

# **A Study of The Situated Practice of Benchmarking in the UK Construction Industry**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The focus of this thesis is the situated practice of a select number of quality and business improvement practitioners (QMs/BIMs) from the construction industry who were actively involved with academia in collaborative research. The research is described as exploratory to the extent of requiring a revised research instrument that was ‘designed’ to meet the concerns of the QMs/BIMs for direct relevance to current work practices.

It is in this context that I have undertaken to describe and explore possibilities based on selective experiences based on this research. The approach adopted in undertaking this research is based on the interpretive paradigm, specifically that of reaching understanding based on Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action. The basis for this is in terms of the notion of ‘communal rationality’ as proposed by Gergen and Thatchenkery. A key concept in this thesis is that of communities of practice (CoPs) and the notion of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). These concepts are central to understanding emergent forms of practice amongst these QMs/BIMs.

The seemingly chaotic nature of this research and the transient dimension of the research focus is recognised as a feature of the creative tension between academic researchers and practitioners. Within such a complex ‘collaborative’ research endeavour, the objective of benchmarking as originally intended is realised, in more practical terms, as the development of a benchmarking methodology.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	1
1.1 Selective Insights into the Development of an Unconventional Methodological Approach	2
<b>CHAPTER TWO: A BRIDGING METHODOLOGY FOR UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ISSUES</b>	12
2.1 The Concept of Practice	18
2.2 Best Practice	20
2.3 Shared Practice – Towards a Social Constructivist/Constructionist Perspective	25
2.4 Communities of Practice	31
2.5 The Shared Practice of Self-Assessment	34
2.6 Learning through Legitimate Peripheral Participation	35
2.7 Learning in Communities of Practice of QMs/BIMs	36
2.8 ‘Transfer’ of Practice through Focused Legitimate Peripheral Participation	38
<b>CHAPTER THREE: CONSTRUCTING A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</b>	41
3.1 Some Relevant Research Issues	46
3.2 Practitioner Focus for an Action Oriented Research Instrument	48
3.3 Epistemological Underpinnings of Diverse Approaches Towards Data Construction (Interpretation)	50
3.4 Accounting for a Transdisciplinary Approach Using a Bridging Methodology	54
3.5 A Research Methodology Based on a Postmodernist Ontology	58
3.6 Interpretive Understanding and the Participant Observer Role	62
3.7 An interpretive Approach Based on Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action Allowing for Reflexive Elaboration	64

<b>CHAPTER FOUR: A REVIEW AND EXAMINATION OF TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT PRACTICES</b>	<b>69</b>
4.1 TQM - A Concept Amenable to Reification	71
4.2 Brief Insights on TQM Viewed from Diverse Research Traditions	73
4.3 Total Quality Management - Rationale for a Social Constructivist Perspective	74
4.4 The Practice of Introducing TQM Principles through the Self-assessment Process - A Constructivist Perspective	77
4.5 Quality and Business Improvement Practitioners Working to Establish a 'Culture Oriented to Business Excellence'	79
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: COLLABORATIVE PRACTITIONER – RESEARCH</b>	<b>85</b>
5.1 Substantive Knowledge Through Participation in Action Research of Practitioner – Research	85
5.2 Emerging Forms of Practice Within Research	88
5.3 Practitioner Research - Linking Research to Practice	91
5.4 Quality and Business Practitioners' Dominant Perspective for Engagement in Collaborative Research	92
5.5 Interpretation of QMs/BIMs Research Strategy	94
5.5.1 An Analysis of Research-Interests Positions of QMs/BIMs	96
5.6 A Research Methodology Allowing for Practitioner Research	98
5.7 A Constructionist/Constructivist Understanding for Participatory Action Research and Action Learning	103
<b>CHAPTER SIX: BENCHMARKING</b>	<b>107</b>
6.1 Making a Discourse at Benchmarking	107
6.2 A Brief Review of Benchmarking Within the Construction Industry	110
6.3 Measures – Benchmarks, Metrics and Key Performance Indicators	113
6.4 Understanding 'Benchmarking' as a Mixed Metaphor	122
6.5 The Dominant Benchmarking Discourse	123
6.6 A Constructivist/Constructionist Approach Towards Benchmarking	127
6.7 Situated Learning in terms of Focused Legitimate Peripheral Participation	130
6.7.1 Knowledge Acquisition Through Engagement and Participation in Benchmarking – A Social Constructivist	133

Perspective	
6.8 The Practice of Benchmarking as an Opportunity for Learning Through Participation Amongst Practitioners	135
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A METHODOLOGY FOR JOINT (COLLABORATIVE) BENCHMARKING</b>	139
7.1 Developing the Data Collection Methodology for a Comparative Study	141
7.2 Issues Relating to Data Collection	146
7.3 A Constructivist Narrative of the Self-Assessment Process	151
7.3.1 A Description of the Assessment Methodology	153
7.4 A Constructivist Narrative of the Collaborative Benchmarking Process	155
7.5 The Researcher Pursuing Interests as an Honest Broker for Coordinating Benchmarking (Action)	165
7.6 Using the Excellence Framework as a Generic Sensemaking Device	168
7.7 A Brief Critical Perspective on Quality Managers	174
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: SELF-ASSESSMENT</b>	176
8.1 Some Insights on Organisational Self-Assessment	176
8.2 Research Design	179
8.3 Key Aspects of Self-Assessment	182
8.4 Feedback Reports, Consensus Meetings and Scoring	182
8.5 Self-assessment as an Indicator of Excellence Maturity	184
8.5.1 The Construction and Proliferation of Representational Practices in Relation to Quality	185
8.6 The Concept of Assessment of Practice	186
8.7 A Participative Methodology for Self-Assessment	190
8.8 Reframing of Management Issues	193
<b>CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION</b>	195
9.1 The Participative Benchmarking Methodology	196
9.2 Key Findings Related to that of Practitioner-Research, Self-Assessment and Benchmarking	197
9.3 Implications for Further Research	199

**References**

**Appendix**

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis is based on having been involved as a key ‘field researcher’ on a research project which was the outcome of the proposal (GR/M075640) put forward to the EPSRC by the University of Birmingham ‘Culture of Quality’ (COQ) Research Group. The purpose of the research was to *establish the cultural conditions that are conducive to achieving high and continuous improvements in quality within the construction industry*. This was to be achieved by working with five contracting organizations from the Midlands region in the UK. Based on the original research ‘strategy’, as outlined in the research proposal, the approach was to work in collaboration with these five focal organizations.

The commitment on the part of the organisations was the provision of access, and ‘assistance’ to researchers involved in conducting research, that would enable data collection from their respective organisations, as well as their clients, suppliers and subcontractors. However, two of the original five focal organisations, referred to in this thesis as ‘*Excite*’ and ‘*Valiant*’ for purposes of maintaining confidentiality, withdrew from the project, due to problems associated with organisational restructuring. This is briefly described in Chapter Six, the remaining three focal organisations are referred to as ‘*Pathfinder*’ (PF), ‘*Abel*’ and ‘*Cain*’. Additionally, a fourth organisation (‘*Novel*’), a medium sized construction contracting company was invited to participate in Phase Two of the research project.

The research was to be conducted using structured and semi-structured questionnaires, observational and shadowing techniques. A select sample of ten projects were to be monitored longitudinally, as well as questionnaires being administered to clients, suppliers and subcontractors of the five organizations simultaneously. The projects were to provide the source of data on:

- i. members’ perception of the culture of the five focal organizations and
- ii. of the perception of clients’, suppliers’ and subcontractors’ personnel regarding the quality of the product/service delivered by the focal organizations.

A 'Culture of Quality' Steering Group comprising members of the research team from The University of Birmingham and 'quality'/'business improvement' managers of the participating construction contractor organizations, was set up as a platform for negotiations, discussions and collaboration in dealing with issues relating to the research. My role as a researcher, was outlined within the research plan as mainly that of a field researcher, and additionally to work on the development of change techniques. Hence, my participation in the research project involved working in close co-operation with the quality and business improvement practitioners, forthwith referred to as Quality Managers/Business Improvement Managers (QMs/BIMs).

The research project had among its original intended outcomes:

1. A tried and tested technique to profile the culture of an organisation.
2. The development of appropriate benchmarks for specific processes, allowing comparison with a company's performance with that of others in the study.
3. The development and application of methods and tools to promote a culture of quality in organisation.

Frameworks such as that proposed by Hofstede (1980) and Hall (1995), and their associated questionnaires were to be used as research instruments, as a means for identifying organisational cultures. Consequently, the analysis of the collated data was to be the basis of a study that hoped to establish the cultural conditions that are seen to be conducive to establishing a 'Culture of Quality' within UK construction contracting organizations.

## **1.1 Selective Insights into the Development of an Unconventional Methodological Approach**

Following Alvesson et al. (2000), the research process is seen as constituting "a construction of the social reality in which researchers both interact with the agents researched and, actively interpreting, continually create images for themselves and for others [...]" (p. 6). The epistemological basis to the methodological approach taken in presenting this thesis is that: knowledge is not produced by a single, rational individual,



who is engaged in solitary reflection upon the world. Following Burkitt (1998), the view taken is that, “understanding is not achieved through the penetration of reality by outstandingly rational individual minds, but through the communicative construction of knowledge within relationships” (p. 124). In this sense, knowledge and understanding is constructed by interdependent people who are practically engaged in joint practices with one another, and not by detached and disengaged observers.

This thesis is based on a *reflexive interpretive methodology* that is informed by diverse research traditions of <sup>1</sup>social constructionism, social constructivism, ethnography, critical theory, and Foucauldian analysis. Following Alvesson et al. (2000), the idea of reflexive interpretation is seen as a way of “indicating the open play of reflection across various levels of interpretation, exemplified by the empirically based, the hermeneutic, the ideologically critical and the postmodernist” (p. 248). Additionally, the approach here towards text production (authorship) is to engage in the interplay between philosophical ideas and empirical work, which according to Alvesson et al. (2000), “marks high-quality social research” (p. 7).

Drawing on the ideas of Habermas (1986), I have taken a specific approach towards achieving interpretation (data construction) based on interaction with research subjects, which is oriented towards achieving interpretive understanding in the *performative attitude* based on communicative rationality (see Habermas, 1986). According to Brand (1990), the notion of performative attitude is with respect to the perspective of the participant in a *certain Lifeworld*, which is seen as that which sets the ‘context-forming horizon’ of social action and consciousness (see Pusey, 1987). According to Best and Kellner (1991), the concept of communicative action is seen by Habermas to provide a “conceptual scheme whereby one can diagnose pathologies of the ‘life-world’ (such as its colonization by the system of money and power) and provide cures (for instance, an increase in communication, social participation, and discussion of values and norms to reconstruct society)” (p. 239).

