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**“PUSHED BEYOND MY COMFORT ZONE”:
MBA STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE
RESEARCH**

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Abstract

Despite the extensive use of qualitative research methods in the management field, there has been little empirical attention paid to how business and management students learn to do and understand qualitative research and the associated skills developed. This research focuses upon the experiences of MBA students who are conducting qualitative research for an assignment, many of them using qualitative research methods for the first time.

Through an inductive analysis of students’ reflective accounts of the process, the challenges encountered in conducting qualitative research as a novice are highlighted and the links between the skills required for competent practice in this area and those required for more general managerial effectiveness demonstrated. It is argued that learning to conduct qualitative research offers a number of additional benefits beyond the substantive content of the domain. These are enabling the development of skills similar to those required for effective managerial practice; opportunities to learn to manage complexity as associated with the current managerial climate; an understanding of the performative nature of management; and the opportunity to challenge existing mindsets in a creative manner.

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Introduction

Qualitative research methods are now used extensively throughout the business and management domain with an associated recognition that research underpinned by qualitative approaches can make an interesting and valuable contribution to our field (e.g.: Bartunek et. al., 2006). Recent debates have focused upon such diverse considerations as theoretical development within the field (Hibbert, Sillince, Diefenbach and Cunliffe, 2014); the possibilities of both established and emerging approaches and methods to offer new research insights (Gill, 2014, Ray and Smith, 2012, Jarret and Liu, 2016); and the appropriate quality criteria for qualitative management research (Welch, Plakoyiannaki, Piekkari, and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2013; Bansal and Corley, 2011; Symon, Cassell and Johnson, 2016). Given this increasing interest, it is pertinent to consider how students engage with qualitative research methodology and learn to do qualitative research with a view to developing management learning and education in this field.

Learning how to do research and research methods training are a fundamental part of curricula within business and management programmes. However, there appears to be little discussion or debate about the content or delivery of these areas in the management syllabus and as Bedeian (2014: 122) suggests: “the level of methodological training

within the management discipline is hard to estimate”. This is surprising given the significance of research methods training to the development of Faculty and doctoral students (Coronel Llamas and Boza, 2011); the recognition of the generic uses and value of such training by managers once graduated (Naudé, Band, Stray and Wegner, 1997); and the calls for more scientific methods education for managers that accompany the advocacy of evidence-based management (Graen, 2009).

My interest here is explicitly in qualitative research and is motivated by my own experience of spending many years teaching qualitative research to a variety of student groups in different Business and Management Schools. The outputs of qualitative research have had an enduring impact upon the field of management learning and development, however how the skills required to conduct qualitative research are learned and taught has received little empirical attention. For example, although there is considerable debate within the management learning and education literature about both the curriculum content and delivery of MBAs (e.g.: Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis and O’Toole, 2005; Rubin and Dierdorff, 2013), the extent to which research methodology should be part of the curriculum remains under-explored. Qualitative researchers drawing upon their own practice have produced insightful insider accounts about their own learning experiences (e.g. van Maanen, 2011; Stablein and Frost, 2004; Cassell and Symon, 2004), however these focus upon those who have already made a considerable commitment to learning how to do qualitative research rather than on the general members of the management classroom.

Why is this issue important? My argument is that many of the skills required to conduct research well are also important for managerial effectiveness. Therefore learning research skills may have an impact beyond becoming a competent researcher. It is clear that a range of different skills are needed in order to conduct qualitative research effectively. These include communication skills associated with data collection such as active listening, probing and the development of empathy and rapport; skills associated with qualitative data analysis such as those of interpretation and the ability to look for patterns in the data in a systematic way; and the skills of persuasive writing that accompany the writing up of qualitative research (Cassell, Bishop, Symon, Johnson, and Buehring, 2009). There may also be other attributes that learning qualitative skills exposes through a “hidden curriculum” effect (Cartlidge and Milburn, 1978).

Despite these potential opportunities we know very little about the experiences of students learning how to do qualitative research. Hence the research reported here focuses upon the experiences of MBA students conducting qualitative research – in this case a research interview - for an assignment, many of them using qualitative research for the first time. Through an analysis of students’ reflective accounts of the process, the challenges faced when conducting qualitative research as a novice are highlighted. In exploring these experiences, I contribute to the development of management education in the research methods field firstly, by pointing out the opportunities that the learning of qualitative research skills offers to the development of managerial skills more generally; secondly, by highlighting empirically the experiences of management learners in this

area; and thirdly, by making some suggestions about how the learning experiences of novice qualitative researchers can be enhanced.

Linking managerial and qualitative research skills

Within the management learning and education literature there has been considerable discussion about the skills and competences required for effective managerial practice and the extent to which those skills and competences map on to the curricula of MBA programmes (e.g.: Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Dierdorff and Rubin, 2006; Bedwell, Fiore and Salas, 2014). The debate has focused upon a range of issues around the MBA curriculum, for example curricular content in relation to evidence-based practice (Rousseau and McCarty, 2007); underlying philosophy and orientation (Ghoshal, 2005); and the applicability of MBA content to what the contemporary manager needs to know (e.g. Mintzberg, 2004). Research has also investigated the range of skills required for specific managerial activities, for example cross-cultural work on expatriate adaptation (Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004; Dinges and Baldwin, 1996). These debates have taken place within the context of increasing demands from employers for graduates with soft skills. Such demands have been highlighted within the academic literature, graduate surveys, and the media more generally (e.g. : Loman, 2001; GMAC, 2012; Lightfoot, 2014).

The literature on managerial skills and competencies is extensive so in seeking to explore the links between the skills and competencies required for qualitative research and those for managerial practice two particular review studies are drawn upon here:

those of Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) and Bedwell, Fiore and Salas (2014). These studies have been chosen rather than any others as the empirical basis from which to understand managerial skills and competencies for three reasons. Firstly, the motivation of both studies is similar to that of this paper in that Bedwell et al. (2014) are concerned with the integration of interpersonal skills into existing MBA courses and Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) with the alignment of MBA curricula with managerial competences. This fits with the motivation here to explore the links between the development of qualitative research skills within the MBA curriculum and those interpersonal skills and competences required for effective managerial practice. Secondly, both studies are based on rigorously generated empirical taxonomies of skills or competencies. Whereas Bedwell et al. draw upon Klein, De Rouin and Salas's (2006) taxonomy of interpersonal skills that was developed through their examination of 58 existing interpersonal skills frameworks with over 400 component skills, Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) draw upon a comprehensive managerial competency model derived by Dierdorff and Rubin (2006) from nationally representative data from 8635 incumbents across 52 managerial occupations (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009). Thirdly, given the complexity of previous definitions in this field, both papers offer clear and workable definitions of the different skills and competencies in the taxonomies used.

