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Making deeper sense in the midst of great busyness: a study of and with third sector CEOs

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Abstract:

This paper provides the background to a study from which sample findings will be presented and discussed at the ARVOVA 2008 conference in Philadelphia. It explains the origins and aims of a continuing collaborative inquiry with third sector Chief Executives, gives a summary history of the project, and describes the methodological issues involved in doing 'twin-track' research – that is, research aimed at producing both practice knowledge and formal theory.

1. Introduction

CEOs of nonprofits are the fulcrum between complex governance arrangements and an accountable management system. The role is notoriously demanding and the continuing availability of suitable individuals to fill these positions has been questioned (Bell, *et al* 2006). Clearly, boards and their chairs, and leadership coaches and trainers, as well as aspiring chief executives, need to understand the distinctive challenges and dimensions of the CEO role – and that is the focus of the research reported here.

The CE's role gets personal

Characteristically, the role a person plays in an organization is a function of organizational expectations, task requirements, and the person's own capabilities, needs and style (see figure 1). Historically, role theory focused heavily on the first two factors[1]; less attention was given to what the person brings to the role – in terms of needs, fears, hopes, intuitions - or on how the person shapes the role.

The more senior the role in an organization, the greater the discretion associated with the role, and the more problematic this neglect of the person becomes. In particular, Chief Executives have greater latitude in shaping their own roles – indeed, they are expected to do so. This does not mean ignoring organizational expectations and tasks; it means engaging with them and re-shaping them, instead of taking them as given. Individual agency is of the essence – and this of course is the hallmark of the new

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[1] So organizational and management writing contains much discussion of organizational values, expectations and demands (culture and structure); and 'how-to-do-it' toolkits for approaching different aspects of the task. The *person* enters mainly as a constraint, with writers offering observations on, e.g. how culture and tasks can be arranged to engage rather than alienate role holders.

leadership writing. Popular accounts emphasise the distinctiveness of each Chief Executive's style and approach - the person permeates the role.
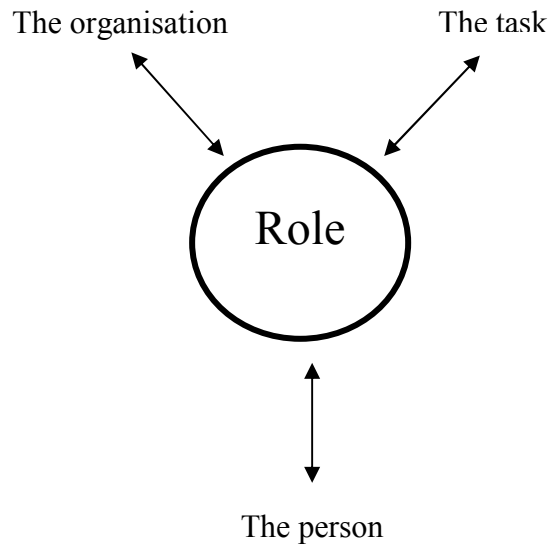

Figure 1: Sources of role

But *how* do we bring the person back in? The pitfalls are familiar: idealising the CE (until he or she falls from grace), over-reliance on anecdote, disappearing into a forest of psychometric dimensions, or reducing the leader to a set of interpersonal skills (a one-sided social psychology focussing on instrumentality and emotional control).

Arguably, the psychodynamic tradition continues to provide one useful answer (Kets de Vries, 1993; Hirschhorn, 1997). Recently, however, leadership studies drawing on adult developmental psychology, have offered a way of taking the whole person seriously that is analytically rigorous and more open to systematic empirical exploration (e.g. the work of Torbert and his colleagues, 2004). Such generic ideas and approaches should have relevance in the third sector. But to what extent, in what ways, and what might they overlook? Context, after all, is crucial. Among leadership theorists essentialist definitions and universal prescriptions are, quite rightly, treated with circumspection (Grint, 2005). Historically, Third Sector organizations have raised progressive agendas confronting society with its adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1994). Societal and community, not just organizational, leadership is sometimes required of third sector CEs. So the application of these new approaches in third sector settings is a question as much as an answer.

Some work is already underway to apply modern thinking on leadership to the Third Sector. For example, in the US, Dym and Hudson (2005) and in the UK, Middleton (2007) go some way towards integrating 'inner experiences' in normative frameworks for leadership conduct and interventions. But to our knowledge the field lacks extended, fine-grain accounts of the working life of chief executives. We know in general what they do – but we do not know in any detail how they go about it, why, and what it is like for them. The research described here tries to fill this gap. It followed nine chief executives of substantial organizations over two years, gathering reflections through extended interviews, three-day and one day retreats, and video

logs[2]. A thematic analysis of the resulting transcripts was then discussed with more than 50 other chief execs in a series of confidential seminars through which many further reflections and stories were gathered.