Note 1: Following Gergen and Gergen (1991), for purposes of clarity, a distinction is made between social constructivism and social constructionism in its strongest form – “that is, to demarcate the boundaries between a wholly cognitive ontology in the first instance and a micro-social one in the second” (p. 94).

However, the notion of communicative rationality in this thesis is ‘elaborated’, to imply that of ‘*communal rationality*’ (see Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1998). Thus, here the notion of rationality is understood from a social constructionist perspective as communal rationality, rather than the individualised notion of rationality that is implied in the term communicative rationality. This is consistent with Burkitt’s (1998) argument for understanding in a relational sense. The methodological approach taken is thus a transdisciplinary one, and is seen as a *bridging methodology* (see Miller, 1997), which is explicated in Chapter Two.

Communicative rationality is seen to be the basis on which communicative action (a competence), which is oriented towards shared understanding takes place. Here, language is viewed as a medium, which is the basis for human rationality – in this thesis, taken to mean communal rationality. It is in this sense, that I find Habermas’ view on communicative action in terms of achieving interpretive understanding - *verstehen* (see Brand, 1990: p. 30), as an adequate conception of a methodologically informed approach to achieving understanding and the interpretation (data construction) of practice. Here, the QMs/BIMs views relating to practice and issues relevant to the broad area of researching ‘quality’ and ‘culture’ in the construction industry, are seen as constitutive of the practice itself; as practice is seen as being reflexive, that is descriptions of practice are seen to self-constituting. According to Wenger (1998), “even when it produces theory, practice is practice. Things have to be done, relationships worked out, processes invented, situations interpreted, artefacts produced, conflicts resolved” (p. 49).

An important distinction is made between ‘thinking’ and ‘reflection’ by Habermas in ‘Theory and Practice’(1974). He understands *thinking* as the process of discourse-dependent argumentation internalized by a single subject; and *self-reflection* as the internalization of a ‘therapeutic discourse’; which is seen as unproblematic to the thought process. This is consistent with a *constructivist* epistemology, focusing on the individual cognitive aspects of meaning making and learning. However, in providing for

a *social constructivist* understanding of engagement in practice, the concept of *social learning* is seen as integral to practice (see Gherardi et al., 1998). Following Wenger (1998), practice is understood as a learning process which takes place in a participation framework involving participation, and thus learning is seen as an integral aspect of practice, which is understood here within the context of Communities of Practice (CoPs) of quality and business improvement practitioners (QMs/BIMs).

In defining communicative action, what has been made clear by Habermas is that social action can be oriented to quite different things, such as the achievement of shared understanding or that of merely personal success. Additionally, action is seen as being coordinated in basically different ways, which then accounts for communicative and instrumental aspects of rationality. Thus, as a researcher I have endeavoured to be guided by what I call the principle of ‘communicative action’ in order to attain *verstehen*; including instances where any ‘steering’ or ‘help’ provided, is that which is undertaken in the context of what is termed as *action research*. It is in this sense that the action research (AR) role is seen as relevant - in terms of focusing on the interests of practitioners.

The exploratory and collaborative nature of research can require such action, as with this project which is a non-deliberate aspect on the part of the researcher. As, AR involves ‘active participation’, such a role can be seen to be incommensurable for a discipline-based research, and could be construed by some commentators as a fundamental flaw. This is in terms of not being able to achieve the positivist ideal of a participant observer- ‘the fly on the wall’. However, in using a transdisciplinary ‘bridging’ approach (see Miller, 1997) that is based on a postmodernist epistemology, this is seen as unproblematic. The imposition of researcher-bias is then seen to be inherent to the research process. Additionally, based on a notion of ‘communal rationality’ (inclusive of researcher and subjects) for achieving communicative action, the active participation of the researcher is a non-issue. It is in this sense that, what can be construed as ‘researcher-bias’ resulting from active participation in the research

process, is seen as being integral to working in collaboration, and of achieving 'shared' understanding (taken to mean interpretive understanding) in the performative mode. Additionally, as there were theoretical issues to be understood, both relating to, and about the focus of the research, the approach taken is to analyse some of the key concepts and phenomenon, as this can be useful for understanding the 'bridging' approach, and the appropriateness of it. Thus, working in 'collaboration' is described 'as it is' - based on the researcher's interpretation, which from positivist position can be 'read' as a misinterpretation. However, here the view is taken that there are multiple interpretations to every phenomenon. Hence, in terms of the 'collaborative' aspect, much is described about the posture of the QMs/BIMs from the Researcher's perspective. It is in this sense, that aspects relating to actionable events of the research project involving industry partners are interpreted as having to be 'endorsed' by the respective quality and business practitioners (QMs/BIMs) prior to acceptance. Additionally, it was clear as 'academic' researchers, we (The University of Birmingham 'Culture of Quality' Research Team) were not going to be 'allowed' to go ahead and carry out our research based on a broad research agenda aligned with the original proposal. This interpretation is based primarily on communication during initial 'Culture of Quality' Steering Group meetings, comprising of three academics and five practitioners from the construction industry.

A key focus of the research was to achieve an understanding of the 'goings-on' from the perspective of a participant observer; it is thus seen as appropriate to analyse the actions of QMs/BIMs on the basis of both communicative and instrumental aspect of '*communal rationality*'. I reiterate that this analysis is based on what can be observed. It is not to be taken as that which is 'assumed' by the researcher; as it is undoubtedly the researcher's version. Here, the actions oriented towards communication for shared understanding, as well as that of strategic action (which is oriented to subjects for success), and instrumental action (which is oriented towards objects), are accepted as a 'given'. This is with respect to the 'shared' (from the researcher's perspective) objectives to be achieved through collaboration. These 'actions' are made 'observable' through rational discourse, or the rationalisation process based on the concept of

communal rationality. This is addressed by Garfinkel (1967) from an ethnomethodological perspective, in terms of:

*“[...] members’ methods for making those same activities visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes.”*

*Garfinkel (1967; p. vii)*

Additionally an emerging social constructionist/constructivist perspective is taken with regards to the particular practice of QMs/BIMs. This is in terms of new sensibilities for understanding postmodernist social forms (see Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1998; Chia, 1995). Broadly, this view is based on the ‘fact’ that, the interests of QMs/BIMs within the context of the EPSRC research project (GR/M075640) was concerning the broad area of ‘quality’ and ‘continuous improvement’; which are seen as not being amenable to positivist descriptions and research methods.

The research methodology developed is based on the assumption that the possibility of a subject-object dualism is very much in doubt, as questioned by postmodernist epistemologies and ontologies. Hence, positivist notions that it is possible to separate the knower (subject) from the known (object), through the deployment of a theory-neutral observational language are found wanting. The basis to this notion is the assumption that it is possible to accumulate sense data that allow us to neutrally apprehend an external and independently existing social/natural reality.

From an epistemological point of view, since ‘culture’ and ‘quality’ within organizations are viewed as social processes, and in order to identify the individual principles involved amongst the various industry research partners, qualitative methods were seen as the appropriate approach to start with. However, the focus towards practitioners’ interest and their related issues, is seen as creating a situation for accommodating diverse perspectives towards the research. This is described in Chapter Five, in terms of ‘industry’ and ‘academic’ posture towards research. Chapter Two provides an understanding for the diverse methodological issues, which qualifies the limits, constraints and boundaries of research resulting from having taken a particular research methodology. This directly implies laying out the context of the research, thus clarifying

its epistemological content. Chapter Three details the construction of the research methodology.

Hence, a postmodernist approach is deployed which allows for methodologies and research techniques that enables the researcher to discern how definitions of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are continually being revised through the richness of context. It is in this sense that this thesis focuses on talk and text as sources of data. The research act itself is seen as socially constructed, and key concerns are the issues of inter-subjectivity and reflexivity. Kilduff and Mehra (1997) describe the postmodernist eclecticism-in-method-use as follows:

*Instead of trying to erase all personal traces of the researcher from the work so as to provide the reader with an illusion of unmediated access to the subject, postmodernists seek to demystify the technology of mediation by explicitly detailing the involvement of the researcher.*

The focus of analysis, using the postmodernist approach, are the social processes e.g. communicative acts such as language. Because meaning is seen as coming from discourse (rather than an objective reality), knowledge is viewed as an ongoing process of creation, rather than something deduced from absolute laws and principles. In appreciation of the fact that insightful analysis is really at the heart of successful qualitative research, the approach here is a transdisciplinary ‘bridging’ approach, informed by social constructivist/constructionist epistemologies. The concept of reliability and validity as applied in ‘scientific objectivity’ is thus precluded in adopting analysis based on an interpretive process. An alternative criteria which is suited to the ‘rigour’ of qualitative research as recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1989) is adhered to, known as the ‘authenticity’ criteria. These authenticity criteria are explicitly formulated to reflect the concerns of alternative paradigms.

1. resonance (the extent to which the research process reflects the underlying paradigm);
2. rhetoric (the strength of the presenting argument);

3. empowerment (the extent to which the findings enable readers to take action);
4. applicability (the extent to which readers can apply the findings to their own contexts).

In this thesis, the primary focus in data construction (interpretation) and text production (authorship) is to provide descriptions from having engaged with practitioners from the construction industry as a participant observer. Thus, Chapter Four on ‘Total Quality Management’ (TQM), Chapter Six on ‘Benchmarking’ and Chapter Eight on ‘Self-Assessment’, have been constructed in terms of content and style, with the specific purpose of situating the main body of work regarding the practice of QMs/BIMs involved in the research project. Thus, to a certain extent Chapters Four, Six, and Eight, help in situating the context for understanding the research more fully. These chapters provide an historical understanding of the focus of the research. This understanding is not constructed with an interest in the past, but from a deep commitment to understanding ongoing practices and possibilities for the future. It is with this sense of purpose that I have pursued a brief description based on Foucauldian analysis. In so doing I see myself performing the role of a diagnostician, who is interested in power, knowledge and the body and how these interrelate. This is the focus of the work of a genealogist in Foucauldian terms (see Burrell, 1998). Hence, in this respect I attempt to seek out the ‘depth’ within ‘reality’ - thus the analytical focus of the thesis on issues of TQM, Benchmarking and Self-Assessment.