Turning to those studies, Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) used the six competency categories from the empirically derived competence model of Dierdorff and Rubin (2006) to explore the extent to which the competencies indicated by managers as being the most critical were aligned with the MBA curricula of 373 AACSB accredited Schools. They examined

six competence categories of managing decision-making processes; managing human capital; managing strategy and innovation; managing the task environment; managing administration and control; and managing logistics and technology. Through their empirical work they demonstrate a misalignment between the competencies that are derived from MBA curricula and those managerial competencies required for job performance as defined by practising managers. They also note some interesting differences between the levels of importance incumbent managers assign to the different competencies and the extent to which they are covered by essential courses required on MBA programmes. They conclude by suggesting that efforts need to be made to ensure that “competencies represented in the curricula are truly being inculcated in students and that such learning transfers to other domains such as future courses and jobs” (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009: 221). Hence this study provides a useful basis for examining the competencies managers require.

Bedwell, Fiore and Salas (2014) draw upon the same concern about misalignment and highlight how there seems to be an increasing frustration in industry that although MBAs may graduate with excellent technical knowledge it maybe at the expense of a general lack of interpersonal skills (IPS). They suggest that the solution is not a simple course alignment fix for three reasons: the lack of flexibility within programmes to integrate IPS; that such IPS courses may not be achieving intended outcomes, and the lack of skill-based practice opportunities which focuses upon interpersonal skills (Bedwell et al., 2014: 173). In coming to these conclusions they draw upon an interpersonal skills taxonomy devised by Klein, De Rouin and Salas (2006). Klein et al’s (2006) taxonomy

includes communication skills of active listening; oral communication; written communication; assertive communication; and non-verbal communication, and relationship- building skills of co-operation and co-ordination; trust; intercultural sensitivity; service orientation; self-preservation; social influence; conflict resolution and negotiation. Bedwell et al (2014: 182) also review some of the teaching techniques which are informed by the characteristics of effective training. The authors conclude that “business schools need to provide instructional opportunities for students to learn about and practice these skills” which research suggests is not done currently.

Unlike the literature on managerial skills and competences, there is little empirical work which focuses explicitly on the skills required to conduct good qualitative management research. One exception is Cassell et al. (2009) where the authors questioned experienced qualitative researchers and teachers about their views of the skills required. Some textbooks also make comments about the skills needed (e.g. Bryman and Bell, 2011) and other sources may focus upon the skills necessary for one particular method such as interviews or ethnography (e.g. King and Horrocks, 2010; Brewer, 2004; Cassell, 2015). There are also accounts of individual’s experiences of teaching qualitative research which shed light on the various skills required (e.g. Humphreys, 2006), and papers which focus upon an aspect of qualitative research and in passing highlight some of the key skills utilised (e.g. Dundon and Ryan, 2010).

Cassell et al. (2009) is the only paper to consider in-depth the skills required by novice qualitative researchers. Through an inductive analysis of interviews with forty-five

individuals with an interest in enhancing the quality of qualitative management research, for example journal editors, research funders, qualitative researchers and doctoral programme leaders they identified a set of skills, knowledge areas and research practices required for the production of good qualitative research. The four different types of research skills identified are effective data collection skills relying on, for example, a researcher being flexible and responsive to context; effective data analysis skills for example being consistent, transparent and interpretive in the analysis process; persuasive writing skills, for example the ability to develop a logical and coherent argument; and the skills of effective critique and evaluation, for example having a sensitivity to different evaluation criteria.

In terms of linking managerial skills and competencies and qualitative research skills it is useful to highlight the links between the qualitative skills identified by Cassell et al. (2009) with the managerial skills identified by Klein, De Rouin and Salas (2006) as adopted and adapted by Bedwell et al. (2014), and the managerial competencies identified by Rubin and Dierdorff (2009). The intention here is to look for similarities between them. So for example, in relation to the skills of qualitative data collection, mentioned in Bedwell et al. (2014) are active listening, oral communication, non-verbal communication, assertive communication, self-presentation, trust, inter-cultural sensitivity and social influence, all of which would be helpful skills in a qualitative interview situation. Furthermore Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) mention how an example of the competency of managing the task environment is communicating with others and establishing and maintaining personal relationships, again key competencies for effective

qualitative data collection. In thinking about qualitative data analysis skills, we can see that evaluating, documenting and recording information, all part of the managing administration and control competence identified by Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) would be important. Written communication skills are managerial skills also associated with good qualitative research and skills of effective critique and communication link in with the competence of judging the quality of information as highlighted by Rubin and Dierdorff (2009). Hence an initial cursory look would suggest that in theory there is a considerable overlap between the different skills and competencies.

However, it is important to recognise that the skills of qualitative research do not operate in isolation in that as Cassell et al. (2009) argue, as well as skills, qualitative researchers also need subject knowledge, and experience of research practices such as reflection and reflexivity. There may also be some additional challenges that are distinctive to learning qualitative research, for example the diversity in the philosophical assumptions underpinning qualitative research; and the different methods available for data collection and analysis (Johnson, Beuhring, Cassell and Symon, 2006; Prasad 2005; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). Such philosophical alternatives and disputes underpinning the field can be somewhat daunting for the newcomer (Harlos et al, 2003; Hammersley, 2004; Clough, 2004). Furthermore, there is a long tradition of managerial familiarity with numbers as the basis for evidence (Thorpe and Holt, 2007), which problematizes the extent to which managers perceive qualitative research as useful or appropriate in their own managerial practice (Skinner, Tagg and Holloway, 2000). Indeed it may be that the association of qualitative research with subjectivity makes it less attractive to the managerial mindset.

The typically cross-cultural nature of international MBA cohorts may also raise issues. We know that there is international and cross-cultural variety in epistemic cultures of qualitative research (Knoblauch et al, 2005) hence an international cohort may draw upon a range of different methodological assumptions. For example Chen (2016) discusses the challenges of teaching qualitative research in China where he argues there is a lack of support for qualitative research because it is seen as subjective, biased and unrepresentative. In addressing such concerns Chen (2016) outlines the importance of an experiential learning strategy which draws upon a pedagogy of the ‘unity of knowing and doing’. Other research has highlighted the importance of practice for the development of qualitative research skills. Galliers and Huang (2012: 129) conducted an expert panel with interviewees who taught qualitative research in the Information Systems field and conclude “There is considerable agreement amongst our panel members concerning the difficulties in transferring tacit skills in class, and the resultant difficulties faced by novice qualitative researchers, especially when such training is so limited”.

