to the incommensurability thesis (Kuhn, 1970), which states that useful dialogue across paradigm boundaries or between two paradigms is impossible as they have no common frame of reference. The authors do not accept this position. Our view is that triangulation, observation of certain phenomena through different lenses, can add corroboration and validation to the assumptions that one paradigm on its own would be incapable of sustaining. The authors, however, agree that different paradigms applied to separate problems can make interpretation of results and potential agreement on the general theory extremely difficult.

The author's experience by reflection. Writing a PhD is a major undertaking (Phillips, 1998 & Connell, 1985), it requires discipline, efforts, time management skills, creative writing skills and positive feedback from colleagues who have offered to read and comment on various sections. Reflection on one's writing, and editing and re-editing the original is also a vital part of this process.

The first problem is finding a sufficiently clear block of time. This is referred to as "A" time where tasks that are considered "important" but "not urgent" are undertaken (Covey). Unfortunately, in real life it is frequently difficult to carve out these oases of calmness and solitude.

Secondly, the deadline — this does indeed pressurise one into frenzied activity. However, this reduces quality and can lead to stress and risks complete failure when a force majeure dictates that some other task takes priority.

Reflecting on a professional career the authors realize that this has been the usual work norm. The authors have become quite good at it and indeed often took pride in their ability to take on complex tasks at very short notice and give solid and good results.

The major purpose of professional practice action research is to identify the ways to improve professional practices, and because of this reflection, very substantial corrections are made that yield long-term benefits to productivity, job satisfaction and health. The improvement has been to write something every day, whether on a formal paper, case study or magazine article. This has been compared to both the practice and benefit of meditation (Furman, 2012), where frequent practice and incorporation into the daily routine reduces writer's block and also sharpens the finished article.

Continuous improvement to a process or a system was one of the concepts introduced by Deming (1986 & 2000) to Japan after the Second World War.

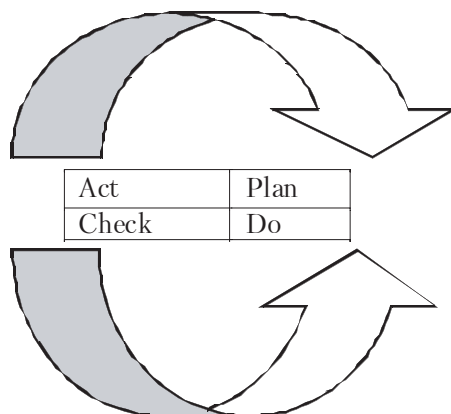


Figure 1. Deming's Circle of Quality

In many ways, it can be seen as similar to the work of Lewin (1946), who is known particularly for his work on change management, but the underlying idea is similar using a process called unfreezing, implementing the change and then refreezing. With the addition of a feedback loop, it mirrors the Deming's quality circle. For example, workers may participate in a discussion as to what was good about a process and what was bad. From this, solutions arise as to how the process can be improved.

Discussions. The purpose of action research is to improve practice, enhance skill levels and develop the ability to evaluate actions. This leads to a virtuous circle whereby the researcher is able to look at different courses of action and select effective and efficient solutions. This development of action research was very much in the area of education — and still much of the literature is education-based.

There is a number of big differences between typical social science research and action research as summarised below.

In the authors' case, the action research circle does indeed come back to education. However, the starting point is the career in marketing from which the authors have moved to that of an academic. The purpose of this thesis is to benefit society primarily through students, but also marketing practitioners by means of education jour-

nal and other papers. We firstly understand and critically review past actions and then seek specific learning points as to how we could improve practices to pass on in academic works.

Table

Social Science Research	Action Research
Theory to inform practice	Theory developed through practice
Largely deductive	Largely inductive
Outsider	Insider
Theory driven	Change driven

Source: Associate Professor Dr. Tony Harland (Higher Education Development Centre, University of Otago) from the AKEPT conference in November 2009.

Conclusion. In the reading of any autobiography, sometimes indirect questions such as "learn from the author's mistakes" are posed. However, the key learning point from Deming's circles, Kurt Lewin's change processes and the spiral of action research is that in order to improve, it is necessary to identify clearly the mistakes made and more importantly to determine what was learned from these mistakes. More pragmatically, it is important to identify and code the mistakes made and enumerate the frequency of each type. By code, we mean to categorise the mistakes into groups: financial, interpersonal, factual etc. Only by doing this is it possible to self-analyse where major weaknesses lie.

So on reflection the author now realises that a list of one's mistakes is a very valuable tool.

So a key question to answer early in the piece: Am I naturally self-reflective? In other words — Am I qualified in my own mind to undertake this journey?

As the authors reflect on this, and we consider our answers carefully, suspecting that we are going to have to reflect on this a good bit longer before we can fully connect all the strands of reflective practices.

However, this may be a task to be undertaken only after this particular work is completed.

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