The approach taken in constructing the above three chapters, relate to “the need of expanding ones’ knowledge base about the immediate event examined, which includes the need of bringing to bear information from situations and contexts *related* to the event (Knorr-Cetina, 1981: p. 30). This, in social constructionist terms can be seen as a form of ‘reflexive deliberation’. According to Cooperrider et al. (1999), “too often in scientific and scholarly pursuits, attention is focused ‘out there’ with little open reflection inside the discipline. [...]. Without reflexive deliberation - exploration into the historically and culturally situated character and consequences of the accounts, including our own - there is always risk of settling in too quickly” (p. 29).

The initial lack of conceptual parameters in undertaking this piece of research is not to be interpreted as being deficient in terms of methodology. However, the ordering and shaping of data has been very much determined by the prime interests of the focal organisations, or rather the interests of participating members from those organisations. In such circumstances, the interpretive approach was central to understanding the goings-on based on participant observation throughout the longitudinal research process. This is presented in Chapter Three, appropriately termed as ‘Constructing a Research Methodology’; whilst, the practitioner’s role in the research is explicated through the interpretations offered in Chapter Five on ‘Collaborative Practitioner-Research’. This is basically an attempt at providing insights of a possible perspective (an interpretation) of the approach taken by practitioners in relation to the research.

I consider the provision of feedback, proposals and conducting of interviews as constitutive of an action researcher role. As noted by Keesing (1981: p. 19), cited in Moerman (1998: p. 8), “we are crucial agents in the micropolitics of elicitation, not simply passive recorders of what people can or will tell us.” The interview data was not used as culturally contexted conversation analysis in order to discover member’s methods. This is seen to be an option leading to an exclusive ‘academic’ posture, conflicting with the ‘understanding’ of the practitioners’ *industrial posture* for a focus on their immediate concerns. The approach towards engagement, from the ‘academic’ research perspective, was initially to enable a particular participant observer role. However, due to what is described here as the ‘industrial posture’ (described in Chapter Two) of QMs/BIMs towards research - with respect to researchers seen as suppliers of ‘knowledge’, the QMs/BIMs’ engagement in the research process was in the main, that of practitioner-researchers involved in action research. As described in Chapter Seven, practitioner’s approach to benchmarking is seen as being aligned with a *constructivist* dynamic. This is consistent with Griffin’s (1998) view regarding manager’s dominant perspective of themselves as action people who seek out theorists to bring them immediate applications underpinned by the notion of human agency, and thus understood in terms of *constructivist rationalism*.



The notion of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) for participation and engagement is seen as integral to a participant observer role. Additionally, the Researcher taking on an action researcher role to initiate benchmarking is seen as a purposeful attempt to co-construct a viable methodology for benchmarking in the context of practice of a community (QMs/BIMs). This is described in Chapter Five as the Researcher having to take on the role of an ‘honest broker’. Hence, what I have undertaken in this research can be viewed from an ethnomethodological sense as ‘a socially organised way of gathering data, and giving sense to what went on using a reflexive interpretive methodology’.

Briefly, this thesis attempts to provide a clear description and construction of ‘how’ a methodology for joint (‘collaborative’) benchmarking can be conceived and practised. This is based on interpretive understanding of the ‘Culture of Quality’ research; and additionally by taking a social constructionist/constructivist view towards possibilities on the basis of selective aspects of the research, which is detailed in Chapter Seven.

## CHAPTER TWO: A BRIDGING METHODOLOGY FOR UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ISSUES

According to Lawrence et al. (1999), “*an issue is an account produced by a participant in an organizational field that constructs the world as problematic and requiring action*” (p. 253). Although this definition is constructed in the context of ‘organizational collaboration’, it is seen as adequate for the purpose intended here. As pointed out by Lawrence et al. (1999), the social construction of issues leads to demand for action. Here, the notion of social construction is considered to be constitutive of the practice of research in itself. The issues outlined are considered to be both, observed during the research process and addressed in reflective analysis. In this sense, my approach can be construed as involving both versions of constructionism (see Manning, 1998), that is: procedural constructionism, as well as reflexive constructionism.

Following Manning (1998), Velody and Williams (1998) consider procedural constructionists’ writing as being focused on generating detailed descriptions of naturally occurring events, seeking to produce an account of the underlying orderliness of such events; how people make sense of the social world. Thus, procedural constructionist writing is more about *discovering*; while reflexive constructionists’ writing explicitly focuses on the process of analysis. However, here following Gergen (1995), cited in Velody and Williams (1998), the view is that “constructionism has passed through its ‘critical moment’ and is ready to take on a ‘generative role’ in ‘offering an orientation towards creating new futures, and impetus to social transformation’ ”(p. 6). It is in this sense that social constructivist epistemologies of ‘learning’, which address the issues of ‘prior knowledge’ and ‘adaptation’ are drawn upon in order to explicate the situated practice of practitioners within the construction industry. Additionally, from a constructivist perspective, issues of ‘self-knowledge’, ‘self-organisation’ and ‘consensus’ can be understood and interpreted adequately.

This approach is centred on an interpretive understanding of the situated practices of QMs/BIMs involved in the research project based on Habermas’ approach to reaching understanding in the performative mode. However, here Habermas’ approach is applied

specifically to the notion of communicative rationality within a community, which is based on Gergen and Thatchenkery's (1998) notion of 'communal rationality'. Additionally, the approach is to allow for a generative role based on a social constructivist/constructionist epistemology and theory of learning.

This thesis is an attempt to use a methodology that is aligned with the character (dynamics) of the phenomena being researched. Additionally it seeks to provide an account of the orientation of practitioners involved in the research project based on what is described by Schutz as *second-level constructs* (see Morris, 1977) that are ideal-typical, based on an interpretive understanding based on Habermas' theory of communicative action. My involvement in this research is that of 'active' participation as a researcher amongst members of the specific community of quality and business improvement practitioners (alternatively referred to as the community of QMs/BIMs) who are particularly concerned with the issues of 'quality' and 'business improvement'. These are the specific areas of concern that underpin the focus of the QMs/BIMs. In this thesis, the positivist notion of the researcher and the passive subject is replaced by that of researcher and co-researchers (active subjects) in the context of a relational epistemology. The QMs/BIMs are seen to have negotiated a position of joint ownership of the issues and objectives that allowed for an exploratory approach, which can be broadly described as within the tradition of ethnographic research.

As pointed out by Hammersley (1992), ethnography places great emphasis on description, a rather distinctive kind of description, which is a *theoretical* description. Although the distinctive descriptions are about particulars rather than universals, they still use concepts, which refer to an infinite number of phenomena. Hammersley (1992), presents the argument that, "all descriptions are structured by theoretical assumptions: what we include in descriptions is determined in part by what we think causes what" (p. 13). Reiterating my research roles with respect to the research project; it was that of participant observer doing 'direct' field research within the context of trying to achieve both 'academic' and 'commercial' objectives of the research project. Additionally, it was engaging in research as an action researcher, due to what is considered here, as the

emergent nature of ‘collaborative research’. Importantly, both these researcher roles are based on a relational constructionist posture towards knowledge production, where the locus of knowledge is seen as within relations and not within the individual.

I view my experience of working amongst a community of QMs/BIMs as that of mainly participant observation (often regarded as the exemplar of the ethnographic method), which is one of the basic methods of symbolic interaction (see Morris, 1977). My involvement in a participant observer role has been amongst a particular group of QMs/BIMs, who are very much interested in the use of self-assessment techniques to assess their business practices, and to use the findings of such exercises as a basis for benchmarking.

The domain of inquiry addressed by this thesis, is essentially an *a priori* commitment to what is empirically accessible, with a focus on the methodological aspect of ‘what passes for knowledge’, informed by a social constructionist perspective with regards to ‘reality’ construction. As noted by Green (1998), “the notion that reality is socially constructed, and therefore, continually re-negotiated is widely accepted within the interpretive paradigm of management research” (p. 381). Hence, the very ‘practices’ that are the source of mutual engagement are investigated in-depth; wherein it is important to remember that this is not the work of a neutral observer. As pointed out by Gergen and Gergen (1991), “accounts of objects are never independent of the observer” (p. 77).

In a sense, the approach that is adopted, particularly with regards to descriptions of practitioner research, is very much in keeping with Schutz’s (1967) central concern with the *adequate* identification and description of the ‘actor’s point of view’. In *action research* (see definition in Chapter Five) terms, and in the tradition of *ethnography*, this is a central concern. However, more elaborate descriptions on methodology and other issues relating to the research are presented, mainly with an intention of addressing a mixed audience of both academic and construction industry practitioners, as well as students in the field of construction management. More importantly, there is no attempt by the Researcher towards a Cartesian quest for certainty - the view that mental events

are private episodes observable to one person alone, and attempts to understand the human mind in isolation from the social practices through which it finds expression (see Scrutton, 1981).

It is evident that in trying to articulate what there is, as pointed out by Gergen (1999), “what is truly and objectively the case - we enter into a world of discourse- and thus a tradition, a way of life, and a set of value preferences” (p. 222). In social constructionist terms, this constitutes an aspect of ‘reality’ in its own right and not just an attempt to represent reality. This stands in contrast to the Cartesian approach to research, which sees the world as fixed and external, where words have fixed referential meaning and in which rational agents are engaged in linear communication of ‘information’ (see Rommetveit, 1987, cited in Lave, 1991). Thus, as a researcher, I use concepts (second-level constructs, as opposed to first-level constructs of actors) in a sensitising manner; as well as to serve as explanatory devices within an interpretive framework. Additionally, analysing the basic assumptions regarding central issues and concepts-in-use is seen as part of situating the research as a form of academic work of communication undertaken through active participation observation and action researcher roles.

However, here both first-level constructs and second-level constructs are not separated as proposed in Schutz’s two-stage model of social methodology. These constructs are intricately embedded within the body of work, and any ‘clinical’ attempt to undertake such a task is seen as problematic from a constructionist perspective. Thus, the approach taken in this thesis differs from the discipline-based approach of Schutz’s model, where “actions must first be described, and understood in terms of actors’ meanings after which they can be explained by concepts meaningful to the analyst and the audience” (Knorr-Cetina, 1981: p.18). However, according to Knorr-Cetina (1981), this explicit commitment of micro-sociologies, such as symbolic interactionism, is not evident in practice. Importantly, following Gherardi (2000), no attempt is made by the Researcher to engage in the disembedding of knowledge as a form of reflexive logic that betrays the logic of practice.