The writings in this area reviewed so far have all drawn upon two sources: reviews of the literature on interpersonal skills and competencies and reflective accounts of qualitative researchers and teachers. Hence in seeking to bring together managerial and qualitative research skills and competencies we are focusing so far upon a theoretical link, rather than upon what happens on a practical level as experienced by students. Therefore in order to really understand the challenges of learning qualitative research skills, it would be insightful to ask neophyte qualitative researchers about their experiences. Indeed

Dehler and Welsh (2013) advocate the practice of asking students what they have learned. As they argue, integrative learning occurs when students are able to articulate what they are learning. Hence, the research reported here seeks to provide an empirical account of the experiences of MBA students completing an assignment that focuses upon the development of qualitative research skills and addresses three research questions:

- What challenges do MBA students identify when learning qualitative research?
- To what extent do students' experiences of learning qualitative research skills suggest that they are also developing managerial skills and competences as part of their learning process?
- What are the implications of these learning experiences for
 - the teaching and learning of qualitative research skills
 - opportunities for developing interpersonal skills through the qualitative research curriculum?

The research project

My approach to the research is framed within an interpretivist perspective where the intention is to understand the subjective nature of reality construction (Prasad, 2005). This informs both my teaching and this piece of research so I am interested in how the students' experience and make sense of their encounters with qualitative research. From a reflexive perspective I sought to use the research as an opportunity to reflect upon both the student's experiences of their learning and my approach to teaching, including my underlying assumptions about what MBA students needed to know about qualitative research.

The research involved analysing the reflective accounts produced by 228 full-time MBA students about their experiences of conducting a qualitative research interview. The students were from two cohorts of full-time MBA students at a large UK based Business School who were taught in the UK in English. They had an average of 6 years managerial experience and female students were 23% of the sample. Details about their professional backgrounds and country or origin are presented in Table One.

Insert Table One about here

Each of them completed an individual assignment in qualitative research methods as part of a research and consultancy skills module that was designed to prepare students appropriately for a real life group consultancy project in which they worked on a business issue with a client. As part of the module students had six hours tuition in qualitative research, three hours per week over a two week period. This was an established part of the course and the format comprised of delivering in a large lecture which meant there was little opportunity for discussion or interaction. The material included a very brief introduction to the philosophies underpinning qualitative research; different approaches to and methods of collecting qualitative data; interviews and examples of some of the things that can go well and badly in interviews (using YouTube clips); different approaches to qualitative data analysis; and writing up qualitative research. The intention of the sessions was to prepare students for the consultancy project that followed where they had to conduct an interview with a client. Therefore the learning outcomes of the two sessions were that the students were able to understand the principles underpinning qualitative research; acquire some knowledge of different methods; and be able to

conduct an interview with a client and analyse it in a way that produced useful data for their project. Their learning was then assessed through an assignment which focused upon their analysis of the interview and their reflection upon it.

The two sessions on qualitative research were sandwiched within the syllabus between lectures on statistics and consultancy skills. Hence those topics were treated in a similar way in that students were given introductions to them so that they could apply the knowledge in their consultancy project. As a Lecturer I had inherited this delivery format and had little freedom to change it. A concern I had was with the little opportunity it offered for space for practice and reflection, so it was important that the assignment was used for practice and reflective purposes.

The aim of the assignment was to encourage students to practice qualitative research skills, mainly designing and conducting an interview and analysing the data gathered. I was keen that the assignment would be helpful for their consultancy project therefore I recommended that they choose their client or someone else involved with the project to interview so that the findings could usefully feed into the project. A further purpose of the assignment was to encourage students to critically reflect upon their experiences of conducting qualitative research and the skills they needed to develop. Hence they were asked to produce a 500 word reflective account at the end of the assignment which would be part of the assessment. Once the assessment was over this would be copied and detached from the assignment so I could use it for research purposes. A copy of the

assignment can be found in Appendix 1. Students were also given the opportunity to opt out of the research if they wanted to but no-one chose to do so.

A total of 228 students completed the assignment which was the total of the two full time MBA cohorts. In writing the reflective account, we could expect that the students wanted to pass the assignment therefore it could be that the accounts they provided were sanitised versions that did not accurately reflect or report their experiences. However, contrary to this expectation, their accounts covered a variety of views and were quite frank in places about both the frustrations and the positive aspects of the exercise. Furthermore, as is usual within an interpretivist stance, the intention here is not to search for the one truthful account, but rather to understand what the implications of their responses may be for how we understand learning in this field.

The data analysis adhered to an inductive template approach (King, 2012) which followed a number of stages. This approach was chosen because of the flexibility it offers (King, 2012: 427). There are a variety of options in conducting thematic analysis and here I chose to derive the template from the data rather than imposing an initial structure. In the first stage of the analysis I read all the 228 accounts through a couple of times to get a feel of some of the issues that the students were raising. I made notes regarding potentially key details to include in the analytic process. During the second stage of the analysis I read through the first fifty accounts again and bearing in mind the research question I wrote down all of the challenges that were identified by the participants. From this initial list a total of 135 challenges were identified, for example: “trying to follow the

interview guide whilst having a normal conversation”; “keeping a record to help us remain impartial”; “set out with pre-defined assumptions that were turned upside down”; “trying to ensure my judgement didn’t overshadow the data” and “running out of time”. From this initial set of challenges the third stage of the analysis involved constructing an initial template where the set of challenges identified were grouped together into sub-themes which were then combined together to lead to the development of 3 higher order themes. Although informed by King’s (2012) template approach, this building up of an inductive analytic structure is common to a number of approaches to qualitative data analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Johnson, 2004). The higher-order themes derived were practical concerns, the complexity of qualitative research which covered their concerns about ambiguous processes and the uncertainties of how it worked, and challenges to previous experience and assumptions.

During the fourth stage of the analysis I sought to code the remaining accounts into the template, however, it became apparent that some revisions to the initial coding scheme in the template were required therefore stage five involved some template revision. An important change related to the recognition that some of the challenges that had again been initially coded as “practical concerns” actually arose from more philosophical concerns about the definition of quality research. Such challenges were associated with the perceived credibility of the research such as “analysis seems unscientific”; “how to remove bias”; and “subjective nature of results”. To address this another higher-order theme of “credibility of the qualitative research process” was added to the template. Stage

six of the analysis therefore saw the production of the final template and stage seven the coding of any remaining data into the template.

