Research Design and Methodology III

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**Dissertation Concept Paper**

**Introduction**

This Concept Paper will provide an overview of the key aspects of my dissertation research that will be fully developed in my proposal. Fulfilling the assignment for SR958-52 will also begin an iterative process with the researcher’s dissertation committee that will shape the research design and methodology of the final work product. What I am proposing in this concept paper is to undertake an instrumental case study of the leadership cohorts that this researcher facilitated at DSG (Dufresne, Spencer Group), which is the midwestern division of Ashley Furniture. Ashley Furniture is the largest manufacturer of furniture and box goods in the world with $10.3 Billion in annual revenues in 2022 and employing over 35,000 people worldwide.

The research question is focused on how DSG leaders have changed through the process of participating in the Life Legacy Cohorts. These cohorts were facilitated by my coaching and consulting firm, Transformed Leader, over a 2.5-year period from 2021-2023. There were over 25 cohorts composed of 8-20 leaders in each group who participated in a 90-day leader development curriculum using the principles of transformational learning. I have chosen a *qualitative case study* as the research methodology for my OGS dissertation to gain insight into how deep change and transformation occurs in the context of a leadership development community.

In this essay, I will review the ethical research criteria required for human participants; assess the appropriate sampling and recruitment techniques; how the data collection and analysis process will take place; and develop an outline for conducting a comprehensive literature review. I will also provide a reflection on how this Concept Paper has prepared me for writing the formal dissertation proposal for the Omega Graduate School.

**Ethical Research Criteria**

According to the Belmont Report (Ryan, K. J., et al. 1979), there are three fundamental principles that provide ethical guidelines for the protection of human subjects in qualitative research. These principles include 1) Respect for Persons, 2) Beneficence, and 3) Justice. The first principle implies that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents and persons with diminished capacity are entitled to protection from harm. This principle is grounded in the Christian perspective that men and women are created in the image of God and as such have infinite worth and value. The second principle of Beneficence states that human subjects are not only to be protected from harm, but also offered acts of kindness and gracious benefits that go beyond strict obligation. Subjects of human research should benefit from the research project as well as the human community whom the research will ultimately benefit. The golden rule expresses the spirit of Beneficence: “In everything do to others what you have them do to you.” (Matt. 7:12a NIV). Finally, the principle of Justice is about the fairness of the research and who is deserving of its benefits. “An injustice occurs when some benefit to which a person is entitled is denied without good reason or when some burden is imposed unduly” (Ryan K. J., et al., p. 5). This ethical principle ensures that fairness and equality is maintained in how the benefits and burdens of human research are being distributed among diverse social and economic classes. The Christian is obligated not to show favoritism among various groups of people: “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers” (James 2:8,9 NIV). The Christian researcher is not only bound by good ethical principles and practices, but also by the biblical standards of love, justice, and respect for every person.

The application of these three ethical principles to a qualitative case study with human subjects requires the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Omega Graduate School. As stated on the OGS website, “The IRB reviews research proposals to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects who participate in research activities conducted under the authority of the graduate school” (<https://ogs.edu/research/institutional-review-board-irb>, p.1). According to the policies set by the Academic Affairs Council, the following requirements must be satisfied to conduct qualitative case study research with human subjects:

* Informed consent is sought from each prospective participant.
* Informed consent is documented under and to the extent required by HSS regulation 45 CFR 46.
* The research design makes adequate provision for monitoring data collected to ensure the safety of participants.
* Adequate provisions are made to protect participants’ privacy and maintain data confidentiality.
* Additional safeguards are included in the study to protect the rights and welfare of participants vulnerable to undue influence.
* OGS does not support research involving participants likely to be vulnerable to coercion or otherwise compromised is not permitted, such as children or teens under 18, prisoners, and persons suffering from mental disabilities.

In addition to the above requirements, doctoral students must take IRB Human Subjects Protections Training and provide a certificate of completion to the IRB and provide a copy of the certificate in the dissertation appendices (<https://ogs.edu/research/institutional-review-board-irb>, p. 1-2).

Since this researcher will be doing a case study with human subjects, there are unique ethical challenges when engaged in qualitative interviewing. Patton (2015, p. 495) makes the important point that while personal interviews may open old wounds, they can also be healing for the people who participate in them. There is a lot of relational power in leading and facilitating interviews as participants will often share more than they intend to share, especially when they are offered confidentiality.

Because qualitative methods are highly personal and interpersonal, because naturalistic inquiry takes the researcher into the real world where people live and work, and because in-depth interviewing opens up what is inside people, qualitative inquiry may be more intrusive and involve greater reactivity than surveys, tests, and other quantitative approaches (Patton, 2014, p. 496).

This researcher anticipates that the interview process may open some sensitive areas that human subjects might share. Since I have many years of experience providing counseling and executive coaching, I am confident that I can manage emotionally intense moments in a careful and ethical way. What I need to be cautious about is keeping the boundary between gathering the qualitative research that I have the informed consent to do, while not being drawn into coaching and counseling the human subjects that I am not authorized to do. Having a well-designed interview guide will be helpful in navigating the power and ethical boundaries of qualitative interviewing.