As Burkitt (1998) puts it: “objects of knowledge cannot be independent of the accounts given of them, and that our understanding cannot be separated from the sociolinguistic practices in which it is achieved” (p. 124). In this respect it is important to report on the accounting practices of actors, which enables a better understanding of how order and meaning is negotiated. According to Gergen (1985) social constructionism is the explication of the:

*[...] processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live.*

(Gergen, 1985, p. 266)

These important research concerns are seen as having been maintained by continued engagement in a participant observer role that is oriented towards understanding in the performative sense (see Habermas, 1986). As noted by Wenger (1998), “membership in a community of practice is [...] a matter of *mutual engagement*” (p. 73). This is seen to enable the provision of accounts pertaining to such aspects of the research that are directly reportable; and additionally providing descriptions that satisfy meaning-adequacy, based on what is termed here as historical (on the basis of a longitudinal research) and culturally-contexted descriptions (in terms of being ‘situated’). There is no intention in this thesis to imply that I have pursued a wholly exclusive approach enabled by privileged access to knowledge; as there are obvious limitations posed in carrying out field research that limit access. These include problems of not being allowed access to commercially sensitive information; the researcher having to maintain ‘confidentiality’ in the interest of respondents; and researcher ethics that could compromise the interests of collaborative partners.

An explicit attempt is made in this thesis to situate, what is termed by Alvesson et al. (2000) as “data construction (interpretation) and text production (authorship)” within current intelligibilities. It is in this sense that this work is considered as being aligned with postmodernist writing. According to Lax (1992), postmodernist writings “focus on ideas regarding text and narrative, with attention to the importance of dialogic/multiple perspectives, self-disclosure, lateral versus hierarchical configurations, and attention to

process rather than goals” (p. 69). Additionally, as pointed out by Steedman (1991), meaning does not lie around in nature “waiting to be scooped up by the senses; rather it is constructed” (p. 54).

It is in this sense that the situated practice of self-assessment and benchmarking is explored. Thus, brief analysis of particular phenomenon that are the focus of this research is presented to provide insights into ‘competing realities’ to initiate such ‘explorations’ towards generative theorising. Taking one such instance; from reviewing extant literature on the practice of benchmarking, it is evident that commentators often use the term benchmarking as a mixed metaphor, although the emphasis is often on achieving competitive advantage (Camp, 1989a, Karlof et al., 1993). Here, following Cox et al. (1997), the term *benchmarking* is distinguished from *benchmarking*. The root term for the former is *benchmark*, which is grounded in the metaphor of ‘mark’ or standard, with related connotations of having to reduce performance gaps. The latter term is grounded in the metaphor of “a bench placed next to a table around which there is room for several people/organizations to visit and meet figuratively, if not literally” (p. 291). The dominant relationship in *benchmarking* is that of joint collaboration and conversation rather than competition. Thus, by using alternative metaphors, the common conventions of making sense which are employed are ‘violated’, allowing for alternative interpretations (see Gergen, 198: p. 139). Additionally, following Alvesson (1993), the purpose of metaphorical analysis is to challenge established metaphors and to investigate the power of each metaphor in guiding reasoning and observation.

It is in this sense that this thesis focuses on the identification of aspects of Excellent Practice (EP), an alternative concept for Best Practice (BP). This is based on the argument that the notion of BP is seen to imply a prescriptive approach to knowledge, which has functionalistic connotations for objectifying knowledge in terms of being ‘effective’ knowledge. Thus, in order to maintain a consistent methodological stance, the term EP is seen as a ‘descriptive term’ which allows for a social constructivist/constructionist understanding of, and *how* such knowledge is ‘transferred’. Thus, enabling a process-oriented phenomenological investigation. It is in this sense,

that the notion of BP is critically examined and analysed, allowing for an understanding of current practice and that of alternatives.

From reviewing extant literature on benchmarking, it is evident that research into the ‘socially organised ways’ in which BP is determined and ‘transferred’ is lacking. Additionally, it is suggested here that current approaches do not emphasise the relational nature of knowledge (see Dachler et al., 1995), and the ‘transfer’ of knowledge is often reduced to that of taken for granted “shared presuppositions”. Hence, the term EP is used to distinguish a discourse from its earlier version. As pointed out by Xu (2000), discourse is subject to mutations and a discourse changes shape when a link is cut. “To sustain a discourse, one either reinforces established links by reiteration, or makes them *absent* from presence [...]” (Xu, 2000: p. 431).

However, for purposes of presentation and clarity, a focus on a social constructionist view towards ‘practice’ within CoPs is retained within this chapter, whilst providing a brief outline of the cognitive aspects relating to a constructivist perspective. From the social constructionist perspective, the ‘reality’ constructed and interpreted will necessarily be partial; as no two interpretations of participating and observing the same events can be identical in totality. In such circumstances, the interpretative approach is seen to be crucial in offering, what I term, a culturally-contexted description; as a means to communicate a better understanding of complex phenomena integral to this research, which is seen here to require a *bridging* research methodology (see Miller, 1997).

## **2.1 The Concept of Practice**

Turner (1994) is of the view that the concept of practice as it is currently in *vogue* is deeply flawed. He points out that the traditional use of the concept of ‘practice’ as being very much a strategy to primarily remedy the insufficiency in accounting for the diversity of knowledge. However, I find his argument distinctly addressing the issues arising from the difficulties that the traditional concept poses in terms of articulation. This matter, I believe is reconciled but not resolved through the interpretive mode of knowledge production, wherein detailed and specific accounts of such practices in a



situated context are explicated based on diverse methodological perspectives. Thus, in this thesis, based on a social constructionist/constructivist perspective, the notion of CoPs (see Wenger, 1998) is used as the context to account for the ‘transmission’ of both the explicit and implicit aspects of practice.

Based on a constructivist (contrasting with social constructivist, which emphasises both the social and cognitive) epistemology, ‘practice’ is defined as an activity seeking a goal ‘which is conceived as a result of following certain general principles of procedure (see, Von Glasersfeld, 1991; Turner, 1994). This view, advocated by Kant (see Turner, 1994), is seen as a rather limiting notion of practice. From a postmodernist perspective (see Turner, 1994), practice is fundamentally diverse, which basically allows for the presence of a distinct ‘local’ characteristic. ‘Local’ in the sense used here, implies that which is “shared within a network or group of people who have some personal contact with one another” (Turner, 1994: p. 9). Hence, practice is seen as socially constructed and *shared* within a particular social group or network.

In this thesis, the concept of *shared practice* refers to that of a *shared methodology*, which is seen as more than just shared knowledge of general principles of procedure. Additionally, shared practice is seen as involving both the explicit and non-explicit aspects of practice, which is described by Gherardi et al. (1998) as knowledge-in-action and tacit knowledge. It is argued in Section 2.8 of this thesis, that by participating in a practice (both in terms of discourse and action), where Focused Legitimate Peripheral Participation (both in discourse and action; see section 2.8) is made possible, both aspects of knowledge regarding practice can be shared. This is based on an approach to generative theorising, which according to Gergen and Thatchenkery (1998) “is designed to unseat conventional assumptions and to open new alternatives for action” (p. 31).

According to Wenger (1998) the concept of practice includes both the explicit and the tacit; it “connotes doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. In this sense, practice is always social practice” (p.47). Thus, shared practice is seen as being socially constructed based on having a *shared purpose*

resulting in a joint enterprise. Here, following Wenger (1998) the three characteristics of practice: *joint enterprise*, *mutual engagement* and *a shared repertoire*, are seen as the source of community coherence with respect to Communities of Practice (CoPs). Thus, the central focus of this thesis is the practice of self-assessment as a methodology for improvement leading to the *joint enterprise* of benchmarking.

It is in this sense that the community of quality and business improvement managers (QMs/BIMs) are seen as engaged in a ‘collaborative’ manner, to work out a *methodology* for continuous improvement. The approach outlined in this thesis is towards a ‘generative’ construction of selective experiences which is based on a social constructivist/constructionist understanding of the concept of practice and the notion of CoPs that is characterised by that of: *joint enterprise*, *mutual engagement* and *a shared repertoire*. Additionally, this approach accounts for ‘prior knowledge’ and the capacity for ‘adapting’ knowledge (see Chapter Seven) within an emergent context. It is in this sense that ‘*transmissibility*’ (through acquisition) of knowledge is conceived to be a feasible process, that allows for discrepancies in operationalising aspects of the practice based on local contingent circumstances.

## **2.2 Best Practice**

Green (1998) argues on the basis of a postmodernist perspective, that the reality of the construction industry is shaped by the dominant management discourse. He finds that the current research agenda for construction process improvement to be heavily influenced by the rhetoric of business process re-engineering (BPR), and its related concepts. Additionally, it is noted by commentators (Seymour and Rooke, 1995; Seymour, 1996; Green, 1998) that within the construction industry there is a need to reflect on thinking attached to dominant rationalist discourse. According to Garnett (1999), “a review of process theory and particularly, process theory in construction shows that the current thinking in construction is [...] predominantly towards a positivist view where generic processes are sought by which best practice can be established” (p.425).

From reviewing extant management literature, it is clear that the notion of ‘best practice’ within dominant management discourse is closely linked with benchmarking. One instance for such an inference is from Camp’s (1989a) definition that “benchmarking is the search for industry best practices that will lead to superior performances” (p. 68). In this thesis it is conceived that based on a collaborative benchmarking framework, as pointed out by Cox et al. (1997), the central idea underpinning benchmarking is that of ‘learning’. However, this is seen to involve making comparisons with best practice (BP).

Additionally, following Alvesson (1993) and Gergen (1982), the approach in this thesis is to generate new metaphors to challenge established ones and to investigate the power of each new metaphor in guiding reasoning and observations. This brings to focus the taken-for-granted preconceptions that confer status of objectivity and certainty on contestable meanings in terms of ‘shared presuppositions’ (see Turner, 1994). By assigning a label such as best practice to knowledge, there is an implied notion of a fixed reality wherein a ‘knowing subject’ is able to access this knowledge which can be abstracted and stored in the ‘objective world’. Thus, here the term ‘excellent practice’ is used, which implies that which is better and adjudged to be so based on specific criteria of excellence. This is seen to be consistent with a situational-and-contexted notion of such descriptions of practice, as a descriptive rather than an objective concept. Additionally, this is a relativistic approach to practice; taking into account that what is revealed about practices as well is a matter of available comparisons (see Turner, 1994).