The eighth stage of the analysis involved carefully examining the data in each of the themes and sub-themes to look for any patterns or trends within the data. In terms of interpretation it seemed that there was a link between the practicalities of needing to develop new skills with other concerns that are more distinctive about qualitative research, for example around how to control a participant's behaviour in an interview. These uncertainties and complexities that characterise the qualitative research process are inextricably linked into the interpretive and subjective nature of the methods which in turn linked to the data regarding the perceived credibility of the methods themselves. What impacted upon this perceived credibility was the ways in which qualitative research was seen to challenge previous assumptions that the students shared which were typically informed by their previous professional experience of using quantitative data. These identified linkages became an underlying narrative in the interpretation of the analysis. Once this narrative was identified, in order to ensure that it was justified by the data in a more holistic way and to ensure the confirmability of the analysis (Guba and Lincoln, 1989), as the final stage of the analytic process I then re-read all of the accounts to ensure that the reduction of the data through the template had not resulted in the findings being too far removed from the initial context of the data. This also enabled the opportunity to reflexively explore the extent to which the conclusions from the analysis matched any pre-existing assumptions I had before the analysis started. I found that some of the findings were unexpected from my perspective – a point I return to in the concluding

section. At this stage I was confident that the narrative was a useful sensemaking device in understanding the accounts overall. Table 2 presents a summary of the different stages of the analytic process.

Findings

In summary, the over-arching narrative that emerged from the analysis was that as well as the practical challenges of the unfamiliar skills involved in conducting a research interview for the first time, the uncertainties, ambiguities and complexities that accompanied the method in use led to concerns about the credibility of the methods. This was contextualised in the light of the students' previous experience. The findings that follow are presented in line with these conclusions in four sections: practical concerns; complexities of qualitative research; perceived credibility of the qualitative research process; and challenging previous experience and assumptions. Excerpts from the accounts are used to illustrate some of the points made and participant numbers are placed in brackets after each quote.

Practical concerns

A number of practical challenges that the students reported were related to their lack of familiarity with qualitative research. An example was the amount of time required to conduct the task:

“As a novice researcher I feel that qualitative studies are labour intensive. I did not realise at the beginning how long it would take me to conduct interviews especially the fact that I intended to conduct an electronic interview”.(10)

The labour intensive nature of qualitative research was a surprise for many of the students and extended to other aspects of the task, for example analysing the data. A lack of familiarity with the practice of qualitative research meant that the practical issues that most qualitative researchers take for granted were rendered problematic. An example is the recording of data:

“Recording the interview was harder than we initially thought. I sort of regretted that I did not follow the earlier advice given during the lectures saying that a good quality recorder would be upmost helpful during this process. After finally finishing the interview, the transcription process was much slower than I initially anticipated. Honestly the slowness caught me by surprise”.(43)

A further practical difficulty was identifying interviewees. Two of the groups had to cold call to find interviewees as this is what their client suggested. Although the difficulties in doing this may be familiar to the experienced qualitative researcher for some of the students this was something of a surprise:

“During this I have found some difficulties to find respondents comfortable to do the interview. Personally, I did not expect that might have been so difficult to find the “way” to persuade people to do an interview. Actually, although we introduced ourselves as University students, we collected many “no” answers to our requests”.(65)

In terms of getting to grips with the practicalities such as finding respondents, conducting the interview and subsequent data analysis, the findings here echo previous research about the importance of practice (e.g. Cassell et al, 2009; Locke, 2011; Galliers and Huang, 2012). Indeed the issue of lack of practice was identified in some of the accounts.

For example:

“The assignment on qualitative methods is an interesting yet challenging experience, especially to a novice like me. Trying to understand the various

methods of qualitative analysis and how to apply them requires a lot of reading and practice. To make a good qualitative analysis using whatever methods available can be done through experience”. (31)

Overall then, the practical concerns the students identified were linked by them to their lack of familiarity with, and practical experience of, this area.

Complexities of qualitative research

Beyond the unanticipated lack of familiarity with the basic skills, students reported that the whole process was fraught with uncertainties. Indeed conducting qualitative research was seen to involve some unexpected complexities. It was the unpredictable facets of the interview that the students found particularly difficult like the interviewee having a different agenda, the over-communicative interviewee, and the lack of willingness of interviewees to stick to the script. The anxiety they experienced as a result seemed to originate from a mis-match between the amount of control over the interview process that the students expected to have beforehand, and the uncertainties that confronted them when they were in the actual interview situation. For example:

“It was observable that the respondent himself had imposed some thematisation of their own in how they framed their answers – this leaves doubt as to whether the researcher is able to draw a conceptual framework around the interview content independently of the respondent-imposed view of the relevant themes and issues. Conversely, there were tangents that the respondent went off on which were outside the scope of the interview. On one occasion, I recall actually intervening to prevent an episode of off-topic rambling”! (3)

Here the student clearly sees themselves in the role of directing and controlling the interview and defining what was relevant: the respondent discussing something else is seen

as inappropriate. However, for another student there was the recognition that there might be different definitions of relevance:

“During the interview we realised that the client’s expectations were different than our understanding of their needs. As a result, some of our questions became irrelevant. It was challenging to come up with new questions, which were not considered before the interview”. (85)

This comment reflects the need for flexibility and an ability to be responsive to context in the data collection process as highlighted by Cassell et al. (2009). Managing these types of uncertainty led to anxiety in places that the student interviewers tried to compensate for. For example:

“I do believe that I diverted a little from the main focus during the interview. In an attempt to gather whatever information I could as I would not get to speak with the respondents again, I tried to address whatever questions I could even though they were remotely related to the main issue. This left the respondent confused and led to information overload for me. Also there may have been instances when I might have led the respondent to answer in a way I wanted him to answer. Though this was totally unintentional, it was an interesting observation while reflecting over this assignment”.(168)

A variety of other forms of compensation were used to deal with the anxiety experienced. These ranged from deciding to stick very clearly to the procedures they had read about:

“Initially, we stuck to the codes and expressed less flexibility due to lack of expertise. This lack of open mindedness meant less reception to discursive answers” (58)

to re-assuring themselves that even if they hadn’t done it properly they had got something useful from the task:

“Nonetheless I came to recognise as I started the analysis section of the study that even if it was not “textbook perfect” it would still be of incredible value to the final Spring project and prove to be a useful illuminating tool”. (18)

The lack of practice identified earlier was exacerbated by the challenges associated with managing ambiguity and dealing with the unexpected. These difficulties will not be a surprise to experienced qualitative researchers who will know that no two interviews are ever the same and that both the process and content can differ greatly. But it would seem that the message about interview unpredictability that I tried to stress to students in the lectures did not get across, leaving them unprepared.