This paper offers a summary history of the project and how data was gathered. A major concern is to explore the methodological issues involved in a study that from its inception was concerned to contribute both to practice knowledge and to formal ('scientific') theory – an approach we refer to as 'twin-track research'. At the conference we will briefly illustrate the sorts of findings that this combined approach allows.

2. The OBACE project: origins, aims, approach[3]

'On Being a Chief Executive' (OBACE) is a research project that developed out of conversations between an erstwhile Chief Executive (Brewster) and a third sector academic/researcher (Paton). Richard Brewster was CEO of Scope, one of the UK's largest nonprofits, for 8 years. He saw through two major changes and experienced the full range of senior management challenges in a relatively complex charity. On leaving Scope he wanted to reflect on this experience to better understand and communicate the realities of such roles. Through conversations with Paton and others it was agreed that such an exercise would be more productive if he worked with other current or recent chief executives to identify critical issues and lessons both for themselves and for leaders in nonprofits generally. *Quite* what this would mean was unclear. One of the motivations for the project was precisely the unreality of abstract management and leadership principles in the face of the turbulent ambiguity of a CE's working life. Hence, from the outset, the intention was to document the 'inside story' of holding this role in third sector settings, viewing the CE's day-to-day experience as arising from the interplay of the manifold challenges they face and the particular person that each one is.

The aims of OBACE – as set out in proposals for funding – were:

I. *To document important but hard-to-capture aspects of CEO experience.* In particular, to produce credible and well-grounded accounts of the personal dimensions of being a chief executive in a non-profit organisation and how these relate to the CEO's development of strategy, structure and the other rational requirements of the job. The accounts will include a significant element of what it is really like day-to-day, how this feels and how individuals respond.

II. *To create new and useful knowledge.* In particular, to enable participants to recognize and articulate how they best manage the relationship between the "soft" and "hard" dimensions of their existence; and secondly to formulate this know-how in ways that have wider application.

III. *To relate this contribution to existing writing on leadership and management.* In particular, to fill a gap in non-profit writing and to correct an imbalance towards overly rational and impersonal accounts of senior management roles.

IV. *To disseminate the learning widely.* In particular, to produce a wide range of training resources based on (i) to (iii) which enable the maximum number of current and potential leaders of voluntary organisations to benefit.

As the idea of a collaborative inquiry with CEs took shape, it became clear that this could provide knowledge and insights on more than just the vicissitudes of their elevated and exposed positions. In the first place, it seemed likely that the intensity of the pressures CE's face simply accentuates and highlights a number of processes and affects that occur in other roles to a lesser extent. In other words, although the CE's role is different and distinctive in important ways (e.g., its relative isolation) that does not mean it has nothing in common with other roles. Indeed, one of the ways it is distinctive may be precisely in having *more* of what is present in many other senior management and professional positions. Hence, suitably framed, issues emerging from this study might resonate for those in other more-or-less exposed and responsible roles.

More specifically, CEs are expected to lead – so this was potentially a form of leadership research. As such, by concentrating on 'top persons' it would be taking quite a traditional approach - *contra* 'the new leadership' with its focus on 'leading across and upwards' and on informal, emergent and distributed patterns of leadership at middle levels. But these are complementary, not alternative research strategies – and in any case, in relation to the wider society, the CE may need to lead in 'new' ways ('leadership without authority' in the terms of Heifetz, 1994).

In addition, the work of a CE provides a privileged window on various important issues in third sector studies - most obviously organizational governance (including board behaviour and board-executive relations) and the interface of TSOs and the processes of public policy-making. In principle, the candid observations and reflections of a group of astute and experienced CEs could provide valuable insights both to inform other practitioners and to refine more formal theories. So, as a OBACHE collaborative inquiry would start from the 'inner world', or personal dimensions, of the CEs experience, and would aim to produce knowledge that would be accepted and useful in the world of theory as well as in the world of practice.

