Promoting the case for Using a Research Journal to Document and Reflect on the Research Experience

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Abstract: This paper draws upon a personal research journey and makes the case for recording this experience using a research journal. to The context for this paper is based on a study of family life and leisure, which collected data using more traditional qualitative methods, namely focus groups and interviews with pre-birth and post birth couples and leisure managers in New Zealand. The research design for this study was based on phenomenology, where the experience of the subjects being studied was significant and involved developing an understanding of the lived experiences of pre-birth and post-birth couples, where the way they acted was dependent upon their understanding and meaning of their behavior (Waters, 1994) This paper draws on the researcher's own reflections recorded in a research journal, whilst undertaking this research study over a five year period. The paper discusses the meaning and importance of reflection as a way of evaluating the researcher's own research journey and highlights a number of issues with reference to the validity of such data. The paper concludes by revisiting the key benefits of reflection and affirms the belief that research journals are a useful tool, which enables the researcher to record personal thoughts and observations in a systematic manner.

Keywords: personal, research journey, phenomenology, observing, writing, journal, reflection, y, qualitative research

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this paper was to examine and record the researcher experience in the field, through the use of a research journal to help fill the gap in the research literature. Dewey (1933) identifies that reflective writing practices are principally concerned with giving serious thought to experiences that are unfolding in order for the researcher to examine and evaluate their experience, rather than focus on the research outcome (Murray & Kujunzic, 2005). This was the same approach, utilised in composing this paper, whereby the research journal provided the means to reflect on the research experience and produce viable data. However, according to Borg (2001) there is insufficient literature on the use of research journals in qualitative research and minimal guidance on how to use them. Whereas, in the training and education of teachers, the reflective journal is common practice and central to their professional development (Brookfield, 1995).With regard to the professional development of researchers, little is known about the benefits of using research journals. Furthermore, it seems that using a research journal to capture additional data is underdeveloped amongst qualitative researchers (Robson, 2011).

1.1 Outline of the paper

The first section of this paper explains the key concepts of 'reflection', the method used to record the personal observations of the researcher. This is followed by an explanation of how a research journal was used to document the researcher's experience during the study on family life and leisure used as the context for this paper. Next, a number of excerpts sourced directly from the research journal are presented and evaluated with reference to the study highlighted above. The paper concludes by reaffirming the benefits of using a research journal and encourages both academics and researchers in the business and management disciplines to consider using this method to record their own personal research journey.

2. Recording the experience of research

Reflection involves an action or as Boyd and Fales (1989, p.101) asserts is concerned with "the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience (present or past) in terms of self (self in relation to self and self in relation to the real world)". Within, the research study, this required documentation in the form of a research journal to record and to reflect which Yinger & Clark, (1981) argue gives reflection more purpose and power (and furthermore the process of " reflection helps to bring the unconscious into consciousness" (Ortlipp, 2008, p.698.). This involved thinking about the research critically to record thoughts in order to evaluate the experiences to give what Ellis (2001) refers to as 'a measure of perspective'. Keeping a research journal helped to clarify ideas and develop linkage between different parts of the research process which Schön (1991) has argued helps bridge the gap between theory and practice. Reflection is largely a cognitive activity involving higher order thinking processes (Wertenbroche & Nabeth, 2000) to analyse, reconsider and qualify our experiences as a researcher (Murray & Kujundzic, 2005).

The act of writing or expressing thoughts onto paper (Cui, 2012) helped facilitate the process of reflection in expanding ,ideas to further develop the research from which it was possible to draw conclusions at a later date Jasper, (2005, p.250) confirms this assertion and provides a more detailed account, in that "reflective writing is, by its very nature ….written in the first person and is essentially subjective [and is connected] to the experiences and perceptions of the author". Learning about research from recording our experiences has the potential to develop a range of research related skills including critical thinking, analysis and creativity. By writing through reflection the researcher is able to facilitate new understanding as information is first perceived then reflected upon in the act of writing. This process acted to represent the researcher's experience of the research first-hand and gave meaning to the research leading to what Jasper, (2005, p. 248) refers to as "understanding and learning about practice" Moreover, by the art of reflecting, the researcher was able to provide evidence and build research experience. , " Jasper, (2005, p.250) concurs with this observation when commenting that reflection "facilitates the researcher's discovery [in compiling] a veritable audit trail of the research process However, caution is required to be mindful of the researcher's role in deciphering how the insider-outsider research continuum impacts on the depth of insights that can be gained from the research participants (Cui, 2012). On the contrary, it could be argued that journal writing lacks objectivity and there is a danger of over indulgence of the 'self' in embellishing what is recorded. Reflecting on different aspects of the research process when writing a research journal provides a forum to record concerns which may have otherwise been lost, or as Nadin and Cassell, (2006) note, simply not considered.