At the heart of the students' concerns here is the lack of control that they experienced during the interviews. Their assumption seemed to be that they would plan what was going to happen in the interview and then that would simply happen. This understanding of the interview neglects the relational element of the process and sees it very much as a one sided encounter to the benefit of the interviewer. Indeed it was precisely this that the students found difficult. For example:

“In data collection, controlling respondents for getting exact and accurate information is very difficult. They can talk about everything and easily miss the target. Repeat same ideas many times or just don't answer the question at all” (29)

Such lack of control could also serve to exacerbate anxiety. As well as the uncertainties around the interview, concerns were expressed about ambiguity in the data analytic process.

“Doing the analysis was at first disconcerting since trying to identify the concept or theme for each sentence seemed a bit random. The analysis experience seemed a bit 'messy' and it was easy to lose sight of what I was doing. After keeping at it, though, distinct themes did emerge and I was able to bring everything back into a coherent set of concepts that I could then attempt to draw conclusions about what came out. I am not sure whether what I ended up with was valid or not”.(48)

Ambiguity around data analysis was seen as a concern here because of the impact upon validity of the analysis. The concern with validity was one that emerged in a variety of different guises in the student's accounts. A further aspect of ambiguity and complexity is the lack of explicit procedures for the analysis of qualitative data. One student suggested that a set of formulaic guidelines for precisely how the analysis should be approached would be useful:

“If somebody could suggest an acronym which describes the procedure of qualitative research, from the interview to the conclusion stage, it would be very useful ... For example ‘7 steps of benchmarking’ or ‘6sigma’... could make people memorize procedures of some methodologies very easily. Then people can use these approaches more easily”.(173)

In the midst of qualitative data analysis, the search for a straightforward, procedural answer is somewhat understandable, however the interesting point here is that the desire is to simplify, rather than grasp and get to grips with making sense of what is initially seen as ambiguous data.

Perceived credibility of the qualitative research process

As noted earlier, some of the challenges initially identified as practical seemed to be rooted in concerns about the credibility of the qualitative research process. The role of the researcher and their input into the data collection and analysis was seen as potentially problematic. As this student pointed out in relation to the interviews:

“In fact, the interviewees’ statements are co-authored by the interviewer who can, with active listening, interactions and questions, lead up to those aspects of a topic the subject he/she wants to address, determine the course of the conversation and potentially undermine the credibility/validity of the data collected”.(19)

Here the notion of co-authorship – an accepted concept in much qualitative research – is problematised again due to concerns about validity in this case regarding the role of the interviewer in data collection. A further example comes from a concern about the analytic process:

“It has been found it is not easy to convert qualitative data into something reliable scientifically. Although applying one of the strategic analysis tools, especially template analysis in my case, to data interpretation, it seems there is some risk in that the data can be seriously distorted by the researcher; unlike the case of quantitative research. Especially in the process of modifying an initial template into the final one, the data might be able to be totally newly-born according to the intention of the researcher, especially by deleting some data estimated as irrelevant by the researcher”. (35)

Once again concerns here relate to the validity and integrity of the research process and there is an interesting assumption here that quantitative research cannot be “seriously distorted”, as this respondent believes is the case with qualitative research. Such recurring concerns about validity are linked into the student’s philosophical assumptions about the nature of good quality, valid research. Depending upon the philosophical standpoint or paradigm within which one is working, this kind of analysis is common practice in interpretivist research, however these issues were raised as major concerns by these students. For example:

“At the moment of analysing the data, it is extremely difficult to leave the preconceived ideas out the door. It has been very difficult to place the “Open Codes” messages the interviewee gave and not the messages I believe to understand from what the interviewee has quoted. These doubts made me very insecure during the whole analysis, rarely was I able to conclude that certain coding was correct. I feel quite comfortable with the final themes and do believe a couple of them I had not conceived prior to the analysis, nevertheless I still have many doubts as maybe more themes are hidden and I was not able to let them emerge”.(46)

Hence even when this respondent was comfortable with their final data analysis they still had doubts about the validity of the analytic process.

It is clear that the students wanted to produce a good piece of work but their assumptions about what constitutes good quality research focus upon the application of positivist criteria such as objectivity, validity and reliability of the research process. As authors who have commented upon the variety of quality criteria available for qualitative research have suggested (e.g. Johnson et al, 2006; Easterby-Smith et al, 2008; Symon and Cassell, 2012), these are not necessarily the appropriate criteria upon which to judge all qualitative research. However, these seemed to be the ones that students wanted to use. Here it seemed that the assignment took them beyond their epistemological comfort zone by problematising how good research is defined.

Challenging previous experience and assumptions

Definitions of comfort zones were clearly influenced by previous experience. For example:

“The approach of qualitative data analysis was particularly difficult for me due to my previous professional and academic background. With a doctorate in the natural sciences and a professional career history in pharmaceutical R&D and conducting and reporting technical studies for the consumption of industry peers and regulators, I have an in-built aversion to arriving at conclusions based on conjecture, speculation and insight. My training is such that I feel obliged to substantiate any definitive statement I make, or even quote second hand, with controlled experimental data. Thus taking the respondent’s opinions as “research data” doesn’t come naturally”(5).

As another student expressed it, as a result of their technical background and being used to working with equations and numbers “I felt like I was walking on the other side of the

moon while transcribing and coding the data”. Therefore for some, learning qualitative research challenges their understandings and fundamental assumptions about what research is about and how it should be done. It was almost “unnatural” as this respondent suggests. Students clearly privileged notions of objectivity and found challenging those notions difficult. Here again it is the epistemological assumptions underpinning qualitative research that some found particularly uncomfortable and as Hibbert (2012: 816) suggests, we would expect students to favour their familiar worldviews.

However, the reflection required for the assignment added an additional dimension in that it enabled students to recognise that the demands of the exercise could be seen to challenge existing mindsets. Some students suggested that the exercise had encouraged them to think in new ways and facilitated open-mindedness in relation to how they approached qualitative data:

“I learnt that during the interview process, you have to keep an open mind so that you are not stopping yourself from discovering something new. This flexibility also gives you the opportunity to ask other questions during the interview to explore additional topics you may not have considered before” (49).

This learning identified here contrasted with some of the ways of dealing with anxiety previously mentioned where respondents felt they had lost control of the interview.