The co-production of knowledge

Conventional, discipline-based (or 'narrow') science treats subjects as objects, with interactions and observations merely a means of gathering data. The researcher controls the interactions and to avoid contamination, the relationship between the researcher and the researched should be neutral and limited. However, the inner world (or the self behind the role) is personal, even intimate, and multi-faceted. It includes, for example, the reasons for particular choices, recollections of emotions, inner dialogue around events, and the construction of meaning surrounding one's work ('vocations'). For CEs, as for the rest of us, such information is not always easily surfaced. This may be because aspects of the self are uncomfortable to us, or hard to explain (for example, some intuitions). Or it may simply be because what we know – and display as expertise in day-to-day activity - is so complex that it cannot be readily explained (Polanyi, 1966). The know-how that is created in the successful accomplishment of complex projects is highly sophisticated – but it is inter-

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disciplinary, applied, context-specific and in large measure *tacit* (Gibbons, *et al* (1994).

In so far as tacit knowledge and our private selves can be revealed and shared, this happens gradually as part of trusting relationships. It can only ever happen with the full active cooperation of those involved through discussions pursued at some length and depth over a period of time. Hence, this information is largely unavailable to narrow science; and OBACE is, of necessity, research in a hermeneutic or dialogical tradition with the subjects invited to be co-creators of the findings (Bradbury and Reason, 2001). In consequence, this had to be a project that would 'work' for the CEs, not just the researchers. There had to be something in it for them, as well. A public-spirited commitment to research (and, possibly, consideration of the potential benefits of enhanced visibility within the sector) was unlikely to be enough to sustain the interest and involvement of people who were already, in most cases, over-committed and well-known. With this in mind, the inquiry was developed to provide, where possible, some of the benefits and enjoyment of a learning set or support group, while also making every effort to minimise calls on the participants time.

A growing body of experience and methodological guidance is developing around the conduct of different forms of collaborative inquiry (see especially, Bradbury and Reason, 2001). Like any form of inquiry or investigation that tries to be rigorous in the treatment of complex and uncertain phenomena, collaborative approaches are difficult and prone to various forms of error. They may be carried through more or less skilfully and successfully. The specific challenges for this inquiry included the practical ones of scheduling time in the crowded calendars of exceptionally busy people; and in devising and agreeing a detailed protocol for confidentiality. This included guaranteeing that data from the research would never be used in a way that could be attributed without the explicit agreement of the person(s) concerned. At the time of writing this means that the names and organizations of the participants are known only to those directly involved in the study; and it remains to be seen whether some participants will want their contributions to be rendered anonymous, in whole or in part[4].

The limitations of this approach also need to be acknowledged. A classic approach to leadership research is to identify particular individuals as successful, to observe or enquire about how they behave, and to digest the findings into lessons and principles. That approach has value – and also definite limitations[5]. This study is not of that kind. Though, by definition, the CEs have been *successful* (they have achieved rapid promotion), we have not tried to gauge whether and to what extent they were also

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[4] Some of the judgements involved in interpreting data are discussed below. Other challenges for the researchers included judging when it was appropriate to share their own experiences as part of the group, negotiating a shared agenda, and facilitating discussions. A thorough treatment of the personal and professional challenges this presented the researchers is beyond the scope of this paper.

[5] Identifying 'successes' and establishing causality are both problematic; under close examination the leader's role may be mixed, and one-among-several in the right time and place. While the lessons and precepts may contain much sound advice, they often, and rightly, contain opposing principles (Quinn, 2004). Everything then depends on their considered integration and application in specific circumstances. And on that the prescriptions are silent.

effective (to use the terms of Luthans, 1984)[6]. Our presumption has been that by surviving in their roles and achieving some tangible results, they have been (at least) 'good enough' CEs. That (by their own admissions) they have feet of clay and make mistakes is also clear, and in no way undermines this approach. Indeed, how busy CEs come to view particular actions or decisions as 'mistakes', and what they then do about it, are (we think) interesting and important issues.

3. Doing collaborative inquiry: the OBACE process so far

The first CEs recruited were known to Brewster; two others known to Paton were recruited, and a further two were invited. They formed a 'core group' of 9 (i.e. 8 plus Brewster himself). The choice of CEs to invite was guided partly by pragmatics (so-called 'convenience sampling'; recruiting senior figures first to lend the exercise credibility) and partly by a concern for variety within the group. Thus, a range of 'fields of work' was sought. Diversity among the CEs was an important consideration (two were from ethnic minorities; one had a significant disability; five were women). The size of the organization ranged from medium to very large. One had recently been appointed to his first CE position; others were in their second or third job as a CE. Finally, two of the CEs invited were from public organizations – to allow some comparison with non-profit CEs operating under different governance arrangements.