3. Developing the case for using a research journal l

As part of the journey through the process of completing the study on family life and leisure, a research journal was compiled to document the personal experience of the researcher. For this purpose, personal feelings and thoughts were recorded in note form in a research journal after the research proposal was confirmed until the study on family life and leisure was completed in full. During more intensive periods of the research process, which included undertaking the focus groups and interviewing couples, there was obviously more detail to record and this occurred on a daily basis. However, at less intensive periods of the research process, such as times when making arrangements for the focus groups or interviews, thoughts were recorded on a weekly basis and reflections were more subject to time lag and possible memory loss. To help structure the research journal, each page of the research journal was divided into four sections. Section one recorded what went well, section two recorded what did not go so well, section three recorded key learning points from the experience and section four referred to evidence to substantiate the comments made in the previous three sections to provide further evidence to justify the reflections that were made. Writing the reflective journal allowed the researcher to acknowledge thoughts and emotions. Writing the research journal provided a means to communicate feelings and opinions to make them what Ortlipp (2008) has described as visible. The writing of a research journal is one of a number of methods of reflection that a researcher can utilise to record their experiences in a simple and effective manner.

The research journal provided an outlet for observations that were not recorded elsewhere and encouraged critical analysis and critical thinking, both key research skills in qualitative research (Patton, 2004). Writing the journal provided time out to think about the research and make informed decisions of what was important and critical and what was not. The practicalities of recording thoughts on the focus group process and interviews suffered some time lag in the recording of some of observations recorded in the journal. This had the potential to impact upon the quality of the research journal, primarily influenced by the researcher's memory. This is one of the limitations of using this method to record experiences, as the researcher needs time and space to record their observation. Ideally, this needs to happen as soon after the experience as possible, which in the case of this research study was not always possible. Nevertheless, the strategy that was adopted during the research study meant that time was set aside as part of the research plan for the purpose of compiling the research journal. This proved to be a useful l exercise to analyse thoughts during the research study period in a systematic way. In reflecting on the research process it was possible to focus on thinking and looking in order to understand the research experiences as they unfolded to question beliefs and expectations which Gidman (2007) argues develops the researcher. For example, during the early stages of planning the interviews with couples it was intended to just interview them together. However, as a result, of reflecting on the gender dimensions of the interview process with couples in the research journal, it was decided to interview couples on their own. This allowed each interviewee to talk more freely without interruption from their partner. The process of reflection helped in examining and evaluating the research methods utilised, rather than focusing on the outcome of the research (the data). Through reflection it was possible to gain additional insights in relation to the lived experiences of the individuals involved in the research, which helped facilitate a deeper level of questioning, which is at the core of qualitative research (Alaszewski, 2006).

In the planning stage of the research study it was intended to run the pre-birth focus group for one hour, when couples had arranged this time to be available. In reality though, this focus group ran over time as conversations often turned to many different areas of discussion that were not necessarily relevant to the research project. This only became clear after reflections in the research journal had been first documented then read. As a result, a much tighter rein was kept on the post-birth focus group discussion by following the pre-determined questions more closely. This still allowed for flexibility, but gave the post-birth focus group discussions more direction and purpose in line with the key research questions. The knock on effect was that the skills of the researcher were enhanced in undertaking and managing the focus group meetings. This eventuated as a direct result of recording personal observations in the research journal. Furthermore, during the focus group discussions and interviews it was possible to reflect on hidden data, concerning the feelings, attitudes and emotions that research participants were expressing. Without using a research journal this detail would have been lost to the researcher.

4. Putting the theory into practice

Gaining insights into the world of the researcher is often problematic, but the compilation of a research journal provides a window into their experience through personal reflection and can be utilised as an important methodological tool in "contributing to the trustworthiness of a research study" (Jasper, 2005, p. 248). This has the potential to provide the researcher with information to discuss less well documented issues in research with their research supervisor and can help identify any research difficulties or problems from the researcher's perspective that might not be evident to the supervisor. Compiling information in a research journal provides evidence and another source of data for the researcher which "becomes a tangible way to evaluate our own experience, improve and clarify one's thinking and finally become a better scholar" (Janesick, 1998. p.24).