Rather here, flexibility was seen as a way of dealing with the unfamiliar. Here there was also the recognition that open-mindedness is an important part of the research process, and that learning might be unexpected:

“Looking back at this whole exercise, I would have to say I enjoyed conducting the interview. I have done interviews before, but not at this level of sophistication. During the interview, it was really interesting to actually see how much information one person can have about one subject. What is even more amazing is

how much this one person can tell you in about half an hour's time. My group did not realize this until we had listened to the tape and started noticing all the minute details. We were all thinking, 'this is so great for our research'" (106).

For this respondent, the potential ambiguity and complexity surrounding the interview had been – on reflection – constructed as “sophisticated”. Whereas for some the purpose or validity of the exercise had not been initially apparent, the reflective analysis demanded by the assignment had brought it to the fore. For example:

“This assignment brought an immense learning experience for me. Before embarking on the assignment, I thought it to be uninteresting and tedious with very little value in terms of learning on an MBA course. I wanted it to be over soon, as I did not feel that it would be a fruitful knowledge-gaining exercise. But as I went on with it, my views changed” (27).

There were also places where students reported back on their pre-MBA experience, critiquing it in the light of this reflection. This was particularly highlighted in relation to how they may have conducted interviews in the past and how if they were in the position of doing them again they may do it somewhat differently.

A summary of the challenges that the students identified is presented in Table Three.

Insert Table Three about here

The implications of the analysis are now discussed.

Discussion

Having identified the challenges that the students encounter (see Table Three) the second research question asked about the extent to which the challenges identified imply that

students are developing general management skills and competences through their qualitative research experience. It is evident that many of the practical skills deficiencies that the students' identity fit with the skills and competences identified in the reviews of Rubin and Deirdorff (2009) and Bedwell et al. (2014) as important for generic managerial practice. For example, the practicalities of time management in qualitative data collection and analysis require the appropriate access to information as required for managerial decision-making processes and managing administration and control (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009). Managing the unpredictable nature of the interview or the interviewee requires skills such as active listening, oral communication, assertive communication and trust (Klein et al, 2006). Practical challenges such as difficulties with recording data are examples of managing logistics and technology (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009). Hence the potential overlap identified in the literature review is supported by the data here. In their accounts the students identify explicitly some of the difficulties they encounter in relation to these skills and competencies and also reflect upon what skilled competence could look like. Indeed it is interesting that for some, their difficulties with the unpredictable nature of the interview emerged as a result of their assumption that they did indeed already have the interpersonal skills required to do such a task, and the complexities they encountered were unexpected. It was only on reflection that they became aware of the more developed set of interpersonal skills required, as evidenced by the quote of student number 106 with their comment 'I have done interviews before but not at this level of sophistication'.

Therefore it is apparent that for this group of students learning qualitative research has provided them with the opportunities to practise skills and competencies associated with more generic managerial requirements, though they may not have necessarily recognised this link themselves. Turning now to the third research question, this focused on what management educators can do to enable learning in this area firstly, in terms of the teaching and learning of qualitative research skills and secondly, in terms of the opportunities offered for developing interpersonal skills through the qualitative research curriculum. In terms of what management educators can do, given the cross-over between the skills and competences required for practising qualitative research and general managerial practice, ideally interventions should be made that achieve synergies to build upon the links identified. Hence links could be made across the curriculum between these two separate areas of study. Teachers of qualitative research could emphasize more the interpersonal skills required for good qualitative research and how developing qualitative research skills can enhance the skills of effective managerial practice more generally. This could help to address the problem of the lack of skills-based opportunities for practising interpersonal skills in MBA programmes as identified by Bedwell et al. (2014). Those educators similarly responsible for the development of interpersonal skills could draw attention to the cross-syllabi links.

The importance of practice in qualitative research has been identified by a number of writers (Galliers and Huang, 2012; Fine et al, 2000; Locke, 2001; Cassell et al, 2009) and here these practice opportunities could focus upon the development of both sets of skills. Practice opportunities do not need to be fully-fledged and bite-size practice chunks could

help, for example, conducting a ten minute interview with a colleague and asking for feedback or a task to try and code a section of interview transcript. Such bite-size practice tasks could be included in a lecture format. Some of the suggestions made by Bedwell et al. (2014) for developing interpersonal skills in this area such as experiential exercises and video demonstrations may already be included in qualitative research teaching including my own, but there is an opportunity for management educators in both domains to learn from the overlap identified here.

However, encountering skill challenges on its own does not seem to be enough to explain the learning experiences of this student group because there are other challenges they identify that are more directly related to qualitative research as a subject. One example are the challenges related to the perceived credibility of qualitative research and how this confronts their previous experience. Students described this discomfort by highlighting how their experience of qualitative research conflicted with their perceptions of good managerial practice. Indeed the rhetoric of objectivity, clarity and being able to direct others are fundamental to stereotypical conceptions of what management is about (Watson, 2001). Some expected to be in a position of control, being able to direct the data collection and analysis in a logical, rational and ordered manner. Yet the ambiguity in the process threatened their potential to achieve this position. Other concerns also identified in the qualitative research literature were highlighted, for example those underpinned by the diversity in qualitative methods and philosophies (Prasad, 2005; Harlos et al., 2003; Clough, 2004). Although the students did not identify an understanding of different philosophical approaches as a challenge, many of their concerns related to their own

philosophical assumptions about what defined good research which seemed to fit clearly within a positivist paradigm.

The student's surprise with the uncertainties surrounding the interview process presents an interesting issue for the qualitative educator in terms of whether students can be more adequately prepared for a situation which is more unpredictable than expected. Perhaps what the students need here is some detail on understanding qualitative research as a relational, interactive process. Indeed as Sergi and Hallin (2011: 192) suggest "research may be described as a linear, step-by-step kind of process, but it can also be understood as a practice that is lived, since the researcher brings her whole self into it, encountering a multitude of other experiences, which include emotions and feelings". Perhaps they should also be introduced to the notion of research as performance (Sergi and Hallin, 2011) as well as the development of interpersonal skills. Understanding the performative dimensions of research may give us additional insights into management practice beyond a research setting. Such insights may include recognising that everyday managerial behaviour may also be understood as performance and that a dramaturgical metaphor (e.g. Goffman, 1956) offers different insights into the understanding of managerial practice.