A timeline for the research so far is given in Box 1. The process has been more protracted than expected – both because it was more successful than anticipated in engaging CEs involvement; and because of delays in obtaining follow-on funding[7]. This extended timescale has however brought significant benefits. Six CEs have departed their jobs – some not by choice – and are now in different roles in different contexts. In particular, continuing contact has allowed 'what happened next' to be come apparent in relation to many of the events reported, and more generally to make a longitudinal dimension possible. Hopefully, too, some issues will have become less sensitive with the passing of time, meaning there will be less need for excisions, circumlocutions and disguise in published accounts.

Box 1 - Project timeline	
January - May 2003:	Initial concept; discussions around project.
June - July 2003:	Testing of idea with 4 CEOs known to RB; exploratory conversations with potential funder (Zurich Financial Services). Development of purpose and methodology of research.
September 2003:	Confirmation of funding for first phase of project. September 2003 to February 2004: recruitment of members of core group.

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[6] Positivistic research in the style of Luthans, *et al* (1988) classic study would require observational data, or 360° assessments, over a prolonged period; and a large enough sample to allow for multivariate analysis. The cost does not bear contemplating.

[7] Strangely, funding was most easily obtained when the project was hugely speculative; as its success was increasingly assured (at least in the researchers' view) follow-on funding proved harder and hard to find. We pay heartfelt tribute to all our funders for their willingness to take risks and for their continuing interest and support over an extended period.

Dec 03 – Sept 04:	Individual *in-depth interviews*.
Sept 04 – Jan 05:	Transcripts prepared of interviews; preparation for retreat.
Jan 6 – 8th 2005:	*Retreat*, final agreement on confidentiality; preparations for video diaries; request from participants for follow-up.
Jan - Sept 2005:	Spasmodic completion of (all but one) *video diaries*; pursuit of funding for analysis phase. Abandonment of initial plans for a validating 'reference' group.
Sept to Dec 2005:	Negotiation of next phase of funding from Workforce Hub at NCVO/Third Sector Leadership Centre.
Jan - June 2006:	Detailed analysis of all transcripts; initial report produced for core group consideration.
July 2006:	Core group *reunion*. Reflection on changes, further CEO experiences. Two members of group absent.
July - Sept 2006:	Follow-up interviews with absent members, preparation of "Preliminary Report" for Leadership Centre.
Oct 06 – Jan 07:	Negotiation of top-up funding from Leadership Centre, and definition of next phase of research. Agreement of funding for this phase with Prospectus, social sector recruitment agency.
Feb - June 2007:	Preparation for seminars, including selecting and inviting candidate CEOs.
June 19- 21 2007:	*Confidential seminars* with 58 CEOs in London, Bristol and Leeds.
Sept - Dec 2007:	Further negotiation of funding from Leadership Centre and OU; initial analysis of seminar transcripts.
Jan - Dec 2008:	Further funding agreed from ACEVO, analysis of transcripts; preparation of full length manuscript of book; initial assessment of training and coaching material that can be derived from the research.

In terms of data-gathering, key events in this process were the initial in-depth interviews, the retreat, the 24 hour reunion, and the confidential seminars. These are described in turn.

The in-depth interviews were scheduled for up to three hours and took place in the CEs office. The basic interview schedule is given in Box 2. However, the approach was conversational and 'interview agenda' would be a better descriptor. Stories of particular incidents and events were emphasised (ref) and participants were invited to draw diagrams to illustrate their 'worlds.

The retreat was held in a country hotel over three days. Since the CEs had not met before, much of the first day was spent getting to know each other and each other's

situation, as well as negotiating ground rules for confidentiality[8]. On the second day the morning was spent working in small groups on issues the CEs themselves had brought to 'chew over', while the afternoon included sessions on Phases of Development as a Chief Executive and on how they made decisions.

Box 2 – In-depth interview agenda

1. What's happening now? What are the current issues?
2. Introduce key players + the setting: diagram of 'your life as CE?' What are the main demands and other factors shaping it?
3. Stories:
   Success/personal competence/achievement - how did that come about?
   Negative/failed/mistaken (with hindsight) - how did that come about?
   Confused/uncertain/mixed/inconclusive
   Contentious decision: tell the story of how it was made and describe your role in the process
   Describe a time when you felt v. positive and why; and a time when you felt bad and why, and how you handled this
4. Key relationships:
   Describe the most positive and the most challenging.
   How do you manage key relationships?
   How do you handle the strains?
5. How do you think about your role and what the work is – key ideas/principles that shape your approach to the role; terms in which you think?
6. How do you stay in control, not just reacting and responding?
   How do you preserve your own agenda? (Own space? Conscious use of time? Looking after self?)
   Where do you go for 'sense-making and support'?
7. What have been the hardest lessons to learn; are there lessons you need to keep re-learning? (because, e.g. you revert to acting/behaviour that you don't like and/or doesn't work.)
8. Overall, best and worst things about being a Chief Executive?