**Sampling Techniques**

In a qualitative case study, purposeful sampling is essential to achieve substantive results. According to Patton (2014), purposeful sampling is defined as “selecting information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated” (p. 264). Since my research question is to explore how transformational learning has impacted the growth and development of leaders at DSG, I want to interview those people who were fully engaged and participated in the experiential exercises that took place in the Life Legacy Cohorts. Patton (2014) makes the case that unlike quantitative studies, purposely selecting information-rich subjects is a strength in qualitative research.

What would be “bias” in statistical sampling, and therefore a weakness, becomes intended focus in qualitative sampling, and therefore a strength. The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term *purposeful* sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations (p.264).

This researcher is very much aligned with the importance of doing *purposeful sampling* when the research question is focused on how deep change and transformation occurs through the process of experiential learning. Therefore, choosing the best candidates for individual interviews is essential for fulfilling the design of the case study.

There were 225 participants composed of DSG leaders and managers who were involved in the Life Legacy Groups over a 2-year period from 2021-2023. The design of the case study requires 15 in-depth interviews selected from these participants who would volunteer to be a subject of the qualitative research. My intention is to use a fair and equitable nominating process that would create a pool of potential candidates for the individual interviews. Drew Maddux, who is the Executive Vice President of Leader Development at DSG, was involved in all the recruiting and coordinating the Life Legacy Groups and assisted me as the Lead Consultant in the facilitation of the leadership cohorts. Drew and I would work together to identify the right candidates, develop the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and then recruit the 15 leaders who would be interviewed for the qualitative case study. My responsibility as the qualitative researcher is to ensure that the recruiting process will be equitable and free from coercion or undue influence from people in power.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Obtaining a thick, rich description of how the Life Legacy Groups made a difference in the lives and leadership of those who participated in them is the primary goal behind the data collection. Essentially, this researcher wants to get the stories about what it was like for the DSG leaders to be there, and how they constructed the meaning of the experiential learning processes that were facilitated in these groups. Gathering and analyzing their stories is not functioning as the detached, objective researcher, but mining the gold of fieldwork, which is seeking to learn the very nature of the phenomenon that is being studied. “Going into the field” according to Patton (2014), means having direct contact with the people under study and their social contexts to fully understand the realities of their lived experience (p.55).

In this qualitative case study, I facilitated and directly experienced every leadership cohort that was offered at DSG. I observed how participants’ mindsets, values, and even identities shifted and changed through the transformative learning activities that we were engaged in.

What I couldn’t know a facilitator of the change process, was how the deeper meaning of the experiential work was internalized, interpreted, and construed. As consultants we had a lot of anecdotal evidence that the leadership cohorts were powerful and life-changing, but not the research support that would come from gathering and analyzing the data from structured interviews. Having a doctoral level case study for a transformational leadership development process would be a very valuable contribution to make for our company, the DSG Corporation, and the field of human development.

Dedoose is the software platform that this researcher will be using to collect and analyze the data from the qualitative interviews. This cloud-based platform, recommended by the OGS faculty, supports traditional qualitative methods for data collection and analysis in a secure and collaborative environment (Salmona, Lieber, & Kaczynski, 2020, p. 8). In the early days of naturalistic inquiry, qualitative data analysis had to be done manually with colored markers, sticky notes, and index cards. The inductive process of coding the data and thematic analysis was painstaking and very difficult to track and document. With the emergence of advanced computer applications for social science research, the qualitative data analysis for this DSG case study can be done in a far more logical, structured, and efficient way.

This researcher will be using the Dedoose software to support what McClane (2017, p. 178) describes as the “Five Stages of Qualitative Analysis for Generating Theory.” The following table depicts the unfolding stages, like a funnel that filters the qualitative data towards the generation of a theory that would explain the phenomena being studied:

Table 1: *Five Stages of Qualitative Analysis for Generating Theory*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **STAGES** | **PURPOSE OF EACH STAGE** |
| Open-line codes | Language markers-labels that identify simple concepts from raw data |
| Concepts/ Axial Codes | Gathering of similar open line codes under one rubric, creating a category or Axial Code |
| Selective Codes | Marshalling of broad, axial codes to create descriptive and minimal amounts of selective codes for the central phenomenon |
| Postulates | Minimal number of broad, descriptive, selective codes that create postulates |
| Theory | A single idea proposed to explain phenomenology from all postulates |

These five stages are especially appropriate for developing a grounded theory, but my goal in this qualitative case study is to understand how leaders have changed through the process of transformational learning. Using the five stages of data analysis with Dedoose software may lead to an underlying theory of transformational leader development, which would be a very significant and satisfying result of the dissertation research.