Cox and Thompson (1998), from the Centre for Strategy and Procurement Management (CSPM) at the University of Birmingham, argue that the notion of ‘best practice’ is contingent on the organisation’s individual commercial circumstances. Having participated in a multi-country benchmarking exercise, which purported to examine ‘best practice’ in purchasing management they share their experience regarding the determining of benchmarks. According to them, “*the study was unable to conclude which operations constituted ‘best practice’; each participant had achieved beneficial*

*results but through the use of considerably different means. An appropriated and/or effective benchmark could not be established [...]*" (p. 2).

Green (1998) views the proliferation of *best practice* (BP) within the UK construction industry as essentially through the propagation of dominant power groups in terms of the vested interests of the construction industry's establishment. Analysing this phenomenon from a critical perspective, he is convinced that individuals seek to influence practice within the industry through various industry bodies. They are namely, the Construction Industry Board (CIB); the Construction Clients Forum; the Construction Round Table; the Construction Research and Innovation Strategy Panel (CRISP); the European Construction Institute; the Reading Construction Forum and the Major Contractor's Group (MCG).

Additionally, within the UK construction industry there are concerted attempts to engage in the *sharing of best practice*, as evidenced from the efforts of the Movement For Innovation (M4I), The Construction Best Practice Programme (CBPP) and The Construction Productivity Network (CPN). It is also one of the fundamental principles underpinning the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model's (EFQM, 1999) claims for enabling focused business development among organisations in their pursuit of excellence, in terms of business excellence as adjudged against the framework of the EFQM Excellence Model (see Appendix i).

It is argued in this thesis that there are attempts to objectify BP through recognition schemes. *One of which* is the practice of acknowledging excellence award winners as models of best practice in specific areas, based on what is claimed to be a rigorous assessment exercise. Thus, the notion of 'best' is seen to imply 'excellent' in terms of identifying 'best practice' through the 'self-assessment for awards' process (see BQF, 1998a). In the postmodernist sense, the truth and validity of practice is itself 'local' and *practice-relative* (see Turner, 1994). Based on such a perspective, the notion of 'best' is seen as a context-dependent-relative concept. However, in current management

discourse 'practice' is being assigned a value judgement to signify a standard of universalistic and deterministic status in terms of being the 'best'.

It is in this sense that the notion of 'best practice' (BP) is seen to imply an evaluative content, which is often qualified by criteria of variable sorts and standards that presumes a universalistic and ultimate status. Any implication with regards to the possibility of identifying best practice by means of a definitive set of processes or techniques is problematic and limiting when viewed within the broader concept of Continuous Improvement (CI). Such a notion of BP can be identified with change narratives appealing to such notions as rational superiority (see Turner, 1998). The notion of BP implies the ability to offer objective judgements on processes or techniques based on some recognisable comparative standards. Claims to such knowledge in terms of BP are often found in current management literature. The basis to such claims, is very much the preserve of relevant regulating bodies or professional institutions, which seem to exercise unquestioning discretionary powers towards conferring such status on knowledge. One of the ways in which such practice is then legitimised and accorded the status of BP is through recognition by organisations involved in the business of promoting business excellence, such as Midlands Excellence.

Specific to the construction industry, the British Construction Industry Awards (BCIA), which is now in its fifteenth year, is one other award that accords such a status to practice within the industry. The 'BCIA awards' is an industry-wide scheme to *recognise excellence in the overall design, the construction and the delivery of buildings and civil engineering works*. Two notable sponsors of the awards are the British Standards Institute (BSI) and The Construction Best Practice Programme (CBPP). Among the six awards, is The British Construction Industry Best Practice Award sponsored by the CBPP. The awards are adjudged on a set of criteria, specifically that of 'quality of design and construction', 'value for money', application of quality management', 'performance against prediction', 'client satisfaction', and other detailed factors relating to this set of criteria. The process of adjudging is carried out by

a panel based on entry material and subsequent 'judging visits' (taken from Award Details and Entry Form BCIA Awards 2000).

Judgement as to what constitutes best practice are subjective and very much based on perceptions of leading quality and business improvement practitioners, and information based on secondary research literature (see APQC, 2000) - as there can be no definitive criteria for such an evaluation. At best in the UK, the Construction Best Practice Programme (CBPP) acts as a legitimising body for such practices. Hence, BP is seen to be a very subjective notion that is accorded an objective status, and heavily invested in by institutions that exercise discretionary powers and ultimate conferring rights. The approach seems to be based on the different available sources of information within the public domain that offers some means of justification for awarding such a status. Thus it is argued in this thesis that BP is a contestable notion, and does not lend itself to 'objective' assessment.

It is in this sense, and consistent with a constructivist epistemology, that the notion of Excellent Practice (EP) is used in this thesis in place of what is traditionally referred to as Best Practice (BP). Here, EP is the 'consensual' approach by practitioners - the QMs/BIMs involved in the research project in the case of this research, who use the framework of the EFQM excellence model as the basis for evaluation of EP. As noted by one of the QMs/BIMs, self-assessment against the EFQM excellence framework is seen to provide a '*measure of excellence*'. Additionally, the uneasiness amongst the QMs/BIMs with the use of such a term is seen to warrant a more accurate *descriptive* term for such practice. This is also with reference to the use of the term 'good practice' by the Researcher (see Appendix ii) in response to the use of the term 'better practice' and 'good practice' by members of the COQ Steering Group.

The identification of best practice implies that certain characteristics are discernible within a practice that would constitute as being 'best practice'. It is in this sense that the excellence criteria of the EFQM excellence model, and the criteria for assessment that is applied, is seen to enable the identification of 'excellent practice'. Essentially, as noted

in the literature on the excellence frameworks (BQF, 1998a; BQF, 1998b), 'best practice' is evaluated with reference to the 'excellence criteria'. Through a 'discourse of excellence' this idea of excellent practice is seen to have undergone a mutation to that of a taken-for-granted notion of 'best practice'. Thus, the identification of such practice through the excellence awards process can only be that of 'excellent practice' (EP), within the context of the criteria of excellence provided for within the excellence framework.

The 'excellence criteria', which is the basis for the excellence framework, is based on the consensus view taken by groups of senior management practitioners who are recognised for managing leading businesses, as well as through the identification of such practice based on the 'self-assessment for awards' process. The notion of a consensual view, in this thesis is seen as essentially based on the notion of 'communal rationality', hence the contingent and practice-relative sense that is attached the concept of 'best practice'. It is in this sense that the idea of best practice as substantive knowledge is disputed in this thesis. Additionally, the implication of this notion of substantive knowledge that is attached to best practice is seen to imply a prescriptive approach to knowledge within the realm of a 'fixed reality', and this has functionalistic connotations for objectifying knowledge in terms of 'effective knowledge'.

### **2.3 Shared Practice – Towards a Social Constructivist/Constructionist Perspective**

Based on the *traditional* concept of practice, the notion of 'shared practice' implies that practice can be transmitted from person to person, and that it is the same practice for each individual. This is seen to be an idealistic notion of shared practice. This notion of 'shared practice' contradicts the basic assumption that practice is *fundamentally diverse*, and the fact that practices are continually being transformed by the work that they do. Additionally, based on the traditional concept of practice, the tacit dimension of practice is not accounted for. Hence, drawing on the ideas of Turner (1994), it is suggested in this thesis that the traditional concept of practice is fundamentally flawed, as it is unable to account for the diversity in practice in the context of 'shared practice'.

From a social constructivist perspective, it is argued in this thesis that knowledge is not transmitted directly from one knower to another, but is actively built up by the learner (see Driver et al., 1994). Additionally, from a social constructionist perspective, the approach is to replace the individual with the relationship as the locus of knowledge (see Gergen, 1994). This multiple perspective is able to account for knowledge that can be articulated explicitly or manifested implicitly, and additionally account for the transmissibility of practice and the notion of ‘shared practice’. Hence, the position of the radical constructivist, such as Ernst Von Glasersfeld, for whom knowledge is a ‘success’ term, is seen as being essentially that of an instrumentalist one (see Osborne, 1996). According to Von Glasersfeld (1991) when applied to cognition, ‘to know’ is to “possess ways and means of acting and thinking that allow one to attain the goals one happens to have chosen” (p. 16). From reviewing extant management literature on benchmarking and self-assessment, such a constructivist view is seen to dominate.

Based on a constructivist ontology, the notion of ‘shared practice’ in terms of implying sameness of practice, is thus only possible with respect to knowledge which is *explicit*, which can be abstracted and stored in the ‘objective world’. According to Lam (2000), explicit knowledge is that which can be understood and shared without a ‘knowing subject’, and a characteristic fundamental property is its relative ease of communication and transfer. From a constructivist perspective, the understanding regarding shared practice is in terms of achieving ‘*matching*’ practice, in contrast to that of practices that are assumed to be the same in terms of a ‘*fit*’ (see Von Glasersfeld, 1991: p. 23). Thus, based on a *constructivist* understanding of practice the variations in detail of the self-assessment process among the different organisations can be accounted for in terms of being a ‘shared practice’ - ‘sameness’ achieved in terms of knowledge which is *explicit* and ‘sameness’ in terms of *fit*. This is in reference to what can be manifested explicitly.

Additionally, it is argued in this thesis, following Wenger (1998), that the tacit dimension of practice becomes ‘shared’ through engagement within a community of practice (CoP) in a *social constructionist* sense, through Focused Legitimate Peripheral Participation (FLPP). This is based on the perspective that knowledge is seen to reside



in relationships, and hence this knowledge can be acquired. Furthermore, the issue of 'shared practice' to imply sameness does not arise, as sameness is in the sense of a regime of practice (see Dean, 1998).

According to Lam (2000), tacit knowledge is action-oriented and has a personal quality, and cannot be communicated, understood or used without the 'knowing subject' (Lam, 2000). Hence, in order to account for knowledge that can be articulated both explicitly or manifested implicitly (tacit), a social constructivist/constructionist perspective is found to be most appropriate. It is pointed out by Turner (1998), that:

*A (constructed) fact is also an object of conduct -something to use in relation to others. By treating a novel 'fact' as a fact one allows for the accretion around it of standard actions and forms of reasoning. Facts acted upon as facts become practices [embedded as practices]- shared between those who act upon them in a similar way and thus open to use among those who share in the actions and forms of reasoning. [...]. The power of facts to produce practices through their use by a given group of persons - the ability of facts to become tacitized or embedded as practices - creates audiences with shared practices. (p. 113)*

This perspective, regards practice as having a local character, and being socially constituted, where 'transfer' is seen to be possible as a form of knowledge acquisition through participation.