The third day included discussion of what they had learned from their experience as CEs, especially about working with trustees; and about the further information that each would be interested and willing to provide (especially through video diaries); and the ways in which the material might be used and analysed. After dinner discussions were more reflective in character: one by sharing responses to the prompt 'When in your role were you most fully alive?' and the other by sharing poems or objects that had particular meaning for them (and that they had been invited to bring). Tape recorders ran almost the whole time that the group was in session (including the after-dinner conversations).

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[8] This issue was not fully resolved on the first day; it flared up as a 'hot issue' on day two, around the composition of a 'reference' group that had been created as a way of testing emerging findings against a broader and more varied range of experience and situations. After the retreat in the light of this discussion it was decided to disband the reference group. The idea of 'confidential seminars' was then developed as a better (and more acceptable) way of providing breadth to complement the core group depth.

The 24-hour 'core group' re-union was requested by the participants and had not been part of the original plan and agreement for the research. As well as renewing relationships, it provided a chance to see how individuals lives as well as work had 'moved on', not least in relation to some of the major 'issues' discussed at the retreat.

The small number of CEs involved in the core group conversations poses an obvious problem when it comes to generalising from an analysis of their experiences. Hence, the primary purpose of the confidential seminars was to gather further data from as large and diverse an assortment of CEs as possible, in order to check, qualify and elaborate the analysis arising from the extended, in-depth work with the 'core group'. The aim of the exercise was not to gather CEs *opinions* about this, that or the other aspect of a CE's work (about which they would might well disagree vigorously); rather it was to gather accounts of their experience, particularly in the form of vignettes and anecdotes, and their reflections on those experiences.

Conditional invitations to the confidential seminars were extended electronically, through networks, and in selected cases by writing to specific types of organizations. These invitations explained the purpose of the seminars as part of the OBACE project; and that participants would be expected to read and prepare responses to a substantial document before they came – a thematic analysis[9] of the material generated by the core group interviews, discussions and video diaries. Those interested were asked to provide information on the nature and size of their organization and its field of work. These responses were used to fill up a grid aimed at ensuring a wide range of third sector organizations would be represented[10]. Since much of the time in the seminars would be spent in up to five small groups running in parallel, preparation for the seminars included selecting and briefing appropriate colleagues to act as facilitators.

The format for the seminars is shown in Box 3. Notwithstanding technical and travel difficulties, a higher than expected number of no-shows[11], and the researchers own doubts about the sort of sharing and discussion that would be achieved, the seminars exceeded expectations - in terms of the openness of most participants and the depth and quality of many of the reflections provided. The discussion both confirmed and extended the thematic analysis, and provided an extensive further pool of material[12]. It was also clear that the great majority of participants found both the preparation and

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[9] This is available on the OBACE website where it is referred to as the preliminary report
http://www.open.ac.uk/oubs/onbeingachiefexecutive/p1_6.shtml

[10] The participants' organizations ranged from some household names, through many medium-sized national bodies and some smaller regional and local agencies. They encompassed housing associations, hospices, international NGOs, environmental organizations, ethnic, faith-based, disability and labour movement organizations, leisure arts and media organizations, social enterprises, CVSs and development trusts. Some were recently formed (and growing rapidly); one was hundreds of years old. Some CEs had held several positions; a few were invited because they had ceased to be CEs. Efforts were made to include a small number of public and private sector CEs as well, but these achieved limited success.

[11] A 25-30% drop-down occurred between acceptance and actual participation – about half of these involved CEs regretting that particular events now prevented their attendance.

[12] A separate report on the seminars is also available on
http://www.open.ac.uk/oubs/onbeingachiefexecutive/p1_6.shtml

the seminars rewarding[13].

Box 3 – Format for the confidential seminars

Introductions and ground-rules:
▫ Ice-breaker that identifies each person's name and organisation, and one major positive and one major negative feature of his/her life as a CEO
▫ Introduction to schedule and shape of day
▫ Confidentiality agreement.

Presentation on OBACE material followed by Questions and answers

  Coffee break

Structured discussions in groups of 4-6 people, with facilitators:
Initial reactions to material and sharing of 'homework' – viz:
▫ Three points in the draft report that resonated for each member of the group, and accounts of similar instances from their own situations and experiences
▫ Aspects of their experience as CEs that are *not* reflected by the findings; examples from each member of the group.