The data presented in a research journal can be used as another form of data and to supplement primary sources of data. Also, as (Jasper, 2005, p.256) notes the "data contains the researcher's interpretation within

their own cultural, social and experiential parameters", which can be very empowering to the researcher (Finlay, 2002). However, one of the limitations in terms of research outputs which all academics are subject to, in universities worldwide is the observation that accounts of reflective writing are often very difficult to publish or disseminate (Finlay, 2002). Nadin and Cassell (2006, p.210) believe this is often due to "the positive hegemony that permeates many of our research outlets". During the study on family life and leisure, the research journal became a useful vehicle to document experience and had the potential to increase the awareness of the 'self' in research as an individual and as a professional (Borg, 2001).

The journal acted as a vehicle to improve researcher development and "enables the researcher to continuously think about their own research practices and assumptions, by recording their thoughts in a systematic way" (Nadin & Cassell, 2006, p.210). However, there is a lack of guidance on writing reflectively in the research literature. This is especially the case for novice researchers with regards to "the purposes of keeping a reflective journal from a methodological perspective and how to use their perceptions as an integral part of the research process" (Ortlipp, 2008, p.696). Clearly more work is needed in this area to give future researchers the opportunity to record their experiences in a logical and structured manner to later utilise as a source of data for their research, thereby using the data (practice) to inform the theory.

5. The research excerpts

In this part of the paper, five of the key issues (excerpts) are presented that emerged as part of writing the research journal based on the researcher's experiences throughout the time of the research project. In essence, the process of recording reflections by the physical act of writing became another form of data. When writing up the findings, the researcher was able to refer to the research journal and provide further evidence to substantiate the key themes that arose as part of the study. Each excerpt below is given a title to reflect its content and is related to the broader context of the study to give meaning. This provides the reader with insights into the study from the researcher's personal perspective, which was only made possible by the compilation of a research journal.

5.1 Excerpt one- the context of the paper

The researcher's initial interest in family life and leisure as a viable area of study can be traced back to his own personal experience, when becoming a parent and the impact, this significant life event had on his own life and leisure. As a 'first-time' parent, he was able to build rapport during the focus group studies and interviews with pre-birth and post birth couples to establish context. According to, Creswell, (1998) this has the capacity to build trust and confidence, enabling this study to progress In this research study, it was possible to gain glimpses into the lives of couples experiencing a similar life event to the researcher. Cui (2012) has described this as 'insider research' where the researcher has some familiarity and connection with the people they are researching. This was the case in the study on family life and leisure, although it is important to be mindful that the researcher cannot claim to have uncovered the 'real truths' about family life and leisure. Nevertheless, the study on family life and leisure has contributed to the literature and debates surrounding family life and leisure. Within the research journal, personal observations are recorded with respect to the initial contacts the researcher had with the research participants.

5.2 Excerpt two - qualitative methods

In this study, as proposed by Mittelstaedt (2002, p.152), a range of qualitative methods was used to make it, "possible to assess each method used, providing information on their limitations as well as their strengths and clarifying their presuppositions and their consequences". The research journal provided a means to record thoughts on these issues. By adopting a qualitative approach to seek out the opinions of couples, the researcher sought to add to the research methods literature and offer additional insights into the lived experiences of couples, from a male and female perspective using both focus groups and interviews. The focus group studies combined with the interviews from a user and management perspective facilitated a deeper

understanding into the phenomenon of family life and leisure. Moreover, by using both methods it was possible to ensure a deeper level of questioning, which led to a better understanding of the lives of couples involved in the study, Observations recorded in the research journal, both supported and confirmed the data recorded, which used more traditional methods of qualitative research (Patton, 2005). .

This story is obviously selective, as ultimately decisions were made concerning what would be included in the final version of the study, with reference to the thoughts recorded in the research journal in the early stages of the research. At the conclusion of the pre-birth and post-birth focus group studies notes were taken as described in the paper earlier and this was replicated at the end of each focus group and interviews with pre-birth and post-birth couples and with leisure facility managers. This was a difficult and challenging task at times, as the primary purpose during the focus groups and interviews was to concentrate on the participant's feedback. Taking notes immediately after each focus group and after each interview was at times inconvenient and impractical, but provided very useful evidence for the research journal and another source of data for the research study.