Hence, the concept of shared practice in this thesis is used in a situated sense; and the explication of 'situated practice' is based on undertaking inquiry with a particular community of practitioners from the construction industry. In this sense, description of situated practice is not be used as a representative piece of work. Thus, the aim is to avoid what can be seen as using sampling techniques, to pursue positivistic claims to knowledge by forwarding law-like causal generalisations based on typifications and categorisation on a theoretical level. Such *second-level constructs* are seen by Schutz et al. (1973) to be ideal types constructed by social scientists, which are not of the life-world. However, when used in a positivist sense, it can be taken to be representing 'the

*reality out there*', as opposed to being part of the constitutive process of knowledge construction.

It is evident from reviewing literature on self-assessment that there are attempts to divide, contrast and debate the practice of 'self-assessment', allowing for self-assessment to emerge as a discursive object (see Samuelsson et al., 2002; Eskildsen et al., 2001). The approach, to account for differences within practices and possibly forward generalisations in place of descriptions can offer some useful insights, which however can be limiting based on the bias towards prescriptive knowledge. This approach is based on a constructivist ontology for achieving knowledge that is valid if it works to achieve a goal (see Osborne, 1996). However, it is pointed out by Xu (2000) that, as such attempts are oriented towards converting technical features into numbers, 'what is at stake is a practice' (p. 444).

As part of the research process, the different forms of self-assessment undertaken by the participating companies is seen as a *shared practice* amongst the community of QMs/BIMs. It is important to distinguish between 'the practice of self-assessment' as an approach or methodology, from 'the actual conduct of a unique form of self-assessment as a practice in itself. It is argued in this thesis, that the option of an in-depth study of the practice of self-assessment is one that can be seen as an attempt to reify such practices into objectifying entities which can enable causal links to be established. This could only lead to positivist claims to knowledge, which are sometimes used to justify cultural descriptions.

Additionally, in this thesis pursuit of aims oriented towards objectifying knowledge is avoided. Constructs from the observer-researcher's perspective can be seen as a form of sociological reduction, primarily as a purposeful activity for generating abstract knowledge towards rendering it possible to make positivistic claims which can form the basis for orientating further studies based on what is claimed as a 'fixed reality'. This is in itself an enterprise that many researchers in the field of construction management tend to prefer, as it can be seen to be providing a structured analysis which focuses on

*typification* based on abstraction that is aligned with positivist research traditions (see Seymour and Rooke, 1995). In this thesis, however, such second-level constructs are seen as integral to the knowledge production process; to ‘generate’ understanding. Thus, it is important not to confuse common-sense constructs, the *first-level constructs* of ordinary people who employ types to make sense or meaning of their world with second-level constructs, which refer to ideal types, or constructed types that are used to explain ‘social reality’.

According to Schutz (cited in Morris, 1977) the *first-level constructs* are acquired very much in a social sense, and make up the stock of knowledge that actors possess. This sort of ‘stocks of knowledge’ takes on an “appearance of sufficient coherence, clarity, and consistency” for members of a particular group; “to give anybody a reasonable chance of being understood” (Morris, 1977, p. 18). According to Morris (1977), following Schutz, “these *typicalities* have a measure of anonymity in that they belong to no one person but are believed by the members of the group to be shared by all” (p. 18). It is these *typicalities* that I refer to as constituting a ‘shared practice’, in terms of *methodologies* and *processes* which are constantly being reconstituted and transformed by the work of the practices themselves. Hence, *practice* is seen as methodology and process - a regime (see Section 2.6), in the *social constructivist/constructionist* sense that focuses on the relational aspect. It is in this sense that practice can be ‘shared’, implying sameness, and transmissible from one individual to another within a community of practice.

The notion of ‘*shared practice*’ in the context of the dominant positivist approach to benchmarking (as the concept is predominantly featured in management literature), is thus fundamentally flawed - based on the aforementioned arguments regarding the traditional concept of practice. Additionally, the concept of ‘shared practice’ from a constructivist perspective is in reference to sameness of technique, that of performance - which implies instrumental sameness (see Turner, 1994: p. 42). It is however assumed that all aspects of the practice can be ‘shared’ in a constructivist sense. The focus on ‘capturing’ the intricate and important details that contribute to ‘best practice’ (based on

being conferred a legitimating status by socially recognised bodies), so as to acquire the 'sameness' is attempted through '*negotiations*' and sharing of information, which however is oriented towards non-participative and programmatic benchmarking arrangements.

In this sense the scope for shared practice is limited by current versions dominating benchmarking literature which focus on methodology and processes based on descriptions of actions that come always before or after the fact, in the form of 'imagined projections and recollected reconstructions' (see Suchman, 1987: p. 51). These can be rational plans or accounts, which are based on a positivist perspective and does not recognise the reflexive nature of practice (or purposeful action, for that matter). Furthermore, based on a constructivist perspective, the focus is on the explicit aspects of practice. Thus, positing a notion of shared practice based solely on a constructivist dynamic tends to focus on the explicit and predictive dimensions of knowledge.

It is in this sense, that the notion of shared practice from a constructivist perspective is used in a limited but accurate sense to interpret the practice of QMs/BIMs. This is in reference specifically *to the sameness of technique or methodology* of benchmarking based on self-assessment data. Hence, in this thesis the concept of 'shared practice' is used as a *first-level construct* to imply sameness, to denote identifiable fundamental similarities in terms of the methodology of carrying out organisational self-assessment against a framework of excellence, *as a practice within the context of continuous improvement*. However, from a social constructivist/constructionist perspective, the term 'shared practice' is used as a *second-level construct*; as a descriptive term that allows for both explicit and non-explicit knowledge of shared practice within communities of practice.

Additionally, it is suggested in this thesis that the greater benefits of benchmarking can best captured in terms of the concept of 'learning' through LPP. Thus, here the methodology is a 'selective' construction, and is aligned with a social constructionist

perspective towards benchmarking that is oriented towards collaboration, allowing for benchmarking to emerge as a relational process. This is based on a social theory of learning; that emphasises both the cognitive and social. This approach is consistent with a social constructivist/constructionist perspective, and is realised by means of a participative methodology of Focused Legitimate Peripheral Participation (FLPP) within CoPs 'designed' for learning. It is in this sense that the notion of benchmarking is 'structured' around co-participation and mutual engagement, based on a *horizontal conception of benchmarking* (see Cox et al., 1997), and viewed as *collaborative benchmarking*.

## **2.4 Communities of Practice**

Brown and Duguid (1994) contend that much important work has been done on groups in the workplace. However, they note that the focus has been on “groups as canonical [official], bounded entities that lie within the organisation and that are organised or at least sanctioned by that organization and its view of tasks” (p. 176). In addition it is pointed out that the noncanonical communities are emergent - “their shape and membership emerges in the process of activity, as opposed to being created to carry out a task” (1994, p. 176). Eckert and McConell-Ginet (1992) define CoPs as, “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations - in short practices - emerge from this mutual endeavour” (p. 464).

CoPs are being enacted within the industry in both very obvious and subtle forms (canonical and non-canonical forms). This is evident from the membership of such communities by the Quality Managers (QMs) and Business Improvement/Development Managers (BIMs) involved in the research, who are currently working in construction contracting companies within the UK. One such community is the Midlands Construction Forum, which is a voluntary body open to members of the construction industry, which comprise of members, who among other matters, are interested in promoting the development of business excellence (see McCabe, 2001). Further

evidence of membership of such a nature among members of the construction industry was communicated during focus group sessions carried out as part of the research, and information gathered at Construction Productivity Network (CPN) workshops.

The CoPs of QMs/BIMs involved in this EPSRC research project are seen to be a non-canonical group very much concerned with the issues of 'quality' and 'business development'. These QMs/BIMs have a common identity prior to their involvement in the research project, in terms of being members of the Midlands Construction Forum. In this thesis, the description of CoPs of QMs/BIMs as co-participants is provided in some detail, with a view to communicate an understanding of the often neglected but important social aspects involved in practice. These practices often get labelled and categorised into forms of abstract knowledge, such as 'Change Initiatives' or 'Strategies for Managing Change'. Having worked with four different construction contracting organisations as part of the research, it is apparent that there is a conscious attempt by organisations to have their members involved in such communities.

According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice (CoPs) are essentially informal, as they define themselves through engagement in practice. Here informal is taken to mean that, "they evolve in organic ways that tend to escape formal description and control" (Wenger, 1998: p. 118). Wenger (2000) identifies *communities of practice* (CoPs) as one of the *three structuring elements of social learning systems*. The other two are *boundary processes* among these communities; and *identities*, as shaped by our participation in these systems. CoPs are seen as an integral part of our daily lives. It is claimed by Wenger, (1998) that we belong to several communities of practice at any given time. For instance, in the formal work organisation, "although workers may be contractually employed by a large institution, in day-to-day practice they work with - and, in a sense, for - a much smaller set of people and communities" (Wenger, 1998: p. 6).

From a *social constructivist* perspective, Driver et al. (1994) note that, "knowledge and understandings, including scientific understandings, are constructed when individuals

engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks. Making meaning is thus a dialogic process involving persons-in-conversation, and learning is seen as the process by which individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members” (p. 7). This, differs from a radical constructivist position, in terms of knowledge construction going beyond personal empirical enquiry, emphasising both the social and cognitive, and not seen solely as an individual process.

The *social constructionist* perspective, however, emphasises that it is “not the cognitive processing of the single observer that absorbs the object into itself, but it is language that does so. Accounts of the world (in science and elsewhere) take place within shared systems of intelligibility -usually a spoken or written language. These accounts are not viewed as the external expression of the speaker’s internal processes (such as cognition, intention), but as an expression of relationships among persons” (Gergen and Gergen, 1991: p. 78).

It is argued in this thesis that the positivist perspective is fraught with problems, as the focus is mainly to derive explanations by reducing processes which are the focus of investigation to independent and dependent variables. According to Adorno et al. (1976) cited in May (1996), “positivism turns human relationships into nothing more than abstract categories through a failure to examine the conditions under which they develop and are sustained” (p. 41). In this sense, the positivist approach is seen as the increasing desire to control the social and natural worlds in the name of profit.