  Lunch

Structured discussions in groups of 4-6 people, with facilitators
Sharing stories and experience on:
1. Becoming a CE: your recruitment and induction
▫ What were the best and worst moments during the process?
▫ With hindsight, what else might you have done to prepare for the transition?
2. 'In the firing line'/being a 'lightning conductor'
▫ As Chief Executive, have you been a focus for criticism, hostility or conflict?
▫ What were the circumstances? How did you handle it?
3. Working with chairs and trustees/boards
▫ Have these been 'tangos' – or are other metaphors more appropriate?
▫ What have you learned about working with your chairs and trustees/boards/management committee members?
4. 'Presence' or being fully alive
▫ What are the moments in your role as a Chief Executive when you have felt fully there (completely yourself, 'in the flow', 'in your element'…)?
▫ What were the circumstances?

  Tea

Closing plenary
▫ Review of day
▫ Next steps in the OBACE project and open discussion on how the material can be made most useful
▫ Appreciations and goodbyes

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[13] Some brought notes or sent material to the researchers in advance; others offered further observations afterwards. At each seminar there were requests for more of such occasions, in one form or another.

4. OBACE as 'twin-track' research

The research process created an extensive archive of recollections and reflections, vignettes and stories, sense-making and self-examination – all by CEs concerning their experiences as CE and how carrying this role impacts their lives. Depending on which track of research one is following, this material can be viewed in two ways.

Towards practice knowledge

As a resource to generate practice knowledge, the material is a rich and potentially valuable store of insights and know-how. But two questions immediately arise. The first concerns its reliability: without any triangulation to other forms of data, can we really trust what is being reported? The answer can only be 'up to a point' and 'it depends'. Reasons for taking this reportage seriously include the fact that, overwhelmingly, those who participated came across as 'good witnesses' – thoughtful, independent-minded, honest, and self-aware. They were speaking in 'safe' circumstances that encouraged and supported self revelation and many spoke candidly about their own uncertainties or weaknesses. If the accounts offered were still, inevitably in some measure 'self-serving', the 'selves' that were being served possessed strong egos capable of acknowledging many of their own weaknesses and failings, and willing to use the occasions for sense-making and personal learning. Moreover, many of the issues discussed were not particularly 'difficult' or 'sensitive'. For example, it would seem important often for CEs to find ways and occasions to think and reflect in the course of their hectic days. Asking if, when, and how they do this, is not a question for which a right or socially acceptable answer is at all obvious.

However, it remains the case that the CE's, and our, interpretations are ones that others may not share[14]. Moreover, such sense-making exercises are always provisional and incomplete. The fact that the study has continued over an extended period means that claims and interpretations offered at one point have sometimes been qualified or undermined by events reported later. So if this is in many ways privileged material, it also has limitations.

This leads to the second question: how can it be used? The conventional way is to draw together common themes, produce limited generalisations about how CEs cope with various aspects of their roles, and illustrate these with a varied range of instances. This is essentially the approach used in the thematic analysis and judging by the response of seminar participants it clearly has some value. Simply as a way of organizing, reducing and making accessible the material, some use of this approach can hardly be avoided. However, the insights and know-how contained in the material is all highly contingent and specific not just to the contexts but often the persons involved. Moving towards more abstract formulations and implicit recommendations is problematic, with interpretations involved at every step – and in any case, one of the drivers for the research was a concern to get away from the sort of abstracted principles that managers so often react against as 'unrealistic'. The underlying issue here concerns the nature of practice knowledge (tacit in considerable measure), the

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[14] This was brought home to us by the negative response of one of the CEs of a small local non-profit who attended the seminars to some of the material presented in the thematic analysis. We would affirm both the scope for alternative views, and that as participant-researchers we have a more rounded view of the individuals and, importantly, knowledge of the occasion and manner in which things were said which has informed particular interpretations.

forms it takes and how it can be enhanced.   Our view is that sense-making and stories are two of its forms, and that conversations, experimentation and reflection are among the ways it can be enhanced. Hence, the task is not to transform the material into more explicit (abstracted) knowledge but to make it available in ways that can stimulate and inform conversations, experimentation and reflection among new and aspiring CEs and those who work with them. From this point of view, the material is best made available on something like a 'show, don't tell' basis – and what matters is not so much the meaning that the researchers make from the material but the meaning that other practitioners make, and how they use it to inform their practice.