**Literature Review Outline**

The literature review outline for the qualitative case study is developed in figure 1 on the following page. Using a Venn Diagram, I have identified and delimited the overlapping lines of literature that are involved with the proposed dissertation research. I will briefly describe in this concept paper how the relevant literature will contribute to the qualitative research design and methodology.

Figure 1: Venn Diagram for Literature Review Outline

Narrative

Psychology

Transformative

Learning

Interpersonal

Neurobiology

Leader

Development

Adult

Development

Mentoring & Coaching

Nexus\*

**\*Nexus: Transformative Learning in**

**Leader Development Cohorts.**

**DSG LIFE LEGACY COHORTS**

**Transformed Leader**

For the purposes of this concept paper, this researcher will focus on the main circles of literature that overlap in the Venn Diagram. Transformative learning is the first circle that addresses the change process for the DSG case study. Jack Mezirow (1991, 2000) is the seminal author on the principles and processes of transformative learning and its impact on adult learning. The theory and practice of this change process has expanded since the early writings and the literature review in the qualitative case study will include the relevant research articles on how adults learn in transformative ways.

The next circle in the literature review outline is interpersonal neurobiology (INPB) that was developed by Daniel Siegel and his colleagues at UCLA. His masterwork, *The Developing Mind* (Siegel, 2020, 3rd ed.) integrates how the brain is structured for relationship, how the conscious mind develops through relationships, and why interpersonal transformative relationships are instrumental in a person’s growth and development. Siegel’s latest book, *IntraConnected* (2023), brings into focus the integration of self, identity, and belonging. The INPB literature is very relevant as to how and why leaders would develop in the context of a learning community.

The third overlapping circle is in the field of leader development. This circle is in contrast with leadership development that focuses on the growth of a leader’s skills and expertise.

In this genre of literature, I am looking for the stages of development that a leader must experience to grow his or her capacity, character, and competencies. Robert E. Quinn, who wrote *Deep Change* (1996), is an example of the seminal literature on this subject. Another key source on the process of leader development is Charan, Drotter, & Noel (2011, 2nd ed.),

*The leadership Pipeline*. These authors and other sources will help create a conceptual framework by which the thematic analysis of the research question can be evaluated: Have the leaders who have participated in the Life Legacy Groups developed through the process of transformative learning?

There are several other streams of literature that can inform the qualitative case study. These streams include adult development, narrative psychology, and research on the learning processes involved in mentoring and coaching. My challenge as a researcher is how to gather, organize, and delimit the literature review so that it is relevant for the design of this research. I will need to consult with OGS faculty and my dissertation committee to develop and refine a robust literature review that will create the gap of knowledge that will make the case for this qualitative research design.

**Personal Reflection on the Dissertation Concept Paper**

Developing this Dissertation Concept Paper has been very energizing for me in advancing my doctoral program at the Omega Graduate School. When Dr. McClane agreed to changing the essay for Assignment #3 from a fictional study to writing up a pre-proposal concept, I crossed an important threshold to finally completing my dissertation. This shift was a long time coming and writing this essay for SR 958-52 felt like a significant accomplishment. I have more resolve now to finish this academic journey because I have made concrete steps on the road to achieving it.

It was also helpful for me to do the hard work of learning the technical aspects of building a dissertation proposal. I had a grasp of the overall research design and methodology but didn’t have a working knowledge of the ethical research criteria, human subjects research training, various sampling techniques, and how to proceed with data collection and software analysis. Going through the qualitative research textbooks was very informative and gave me greater understanding of what the qualitative research proposal requires to be approved.

Integrating some of the previous work that I had done in Core 4 was also encouraging to me. I remembered when I was researching Grounded Theory, how McClane’s (2017) “5 Stages of Qualitative Analysis for Generating Theory” helped me to see the specific steps involved with doing qualitative analysis and how that work can funnel down into a valuable theory. Since my proposed research is not only a case study with a specific context, but also seeking to understand the deeper change process of transformational learning, I can see the bridge between coding the raw data to developing a generalized theory.

Using Venn Diagrams to outline the literature review was an effective way for me to see how various streams of knowledge overlap in capturing the essence of what I wanted to study. I view the Venn Diagram as an iterative device or map that will provide accurate feedback from OGS faculty and the dissertation committee in refining my proposal. Creating the literature review outline in this assignment was very timely for my trip to the Library of Congress this summer. I wouldn’t want to spend a week in the LOC without a clear map of what I need to complete the literature review.

Finally, by writing up the Dissertation Concept Paper, I gained more confidence that I am on the right path in developing the dissertation proposal. Writing it up required me to grasp the logic of the dissertation and the qualitative research methodology required to answer the foundational research question. Taken as a whole, this Concept Paper makes sense to me and with further development, collaboration, revisions, and refinement, I believe the proposal will organically follow and ultimately be approved. Working with Dr. McClane to complete Core 5 has made me aware of how much OGS has changed from the last time I was enrolled in the doctoral program. The learning process is much more effective than when I was first engaged in the program, and this strengthens my resolve that I can achieve a lifelong goal of earning my Ph.D. in the field of transformational leader development.

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