Following Wenger (1998), I use the concept of *Communities of Practice* (CoPs) as a tool for analysing learning as an integral feature of benchmarking practice, in terms of a process of social participation. According to Gherardi et al. (1998), “the notion of community of practice emphasizes that these processes are at once social and cognitive [...]” (p. 277). Additionally, following Gherardi et al. (1998), I view the idea of communities of practice (CoPs) as useful to enable understanding of the process of ‘transmission’ of tacit knowledge and of knowledge-in-action.

## 2.5 The Shared Practice of Self-Assessment

The technique of self-assessment as a methodology for improvement was the central focus of the research, leading to the *joint enterprise* of benchmarking. The self-assessment process and the use of the technique of self-assessment as a methodology for improvement is understood as a shared practice among the members of the community of QMs/BIMs involved in the research. Wenger (1998) refers to three characteristics of practice: *joint enterprise*, *mutual engagement* and *a shared repertoire*, as the source of community coherence with respect to CoPs. In this thesis, the interests of QMs/BIMs regarding issues on ‘quality’ and ‘business improvement’ are seen as the basis for *mutual engagement*, with *a shared repertoire* constructed around those same two issues.

It was made very clear by the initial group of three QMs/BIMs that any other organisation intending to participate in the research project had to undergo the self-assessment process, before proceeding towards any involvement within the existing group of focal organisations involved in the research. This firstly, required the individual ‘contact’ person from the ‘new’ organisation to have some degree of awareness of the process and the fundamentals of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) framework. Additionally, it is interpreted that knowledge acquired from having conducted a self-assessment against a common framework of excellence was seen by the QMs/BIMs to be fundamental towards achieving ‘joint benchmarking’ (see Section 7.6).

According to Weick (1995), shared meaning is difficult to attain; however he notes that:

*Although people may not share meaning, they do share experience. This shared experience may be made sensible in retrospect by equivalent meanings, but seldom by similar meanings. Individual histories are too diverse to produce similarity. So if people share anything, what they share are actions, activities, moments of conversation, and joint tasks, each of which they then make sense of using categories that are more idiosyncratic. If people have similar experiences but label them differently, then the experience of shared meaning is more complicated than we suspect.* (p. 188)



In this sense, The QMs/BIMs approach can be seen as securing a focus for interpretation - in terms of having a shared experience in conducting self-assessment. Additionally, the use of self-assessment against a common framework of excellence provides for a shared repertoire of excellence that can serve as a common sensemaking device, offering a range of extractable cues. It is noted by Weick (1995), that “frames and cues can be thought of as vocabularies in which words that are more abstract (frames) include and point to other less abstract words (cues) that become sensible in the context created by the more inclusive words” (p.110). In this sense, meaning within vocabularies is *relational*.

## **2.6 Learning Through Legitimate Peripheral Participation**

In this research, as the QMs/BIMs participating in the research project are part of a voluntary, non-canonical group, the notion of peripheral participation as opposed to full participation is seen to be appropriate, both in terms of a descriptive as well as an analytical concept. The concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) is used by Lave and Wenger to articulate the aspect of learning within historically-contexted apprenticeships to a broader historically-and-culturally contexted notion of CoPs, which involves changing participation and identity transformation. It is noted by Wenger (1998) that, as CoPs are “defined by engagement rather than reification of membership, a community of practice can offer multiple, more or less peripheral forms of participation” (p. 118). For, Wenger:

*Peripheries - no matter how narrow - refer to continuities, to areas of overlap and connections, to windows and meeting places, and to organized and casual possibilities for participation [...].*

*(Wenger, 1998: p. 120)*

It is in this sense that the QMs/BIMs were engaged mutually as a CoP, participating in the conducting self-assessment through Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) within the community. The dynamic concept of LPP focuses on peripherality as “a way of gaining access to sources of understanding through growing involvement” (Lave and

Wenger, 1991; p. 37). Following Wenger (1998), peripherality is not taken to mean partial participation as the term often implies. More importantly, the analytical concept of LPP is able to provide a way of understanding *learning in practice*.

I share Wenger's (1998) concern for the profound effect of discourses and their attendant effects, and thus, reiterate the need to reflect on the fundamental assumptions and perspectives that inform, what Wenger terms as the 'enterprise' of learning.

*A key implication of our attempts to organize learning is that we must become reflective with regard to our own discourses of learning and to their effects on the ways we design for learning.* (Wenger, 1998: p. 9)

According to Wenger (1998) "for *learning in practice* to be possible, an *experience of meaning must be in interaction with a regime of competence*" (p. 138). Thus, the insistence by the initial group of three QM's/BIM's that the intending fourth participating company should undergo the similar process of self-assessment, can be seen as reification of membership in terms of acquiring *a locally negotiated regime of competence*. In this sense, knowledge is defined as the recognisable competent participation in practice (Wenger, 1998).

## **2.7 Learning in Communities of Practice of QMs/BIMs**

Alvesson et al. (1992) point out that in the field of management, "training practices are strongly influenced by motivation and learning theory", however according to them these practices "subscribe to the individual as their unit, or level, of analysis" (p. 182). As noted by Patching (1999), the term 'training' is taken to mean those highly focused 'learning activities' that enable someone to perform a set of procedures or tasks in a pre-defined way. Thus, according to him the notion of "training implies a narrowing of options; it implies that there is one right way to do something, and training instils that one right way to the exclusion of others" (p. 5).

According to Von Glasersfeld (1991), in the field of education there is still a widespread behavioristic orientation that focuses exclusively on *training*, where achievement and performance are the primary objective rather than *understanding*, thus disregarding *learning*. Patching (1999) uses the notion of ‘developing’ managers to describe the synthesising of training and education approaches in the field of management.

According to him, the education approach is a broader approach to learning than training, *enabling inquiry and willingness to explore; however, there being little or no focus on immediate practical application*. He views this dominant learning approach to be a traditional institutionalised view of learning in a formal sense, which does not recognise that learning is socially constructed.

Henning (1998) points out that, learning in formal institutionalised settings is essentially “abstract” learning, very much associated with generalised ‘transfer’; while *situated learning* is context-bound concrete learning. Situated learning involves “a rich array of methods constructed from the resources inherent in social relations, discourse, and the physical qualities of objects in the everyday world” (Henning, 1998: p. 86). Following Lave and Wenger (1991), in this thesis, learning is explored as that of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) within communities of practice. LPP is seen as a useful analytical approach based on the view that *learning is an integral part of generative social practice* in the lived-in world (Lave and Wenger, 1991: p. 35). It is important to note that Wenger (1998) identifies the *relations that constitute practice* as primarily defined by learning - hence the emergent nature of CoPs.

According to Hanks (1991), “Lave and Wenger situate learning in certain forms of social coparticipation. Rather than asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place” (p. 14). The consequence of this, as noted by Hanks (1991), is that a whole array of interdisciplinary issues are then focused upon; as it is possible to relate to them through such an approach. According to Fox (2000) “viewing an organization as communities of practice helps to focus attention on specific practices rather than more amorphous concepts such as corporate culture” (p. 856). In

addition, he notes that CoPs may be canonical (official) groups, or non-canonical (informal), and that the non-canonical CoPs can in fact be more important to the organisation's overall capacity to 'learn' and 'survive'.

The social constructivist/constructionist approach that is taken here is to look at the learning of managers in a socially situated and contextual manner, where the mode of engagement of the learner is 'participation in a community of practice'. In this research, it is participation in developing a methodology that is oriented towards achieving business excellence through the purposeful activity of benchmarking based on self-assessment data - as part of an integrated methodology for continuous improvement.

## **2.8 Exploring the Concept of 'Transfer'-of-Practice Through Focused Legitimate Peripheral Participation**

According to Sewell (1999), the identification of BP is often the focus of Total Quality Management (TQM) and organisational learning text, while the aspect of 'transfer' of BP is assumed to be follow on within the complex web of practices. Thus, 'transfer' is presumed to be a taken-for-granted aspect of the competitive process, which is a necessary follow-on outcome, a consequential effect of the dominant thinking in terms of 'survival of the fittest'. The notion of 'transfer' of practice is more clearly understood by using Wenger's (1998) *theory of social learning*. The primary focus of this theory is of learning as social participation.

In this thesis, the term '*transfer*' is used in a metaphorical sense - in the context of benchmarking, when referring to transmission within communities, which is conceptualised in this thesis as *Focused Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (FLPP). This concept is adopted from Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of *Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (LPP) which is seen as being 'structured' around the process of *participation* and *reification*. However, in this thesis it is proposed as being attended to with more specificity, towards securing particular ends for purposeful engagement. This is referred to summarily as a state of *focal awareness* that is attended to in a legitimate sense. Thus, conceptualising such awareness in terms of FLPP, is seen to

capture the reflexive understanding that arises from an orientation towards focal awareness through minimising subsidiary awareness. It is suggested in this thesis, that the orientation towards focal awareness, within the context of CoPs, is based on a *focus towards reaching understanding*. It is in this sense, that Habermas' approach to interpretive understanding is seen as applicable for purposes of maintaining such an orientation.

This distinction between focal and subsidiary awareness is drawn by Polyani (1962, cited in Gherardi, 2000) to convey the meaning of 'tacit knowledge'. As noted by Gherardi (2000), the critical incident technique of action research, and that of the breaching of rules applied in the tradition of ethnomethodology are methods used to stimulate reflections on conditions that govern normality - which enables the elucidation of tacit knowledge (non-explicit). In this thesis, FLPP is about *participation in a practice in an inclusive manner* that is implicated in engagement with participants in *discourse oriented towards reaching understanding*. This mode of participation is implied by Habermas (1986), in his Theory of Communicative Action, in terms of putting forward *validity claims which are criticisable*, allowing for discourse when meaning is problematic to any of the participants. This is analogically comparable to what is referred to as 'moments of breakdown', exemplified by Gherardi (2000: p. 214) as arising from the specific case of subject-object relations that is used as a technique for action research.

The concept of FLPP, in addition, accounts for knowledge that requires contextual adaptation, through reflexive understanding. This is in reference to a community of knowing adopting an idea, information, or knowledge from a different community of knowing, as some external ideas may not fit (see Fleck, 1935/1979 cited in Tenkasi et al., 1999). It is proposed by Tenkasi et al., that the information or knowledge may have to be reconfigured or adapted to fit in with the recipient community's meaning system. This is consistent with Gherardi's (2000) view that "participating in a practice is consequently a way to acquire knowledge-in-action, but also to change or perpetuate such knowledge and to produce and reproduce society" (p. 215).