Of course, in preparing the material with this in mind, selection and interpretation will still be involved – but crucially, for this strand of the research, those processes will be undertaken collaboratively, with the participants. Until we have worked through responses, reactions and challenges from them the process is incomplete and any 'results' provisional. Indeed, as part of being faithful to the messiness of lived experience we anticipate including some of the salient differences of opinion and interpretation. To do otherwise would mean retreating into a categorical world, where the ambiguities and uncertainties have been deftly airbrushed out.

Towards better theory

The material garnered through the OBACE discussions can also be considered as objectified data,[15] for interpretation and analysis aimed at generating or testing formal theories. These may or may not have clear implications for practice, and the CEs may or may not find them interesting. What is involved in treating the OBACE material as data for theory development and testing?

The basic research question concerning apparently successful leaders and senior managers is 'how do they do it?' A developing body of theory in the areas of management, leadership and organizational psychology answers this question in terms of *some distinctive features of the way such people experience and think about themselves, about their role, and about what is happening around them*. Clearly, evidence of the way CEs experience and think about themselves, their role and events around them is *precisely* what the OBACE data-set provides in abundance.

The first methodological issue is whether and how the OBACE material, can be analysed to throw some new light on the 'how do they do it?' question. Box 4 summarises seven concepts that have been chosen as important within this body of work. Happily, many of the concepts in Box 4 can be used to analyse naturalistic and interview data[16] though that does not mean this will always be straightforward. Moreover, where some specific, concept-driven probing was required – for example, regarding the concept of 'presence'[17] – the agreed focus of the research on the 'inside story' of the CE's work made such questioning entirely appropriate. Hence, concepts

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[15] This perspective involves third person (impersonal) treatment of first person data – in contrast to the first and second person (inter-subjective) treatment of first person evidence in the case of practice knowledge.

[16] The data displays, for example, various aspects of cognitive complexity – in the concepts used and combined, and the polarities that underlie the thinking – instances of moral reasoning, and biographical data that the subjects considered significant and drew on in constructing their sense of self.

[17] Hence the question 'When did you feel most fully alive?' used after dinner at the retreat and he final question in the seminars.

relevant to the concerns of the research could reasonably and unobtrusively inform the data-gathering, as well as being deployed once the data was gathered.

Granted the potential relevance and application of some or all of these concepts, a second major issue concerns the scope for generating and testing explanations. If we hypothesise that in some specific ways CEs come to experience and think differently from others, do we not require comparable data from non-CEs? Not necessarily – though this may well be desirable.

Box 4 - *What it's like being Chief Executive: a conceptual framework*

From the literature, the following concepts pinpoint aspects of experiencing and thinking that are expected to be revealed in the way CEs experience and think about themselves, their work and what is going on around them. These concepts have informed the inquiry and will in due course provide analytic lenses for systematically scrutinising the data.

1. **System/field awareness**. The requirement to 'see the bigger picture' is practically axiomatic and forms the basis of much writing on strategy. Systems thinking is widely advocated as a way to achieve this 'helicopter view' and/or as a capability that develops through regularly striving to do so (see, e.g. Senge, 1990; or the rightly popular Chapman, 2004)

2. **Emotional awareness**. An extensive body of work testifies to the value of emotional awareness – in contributing to perceptual clarity and understanding of others as well as self-control. Goleman (1995) is well known but Kegan (1994) is also very relevant.

3. **Dilemma-detachment**. Those in senior positions grapple more or less continually with incompatible expectations, and the capacity to go beyond either/or thinking is widely seen as essential. Quinn (1988, 2004) and Hampden-Turner (1990) are compelling exponents of this view.

4. **Cognitive complexity**. Broader than 3, cognitive complexity is revealed either in the sort of meaning a person makes (Cook-Greuter, 1999, whose work underpins the Leadership Development Framework associated with Torbert *et al* 2004) or in the hierarchical complexity of skills and concepts (see Stein and Hiekkiennen, 2008, for a lucid account of this line of work).

5. **Post-conventional moral reasoning**. When societal norms and expectations become sufficiently an object of awareness to be appraised against higher values or the leadings of an internal moral compass. Kohlberg's (1984) work is seminal.

6. **Integrated intuition**. The sensitivity to, and willingness to take seriously, inner promptings and concerns (and to distinguish them from egoistic impulses, magical thinking and other pre-rational mental activity). This is a feature of Torbert's work, but see also Scharmer (2007).

7. **Presence**. A type of 'flow experience' – where people 'lose themselves' in their activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982) - but where people at the same time 'draw deeply on their personal selves' in a way associated with authenticity (Kahn, 1992).