In regard to the ambiguous nature of the procedures for qualitative data analysis it is interesting here that there is a suggestion from one of the students that a formulaic approach may be more helpful. This creates particular difficulties however, in that although it may reassure the students, it does not necessarily reflect what actually happens in qualitative

research. As highlighted earlier, the analytic process can be messy and ambiguous and accepting and dealing with that ambiguity is one of the skills that the qualitative researcher develops over time. Indeed this is also similar to the creativity required for managing strategy and innovation as identified by Rubin and Dierdorff (2009). Moreover, formulaic approaches can encourage an assumption that there is one right way to do qualitative research, an assumption challenged by numerous qualitative researchers (e.g. Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Rather, it might be more appropriate to reassure students that this is a complex process and it is usual for there to be multiple interpretations both during and at the completion of the analysis process. In the same way that skilled managerial practice involves an ability to manage complexity (Aram and Noble, 1999; Gebauer, 2013) so does the practice of qualitative research. Indeed there may be an opportunity here to help facilitate a more generic understanding of the complexity of managerial practice. As Gebauer (2013: 204) suggests: “Dealing with the unexpected has become a fundamental management challenge”. Indeed Aram and Noble (1999) argue that Business Schools need to more adequately prepare students to cope with the levels of ambiguity and uncertainty they will face in the workplace. Therefore rather than creating some formulaic response to dealing with complexity, the uncertainty around qualitative data analysis can be conceptualised as similar to other types of uncertainties that managers face on a daily basis.

In terms of the concerns identified about the credibility and validity of qualitative research it is important that the role of the researcher is critiqued within the qualitative research classroom, and the challenges of reflection and reflexivity highlighted. Indeed the notion of reflexivity can be extended to look at the idea of the manager as a critically

reflexive practitioner, something that has currency within the management education literature more generally (Cotter and Cullen, 2012). Furthermore, in promoting the views of different ways of assessing and defining what is ‘good’ research, attention can be drawn to the complexities that managers face in dealing with different stakeholder groups and the skills associated with being able to see other viewpoints, for example perspective-taking and cultural sensitivity. Moreover in displaying and discussing some of the relevant advantages of communicating messages through language rather than numbers, the role of language in achieving managerial goals can be explored.

Bearing in mind the philosophical challenges identified, it would seem that philosophical input is important in the qualitative research classroom. However it may be that the focus of that input should be somewhat different from that of outlining and critiquing a range of philosophical approaches. Rather the philosophical concerns students express about issues such as subjectivity should be addressed explicitly in the class input with the primary focus right from the beginning of instruction being upon surfacing and challenging existing assumptions; highlighting the implications of those assumptions; and considering alternatives. Indeed the notion of epistemological comfort zone is a useful one here to conceptualise the kind of input that needs to be delivered. Such input should explicitly recognise the potential discomfort that may arise and focus upon offering challenges to existing mindsets. This offers the opportunity to examine and critique assumptions and mindsets about managerial behaviours and practice and also to develop interpersonal skills associated with working with people of different mindsets such as intercultural sensitivity and conflict resolution and negotiation (Klein et al., 2006).

Insert Table Four about here

Table Four summarises the implications of the challenges identified by novice researchers for management educators. In highlighting some of the implications of how qualitative research is taught, we can also see the opportunities for using the qualitative research curriculum to foster more general development in interpersonal skills and competences. In summary when learning how to do qualitative research, students are also learning a lot more besides that has the potential to add synergy to other areas of the MBA syllabus.

Conclusions and learning

To summarise, through a consideration of the challenges faced by novice qualitative researchers and the linkages between the skills required and those used for effective managerial practice, a number of opportunities have been identified for management learners beyond the substantive nature of qualitative management research. These include enabling the development of skills and competences similar to those required for effective managerial practice; an understanding of the performative nature of management; opportunities to learn to manage complexity as associated with the current managerial climate; and the opportunity to challenge existing mindsets in a creative manner. These skills all imply a conception of management practice as fluid, dynamic and complex, requiring the development of sophisticated interpersonal skills.

Whereas Dierdorff and Rubin (2009) found that there was a heavy emphasis on the functions of business across requisite courses in MBA programmes, it maybe that qualitative research skills teaching potentially offers a more general and inclusive coverage across the skills and competencies required for effective managerial practice. Indeed in the long term it would be interesting to see the extent to which curriculum developments in this area would enable management education more generally to address the greater alignment called for by numerous authors (e.g.: Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Rubin and Dierdorff, 2013) between the skills content of MBA programmes and those skills required to be an effective manager in today's increasingly complex environments.

There are some methodological issues for consideration here. Given the diversity of the qualitative research field, learning to conduct and analyse an interview is a relatively small part of what may be considered qualitative research skills. However, I have conceptualized this as learning to do qualitative research throughout the paper because this was how it was presented to the students. This also reflects the learning outcomes of this part of the module syllabus as noted earlier. It is important to point out that in terms of the exercise the students were given and their consequent reflective accounts these would have been informed by the content of the two lectures I gave and my own conceptualisation of what constitutes effective qualitative research. Clearly my choice of topics to cover in the two sessions will have framed both the student's expectations and practice and this was informed by my interpretivist stance. There is also a question of what can be meaningfully conveyed in six hours instruction in qualitative research. The

extent of instruction in qualitative research on MBA programmes internationally is undocumented within the literature and I suspect there is considerable variation. This is somewhat different from doctoral programmes where in countries such as the UK for example, this is clearly regulated by research funding bodies (ESRC, 2015). Hence it is difficult to speculate the extent to which these experiences are typical of MBA students. Here I would argue that the notion of transferability (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) is more appropriate than generalisability in that we would expect that these findings of their experiences would be transferable to other similar international MBA groups doing similar tasks in similar contexts.

Given the inductive nature of this study, the mapping here between qualitative research skills and more generic skills and competences is only a starting point. The linkages have been established inductively from the data analysis and future research could examine more directly and systematically the linkages between the different sets of skills in the same way that studies are starting to emerge where authors have systematically assessed the impact of interpersonal skills training within their own MBA programmes (e.g. Ingols and Shapiro, 2014). A final methodological constraint is that given the reassurances of confidentiality given to the study participants it has not been possible to come to conclusions about differential group experiences as part of the cohort, for example in relation to characteristics such as gender, cultural and professional background. However what this study does add, which tends to be lacking in other studies so far, are the voices of the students themselves.

In terms of thinking reflexively, the writing of this paper has cast light upon some of my own teaching processes and in particular my assumptions about both qualitative research and about MBA students as a student group. It could be that in teaching qualitative research for so long I now take the subjective and potentially messy aspects of it for granted, and have forgotten the appeal of what can be conceived of as objective or rational stances, most notably for this student group. Perhaps also I should not be surprised about their desire for control given their previous managerial experiences and their status as a student group in the contemporary Business School. This research and my own experiential learning has led to me approaching the teaching of qualitative methods on the MBA slightly differently now. Rather than outlining the highlights of different philosophical approaches at the beginning, I now instead challenge the assumptions that underpin the different approaches right from the start by using exercises to surface the assumptions the students hold about research. This is alongside highlighting that some of the assumptions qualitative researchers work with may be challenging to existing mindsets and how similar mindsets might impact upon managerial practice. I now explicitly discuss how some traditions in qualitative research are perhaps more suited to those who do not like ambiguity, for example neo-empiricist work based on quantitative content analysis.