5.3 Excerpt three- the research participants

Gaining the confidence and trust of those selected as research participants was initially problematic, in the early stages of the research. However, prior to the design of the methodology, informal meetings were arranged with both men and women at the pre-birth and post-birth stages to clarify the purpose of the research. Consequently, their trust and willingness to participate in this study was acquired, which is a key factor in motivating people to give up their time to take part in research studies (Kenny, 1996). Also, the researcher had empathy with their experience as he had personally encountered many of the same challenges that expectant couples and first time parents face, which were recorded early on in the research process and reflected upon when the research went live. Assembling the focus groups took a lot of time, effort and energy and although many participants had initially given their consent to take part, they still needed further encouragement, persuasion and reminders. Observations surrounding some of the problems encountered in this respect were recorded in the research journal then later used as a tool to manage this process more effectively. In reality, this was achieved through more purposeful and regular email contact with the likely research participants and at a later date a number of personal phone calls to encourage their full commitment to the study. Therefore, regular and constant communication recorded in the research journal as one of the key issues in recruiting research participants was the key to elicit their involvement in the study. Both the pre-birth and the post- birth focus group participants were concerned that they might be discussing highly personal and sensitive matters with people they might not know in the focus groups. Consequently, some individuals needed re-assurance of the processes involved and the fact that the research findings were to be confidential. This reflection was recorded in the research journal and as a result of experiences in conducting the pilot studies with pre-birth and post-birth couples. During the pre-birth and post birth focus groups and interviews, couples were provided with more detailed guidelines on how the focus group conversations and interviews would be evaluated and analysed. In particular research participants were initially concerned about the confidentially of information provided and their concerns were met, after they were reminded that their comments would not be identified in the write up of the research study. Also, all pre-birth and post-birth focus group and interview participants were sent a summary of the findings of their discussions by email and asked for comment, before the findings were confirmed in written form as part of this study. This was a suggestion that was made note of in the research journal as a consequence of the pilot studies

5.4 Excerpt four- the research study

The justification for using interviews for the study on family life and leisure was based on the premise outlined by Behringer (2006) as interviews are capable of producing rich, detailed information about the meaningful dimensions of lived experience, the dimensions being family life and leisure. This objective was directed towards allowing interviewees to describe the world as they perceived it, to be described in their own terms

and to highlight what 'things' and events meant for them. The interviews with couples took a lot of time, negotiation and effort on the part of the researcher and were more problematic than the individual interviews. During the couple interviews, the researcher was conscious of one person dominating the other and the need to be careful in causing offence or conflict between couples on sensitive issues that arose. Nevertheless, a number of couples did argue with each other during the interviews, but fortunately disagreements never got out of hand. The couple interviews offered insight into the interactions and nature of the relationship between couples, which were recorded in the research journal. Nevertheless, the researcher had to be mindful that the couple interviews were more likely to produce consensual data, where they might be an attempt to generate a unified reality (Paul, 1989). Also, the researcher was fully aware of possible inconsistencies in the data, in that the construction of events during individual interviews might be quite different, when compared to the couple interviews. This observation was noted in the research journal on a number of occasions when some couples expressed opinions and information that was contradictory when comparing what they mentioned during the solo interviews, when compared to their interview with their partner. Observations noted in the research journal at the pilot stage of the research identified that women often dominated the couple interviews. Therefore, during the interviews study a conscious effort was made to encourage men to contribute and be more engaged in the interview discussions. As part of this strategy, ideas to encourage men to be more open and active in the interviews noted in the research journal were then put into practice. Fortunately, these concerns did not eventuate as men's engagement in the interviews was actively encouraged.

The pre-birth and post-birth couples were generous enough to give up their time, for both partners to be there at the same time for the pre- birth 'couple' interview and for the post-birth couples arranging childcare so the interviews could go ahead. Flexibility was required in terms of times and dates and it was not unusual for parents to cancel their pre-arranged interviews at short notice. When arranging the interviews for post-birth couples it became clear that contingencies had to be planned for, as the demands of parenting were often unpredictable (Shaw, 2008). As a result, a number of interviews had to be re-arranged for a number of post-birth couples at relatively short notice.

Also a number of interviews had to be re-arranged for pre-birth couples that were in the last trimester of their pregnancy, due to tiredness and stress and some simply did not feel like taking part anymore. Obviously, looking after a young child or dealing with the demands of pregnancy were a lot more pressing than undertaking a study on family life and leisure. Again the research journal provided a useful vehicle to document my thoughts on the realities of pregnancy and parenting. Nevertheless, most couples were accommodating and did their utmost to meet pre-arranged interview dates. Some interviews took much longer to undertake than anticipated, which impacted upon the time management plan for the rest of this research study. Fortunately, a number of contingencies had been put in place which allowed extra time for the interviews to be completed.