The concepts and theories in Box 4 are not specific to CEs and that job title covers a wide range of situations. If we accept Kegan's (1994) explanation for the gradual emergence of new ways of experiencing and thinking through adulthood – essentially, because they make us more effective in coping with the multiple, vague and conflicting expectations characteristic of modern life – then the variation in the CE sample may provide enough variety to generate and test hypotheses. For example, we may well be able to 'score' enough of the CEs in terms of the frequency to which their contributions to the discussions displayed the sorts of thinking and experiencing listed. Then those CEs could be grouped into three categories: the first would be comprised of the younger, more recently appointed and first-time CEs and those running simpler and smaller organizations[18]; the third would comprise the older, longer-term and second or third time CEs, and those with particularly large and multi-purpose organizations; the remainder would be in the second group. We could then test whether these groupings were associated with significant differences in thinking and experiencing. Alternatively (or as well), we could select those CEs that display most clearly the ways of experiencing and thinking associated within the later stages of development (as per Box 4), and then examine their biographical and career trajectories – to see whether and to what extent those trajectories reveal the antecedents of accelerated development and fit with the predictions of other writing and research on leadership development.

Hence, although it might be desirable to obtain further, comparable data from others in less senior positions (or in public and private sector settings), the existing data-set provides considerable scope for analysis and explanation. Indeed, the more immediate challenges concern how to apply some of the concepts in Box 4 to the data – and what will constitute a 'good enough' way of doing so, given the nature and aims of the research. This is quite enough to be going on with.

5. Conclusions

The logic of the 'twin-track' approach is summarised in the table below. While useful in differentiating the two tracks and summarising their respective logics and outputs, the table misleads by suggesting a clearer divide between the two forms of knowledge than is actually the case. In fact, they inter-penetrate - with aspects of practice knowledge being subsumed in theory, and concepts from theory being appropriated by practitioners. But that is a story for another day.

How well one judges that these two approaches work, both separately and together, depends of course on the sorts of results they produce. Since the analysis continues (and this is a paper, not the book in preparation, aimed at contributing to practice knowledge), the findings presented at the conference will be brief, preliminary and indicative. Moreover, the use of data is still governed by strict anonymity and confidentiality agreements and so can only be used in a restricted manner that necessarily reduces potentially rich 'thick descriptions' into rather dry 'thin illustrations'. Nevertheless, the intention is to give some indications of both the reflective insights and the lines of theory and analysis that can be supported by the OBACE material.

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[18] Small can sometimes be extremely complicated. But a few of those attending the CE seminars turned out to be running what seemed to be no more than modest and focussed local projects.

	Practice knowledge	**Theoretical knowledge**
Research Questions	1. How do/how can CEs make things happen? Work with chairs and trustees? Cope with the stress and workload? Reflect? 2. (How) is it different for them compared to CEs elsewhere?	1. How are we to understand leadership in third sector contexts? 2. Do CEs come to experience things, and think, somewhat differently – and do these differences illuminate the way they carry out their roles?
Relevant literatures	Popular (generic) leadership writing Third sector writing on leadership Competence frameworks and other prescriptions	1. Theories of leadership in the public sphere 2. Adult developmental and organizational psychology
Evidence sought	Accounts of what happened and why, sense-making reflections. Follow-ups later (semi-longitudinal) – potential patterns and disconfirmations	Naturalistic data and questioning guided by concepts: reports of inner experience, exceptional moments, deeper sources of motivation and personal meaning, as these condition approach to the role. Accounts of transitions; life stories.
Nature of analysis; place of theory and concepts	Internalised theory appears in participants accounts. Thematic (inductive) analysis gives rise to frameworks and generalizations Concepts emerge through dialogue.	Mutual exploration of concepts and data. Systematic analysis in terms of eg, cognitive complexity, to categorize/ locate CEs within a scheme? Testing interpretations through further dialogue?
Nature of findings, contribution	'Thick descriptions' with some surprising commonalities and variability; mismatches between norms and realities of CE roles; some clarification of relevance of generic leadership concepts in 3rd sector?	Which concepts and theories illuminate/ find confirmation in what CEs say and report. Discussion of leadership theories grounded in 3rd sector contexts to explore possible implications for practice.
Limitations	Limited comparison to non-third sector contexts	Exploratory investigation – unclear at this stage.
Intended outputs	Popular (but academically credible) book Resources for leadership coaches, Chairs & trustees	Journal articles on specific topics Scholarly book?

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