Additionally I now also suggest that there are opportunities in the problems students initially identify in the context of a traditionally positivist stance where the challenge is to embrace this ambiguity. For example, a regular question I encounter from MBA students is ‘What do I do if I think someone isn’t telling me the truth in an interview’. In answer to

such a question I suggest that from an interpretivist perspective, the interesting question becomes why is someone telling you what they are choosing to tell you and what do they want to achieve by doing so? Hence a focus on subjectivity and interpretation offers a range of interesting, alternative forms of understanding. I also now link in the skills required to conduct qualitative research with other aspects of the MBA syllabi ranging from customer sensitivity in Marketing to creative thinking in Strategy. I would hope that my students are now better equipped to deal with some of the ambiguities they may face in the field, and more appreciative of the variety of opportunities for skill development that an engagement with qualitative research offers.

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Appendix 1: The assignment

QUALITATIVE METHODS ASSIGNMENT

The task

The task for the assignment is in a number of stages as outlined below.

Stage One

You are required to conduct a brief qualitative interview with an individual on a topic related to your project work. The interview should last about twenty minutes and should be recorded in an appropriate format.

Stage Two

You are required to produce a record of the interview. This could be a direct transcription of the interview, or the notes that you took whilst the interview was taking place. It is expected that the record will be about 4 pages long.

Stage Three

The next stage requires that you conduct an analysis of your interview data using any recognised form of qualitative data analysis technique. Appropriate techniques will be covered in the session on ****.

The assignment format

The assignment should be produced in a discursive (essay) format and should address the following questions:

1. Write an account of the analysis that you have conducted on the interview data. This account should be approximately 1,500 words long and should include:
 - a. The rationale for your choice of analytic strategy
 - b. How you conducted the data analysis (e.g. how you constructed the template or categorised the data for example)
 - c. The findings of your analysis
 - d. Any difficulties you encountered
2. Write a 500 word reflective account of your experience of conducting qualitative research (data collection and analysis). This could include some reflection on what you learned from the process of conducting the assignment and your views about the potential value and role of qualitative research in a business and management context. Please start this account on a new page and ensure that your pin number is not on that page.

Important note regarding this assignment

I am currently in the process of conducting research about how people learn to conduct qualitative research. As part of my research I would like to be able to use the answer that you provide in question two as data for the next stage of my research. This is a totally separate endeavour from the assessment process. The data will be anonymous and I will not know which individual has produced which account. If you prefer not to have your answer used for this piece of research then please let the Module Leader: ***** know. Your answer will then be removed from the answers that will be given to me separately at a later stage once the assessment process is complete. Thank you.

Table One: Demographic and professional background of the students

Country of Origin	Percentage of students
Asia Pacific	46
Americas	20
Europe and Middle East	17
UK	12
Africa	5
Professional Background	Percentage of students
Banking / Finance	29
Manufacturing / engineering	17
Other	16
Telecomms/ High Tech	16
Consulting / professional	13
Other services	9

Table Two: The different stages of the analytic process

Stage	Analytic process
One	Read through each of the individual accounts making analytic notes
Two	Read the first 50 accounts again, noting the challenges identified. A list of 135 challenges identified
Three	Constructed an initial template with themes and sub-themes. Three higher order themes were identified: practical concerns, complexity of qualitative research and challenges to previous assumptions
Four	Coded the remaining accounts into the template
Five	Template revision. Introduction of new higher order theme: credibility of the qualitative research process
Six	Production of the final template
Seven	Coding of any remaining data into the template
Eight	Examining themes and sub-themes for patterns
Nine	Creation of an underlying analytic narrative
Ten	Re-read the accounts to explore the authenticity of the narrative and reflexively consider the extent to which the findings matched pre-existing assumptions.

Table Three: Key challenges for novice qualitative researchers as identified in the research

Concerns	Challenge identified
Practical concerns	Time intensive nature of qualitative research
	Difficulties with recording data
	Difficulties with finding respondents
	Lack of opportunity to practice techniques
Complexity of qualitative research	Unpredictable nature of the interview respondent
	Difficulties in controlling the interview
	Ambiguous procedures for qualitative data analysis
Perceived credibility of qualitative research	Role of the researcher and their impact on the process
	Concern to deliver on positivist criteria of objectivity, validity and reliability
Challenges to previous experience	Appreciation of qualitative data compared to quantitative data
	Challenges to existing mindsets

Table Four: Implications of the challenges identified by novice qualitative researchers for management educators

Challenges identified	Implications for teaching and learning qualitative research	Implications for the role of the qualitative research curriculum to foster interpersonal skills development
Practical concerns	Need to highlight the need for IPS development as part of becoming a competent qualitative researcher	Emphasize to students how the skills required for good qualitative research are similar to those for managerial competence
	Offer bite-size practice opportunities and experiential exercises	Draw out the similarities between IPS and qualitative research skills in practical exercises
	Present learning qualitative research as part of a wider skills development strategy	Be explicit about creating links across the curriculum between the different fields and different management educators
Complexity of qualitative research	Instruction regarding the relational, interactive nature of qualitative research	Highlight the similarities in the relational nature of effective management practice
	Introduction to the notion of ‘research as performance’	Link into discussions about the performative dimensions of managerial practice and the associated skills
	Focus upon how to prepare for the unpredictable in data collection and managing complexity and uncertainty in the analytic process	Enabling the development of tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity in managerial practice
	Reassurance about the multiple interpretations of qualitative data analysis	Conceptualising the uncertainty around qualitative data analysis as similar to other types of uncertainties managers face
Perceived credibility of qualitative research	Be explicit about the role of the researcher and the importance of reflection and reflexivity	Link in to notions of the reflexive managerial practitioner
	Promote the view that there are alternative assessment criteria for ‘good’ qualitative research	Highlight the complexities of dealing with different stakeholder viewpoints when assessing good managerial competence, for example perspective-taking
	Display the relevant advantages of communicating via language rather than numbers	Exploration of the role of language in achieving particular managerial goals
Challenges to previous experience	Surface and challenge initial epistemological assumptions	Examine and critique assumptions and mindsets about managerial behaviours and practice

	Recognise potential discomfort when working with different sets of epistemological assumptions	Highlight that managers often work with others with different mindsets therefore need skills such as intercultural sensitivity
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