Generally, families were very generous with their time and most spoke openly about their feelings and thoughts and most interviews became a kind of conversation, where, interviewees were able to speak for themselves (Tolich & Davidson, 1999, p. 60). The majority of the interviews took place at the home of the interviewees, where they were intimately familiar with their surroundings and where most felt relaxed and comfortable. Throughout the interview stage, the researcher was conscious of the guiding principles outlined by Tolich and Davidson (1999, p.109) were effective interviewing should be concerned with, "asking the right questions, in the right way, while ensuring you accurately record people's responses to these questions". A number of interviews were undertaken at the workplace of the interviewee, as this arrangement was more suitable and these interviewees reported being e more comfortable with this arrangement. In general, the interviews were enjoyable, evidence of which can be found in the research journal as after each interview the researcher's thoughts were recorded. Undertaking the interviews became a source of motivation and helped progress and give impetus to the research study, which was alluded to in the research journal.

After the interviews were completed, other discussions would often ensue on a range of different issues, not all necessarily linked to the topic of this study, but still interesting. During many interviews food and drink was offered to the researcher and on one occasion a three course meal and after one interview that had progressed into late evening, a bed for the night was offered and politely declined. . At the end of each interview, interviewees were asked to reflect on their interview experience and their feedback provided useful information for the research journal. During the solo interviews, individuals remarked that they had enjoyed their interviews, especially the one-on-one interaction with the interviewer, as this helped them remember important details about the questions they were asked. In particular, they appreciated the open-ended nature of the interviews they were involved with, as this gave them the flexibility and opportunity to express themselves freely in their own words. The ability to listen and later reflect in the form of writing in the research journal was important in this respect. As a result, valuable data was compiled in the research journal and made visible with regard to the researcher's feelings, thoughts and opinions that would not have been recorded elsewhere.

5.5 Excerpt five- Interviews with leisure facility manager

Completion of the manager interviews took a long time to arrange, because many of the managers were very busy and had to cancel interview appointments on several occasions. This was frustrating at times in terms of progressing the research, but patience was required as managers had given up their time freely to be involved in this study. Many of them had to cancel initial interview appointments, as they had other priorities that had arisen between the time they were first contacted and the original date the interview was arranged. In order to plan for this contingency, each manager was asked to offer two dates for a possible interview. If the first date was cancelled, which it invariably was, a second date was still available to fall back on, which in some cases was confirmed. This risk management strategy in using contingencies seemed a good idea in practice, but in reality a number of managers had to cancel both dates. In the majority of cases, the 'actual' interview took place on the second or third date that was agreed upon. However, in the case of two managers, the actual interview took place on the fourth arranged interview date. The interviews were largely enjoyable and useful insights were gained into key research issues, from a management perspective. Both positive and negative experiences were recorded in the research journal, and it became apparent that conducting interviews was 'hard work' (Rothman, 1986). Nevertheless, the researcher had the opportunity to reflect on the realities of undertaking research with busy people.

6. Summary

In this paper, the practicalities and purpose of writing of a research journal were outlined as an important qualitative research method to learn about the experience of research and gather invaluable data. Within this paper, it was argued that writing a research journal is critically important to the documentation of the researcher's personal research journey and help validate the authenticity of research data collected using this method. Narratives that derive from research journals have the capacity to better inform other researchers. In particular, early career researchers are more able to learn about the realities of research, "not available from any other sources" (Borg, 2001, p.160) via discussion and analysis of researchers' journals. Moreover, it seems there is a lack of guidance in the research literature and academic debate on how to do it and the difficulties and practicalities involved.

Although, the research study (family life and leisure) used as a case study in this paper does not specifically relate to the business/management research field, the experiences outlined within this paper are relevant to all researchers who are considering ways in which they can be more reflexive. In this paper, the major objective has been to describe the use of a research journal in a specific context (family life and leisure research). This context is useful and of interest to those involved in other types of research as the issues and concerns raised in this paper are evident in all types of research. The paper provides a real-life insight concerning the practicalities and challenges of writing a research journal to encourage other researchers to

consider using this method, as Ortlipp (2008) notes this type of research is, neglected in mainstream research methods taking time out from the 'doing' of the research and finding space to compile a research journal provides the opportunity for the researcher to put reflection into practice by creating and clarifying the meaning of their own experiences "in terms of....self in relation to self and self in relation to the world" (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p.101). All those involved in the business and management research need to seriously consider adopting this strategy as part of their research plan. It is apparent that reflecting on research is now a key issue for qualitative researchers in the social sciences and could potentially be an issue in the business/management field (Nadin & Cassell, 2006). Although, management and business research has been dominated by the use of quantitative methods to help justify their claims as such methods produce quantifiable evidence (Mittelstaedt, 2002).

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