According to Gherardi (2000):

*“The phenomenological concept of practice is perhaps less well known than the Marxist use of the term, which assigns to practice an emancipatory force. As a notion central to Marxist epistemology, practice stands in contrast with the Cartesian notion of detached reflection, of the separation between mind and body, and also stands in polemic with rationalism, positivism and scientism. Practice, in this case, is an epistemological principle. If, as knowing subjects, we are to know that things are independent of us, we must first subject them to our own praxis. That is, in order to know how things are when they are not in contact with us, we must first enter into contact with them.*

*Practice is both our production of the world and the result of this process. It is always the product of specific historical conditions resulting from previous practice and transformed into present practice. The important contribution of this tradition to practice-based theorizing is its methodological insight that practice is a system of activities in which knowing is not separate from doing.”*

*(p 215)*

It is in this sense, that the concept of CoPs when applied to the practice of benchmarking has the potential to generate better understanding, as it then immediately focuses on the key aspects of the process of *engagement* in terms of Focused Legitimate Peripheral Participation (FLPP). The notion of participation here is that of an active process which is both personal and social, it “refers to the process of taking part, and also to the relations with others that reflect this process” (Wenger, 1998: p. 55).

## **CHAPTER THREE: 'CONSTRUCTING' A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The focus of my research essentially provides descriptions of certain situated practices within construction contracting organizations that relate to 'quality' and 'continuous improvement'. These two concepts were core concepts underpinning the original research proposal, which had been constructed under the banner of the 'Culture of Quality' research, an EPSRC funded research project. This area of research is undoubtedly of primary concern to quality management and business development practitioners. Thus, a number of quality management and business improvement practitioners (QMs/BIMs) from a number of major construction contracting companies within the Midlands area of the UK, indicated interest for a proposed research that would focus on 'continuous improvement' within the context of quality initiatives. It is in this sense that the organisations participating in the research project are referred to as 'collaborative partners'. This is based on, what is seen as, mutual interest in the area of 'quality' and 'culture'. Specifically, the QMs/BIMs were involved in working together with the academic research team from the University of Birmingham to develop a methodology for continuous improvement that would enable the establishment of the cultural conditions conducive for the establishment of a 'culture of quality'. Thus, a research Steering Group was formed which comprised five QMs/BIMs representing their respective organisations, together with three members of the University of Birmingham academic research team.

The traditional research design approach of identifying a problem, formulating and testing of preconceived hypothesis would have provided some insights regarding the area of study. However, this approach was found wanting with respect to practitioner's (QMs/BIMs) research focus. From the academic point of view, such an approach can be seen to be limiting the possibility of gaining a more holistic understanding of the issues at hand; mainly by pre-empting the various outcomes, and thus operating in an exclusive research environment rather than an inclusive one. Hammersley (1992) points out that "the structured character of the data collection process involves imposition of

the researcher's assumptions about the social world and consequently reduces the chances of discovering evidence discrepant with those assumptions" (p. 11).

Through no particular a priori preference on the part of the researcher, an exploratory approach towards the research was seen as most appropriate. From the researcher's perspective, two particular factors seemed to have had an impact for such a turn. Firstly, the complexity of the official research objective of attempting to identify the cultural conditions conducive to establishing a 'Culture of Quality', and additionally the concern for a research methodology that is able to deliver 'tangible' outcomes from the perspective of the organisations involved.

The research team was to have access not only to observe and obtain data from within the focal organizations but also that of their clients, suppliers and subcontractors. The research was to be conducted using structured and unstructured questionnaires, observational and shadowing techniques. A select sample of ten projects were to be monitored longitudinally, as well as questionnaires being administered to clients, suppliers and subcontractors of the five organizations simultaneously. The projects were to provide the source of data on:

- i. members' perception of the culture of the five focal organizations; and
- ii. of the perception of clients', suppliers' and subcontractors' personnel regarding the quality of the product/service delivered by the focal organizations.

The area of research appeared problematic to the QMs/BIMs concerned. This became evident at the early stages of the research process, prior to deciding on the 'methodology' of the research. One instance of such evidence, is as follows:

*Excite: What I'm trying to do, and I keep coming back to it is that we're focused on construction, on our industry, and that is our 'culture of quality'. Because that is a big enough subject, and that's what we want to learn about.*



‘Culture’ and ‘Quality’ are two very broad concepts, and according to Fox (2000) ‘culture’ is an amorphous concept, while Flood (1993), points out that ‘quality’ is defined in various ways. Importantly, what became clear was the fact that the QMs/BIMs *did not share common notions* of these two concepts. This was implied by one of them.

Valiant: *Back to the definition of what we mean by the ‘Culture of Quality’, what we’re looking for, [...].*

The posture of QMs/BIMs - which is described in this thesis as an ‘industrial posture’ (see Section 5.2), was framed by their instrumentalist position in terms of an incessant “what’s in it for us?” rhetoric. This approach to collaborative research is seen to contrast with the traditional role of organisations as research ‘hosts’. In this thesis, it is suggested that organisations that concede to the traditional ‘passive’ research role of organisations as a form of ‘living laboratory’, is based on the presupposition that research has some service implications to the construction community, and/or society at large.

Thus, in their quest for tangible and immediate practical outcomes the QMs/BIMs ‘preferred’ to focus on using the amalgamated Business Excellence Model (BEM) and European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) excellence model (referred to as the BEM/EFQM framework) as a research instrument (see Appendix ii) - as a framework against which a self-assessment exercise was to be conducted. The output of this was then to be the basis for undertaking a benchmarking exercise, which was to constitute phase two of the research project. The research team was to satisfy this priority, while at the same time devise ways to maintain the original objectives of the research as spelt out in the EPSRC proposal. This had to be achieved within the limits of access accorded to the research team for the purpose of data collection. It was evident from discussions during Steering Group meetings that the QMs/BIMs were quite intent in playing the role of ‘gate-keeper’ (see Lewin, 1958 cited in Friedrichs, J. et al., 1975). The specific instance of this was evident in their response to the requests for

possible people from the focal organizations who would be suitable to partake in undertaking a self-assessment of the organization based on the BEM/EFQM excellence framework.

*Rsch 1<sup>2</sup>: The only difficulty I see particularly with a lot of this questions we put down here [referring to the self-assessment questionnaire], it seems there would be experts within who would be qualified to answer those questions and they are people [...]. Particularly, if you talk about 'Resources' [one of the criteria of the excellence model].*

*PF: We started going down that path, we thought this is dangerous, you're getting pocket of silos in the business. We want all our business to understand how we function as a business. Because we have got people who haven't got a clue how we do purchasing; how our finance works, we've got problems in this business.*

As a final outcome of negotiations amongst members of the 'Culture of Quality' research Steering Group; the research involved a two-pronged parallel process:

- It was agreed by the research team that 'we' were directly involved in helping the organisations work out certain issues relating to 'quality' and 'improvement' which had a direct impact on business development. The research involved a collaborative research strategy to understand the 'usefulness' and practicalities of the 'excellence framework' in order to improve their efficiency (see Appendix iii) in the form of tangible outputs that can be measured and monitored within their existing work culture.
- Working to achieve some of the original academic research objectives of identifying the conditions conducive to establishing a 'culture of quality'.

Hence, based on a practitioner-researcher (see Chapter Five) focus, the academic research team was involved in efforts to research ways to improve current work practices oriented towards 'developing excellence' within particular UK construction contracting organisations. The shared objective that was decided, after negotiations and deliberations, by members of the Steering Group was to use the BEM/EFQM model as a

Note 2: The academic research team members are identified as Rsch 1; Rsch 2 (the Researcher ); and Rsch 3.

framework (see Appendix ii, for sample) to carry out self-assessment. The outcome of the assessment was to be used as a basis for benchmarking. Additionally it was realised that such an assessment could constitute the common framework for engaging in benchmarking. This is broadly interpreted as a methodology that is constitutive of the practice of '*developing a 'quality culture' in the construction industry*' - which was the original focus of the COQ research.

The self-assessment process itself can be compared to the critical incident technique of action research, and that of the breaching of rules applied in the tradition of ethnomethodology. These are methods used to stimulate reflections on conditions that govern normality (Gherardi, 2000) and enables the elucidation of tacit knowledge (non-explicit). As *practice* is seen as methodology and process - a regime, thus, the QMs/BIMs were committed to jointly constructing a methodology for benchmarking based on self-assessment data that was seen as appropriate to their purposes, which accounts for the differences in approach to assessments.

The BEM and the EFQM Excellence Models (see Appendix i and iv) are fundamentally similar, and were amalgamated in 1999 and recognised as the EFQM Excellence Model 1999. Which is claimed to be an 'improvement' to the previous one. Besides the practicalities involved in having one European model of excellence which is fundamentally similar, what has also been incorporated within the 1999 model is important aspects of recent findings on excellent practices within the business community, such as 'Partnership'; and that of 'Innovation and Learning' as a feedback loop.

The BEM is based on the following premise:

**Customer Satisfaction, People (employee) Satisfaction and Impact on Society**

are achieved through

## **Leadership**

driving

## **Policy and Strategy, People Management, Resources and Processes,**

leading ultimately to excellence in

## **Business Results.**

Each of the nine elements in bold above, is a criterion that can be used to assess the organisation's progress toward excellence. There is a weighting attached to each criterion which are used to score the organizations level of excellence as measured against the model.

(From BQF, 1998a)

### **3.1 Some Relevant Research Issues**

From reviewing extant management literature, it is evident that the 'variable-analytic tradition does feature quite prominently as a preferred research methodology within mainstream management research. According to Hughes and Sharrock (1997), the development of the 'language of variables' owed much to the work of Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues, who "saw the research process as one of translating concepts into empirical indicators; that is indicators based on what is observable, recordable, measurable in some objective way" (p. 50). Deetz (1995) characterises the 'variable-analytic' research tradition, in terms of "research [which] is done under a logic that if x and y show a statistical relation and y and z show a relation then I can get a publication showing a relation between x and z" (p. 59). Consequently, it is not surprising that, "endless studies can be published following likely confirming results with no theoretical meaning or interpretation" (p. 59).

Hughes and Sharrock (1997) argue that the positivist notion of the objectivity of science is seen to depend on the fact that there is "a theoretically neutral 'observation language'

in which investigators can give the barest of description of their direct experience of the world, thus presenting data of which the scientist can be most certain since it describes what has been directly observed” (p. 43). Hence this notion of ‘observational language’ establishes the connection between language and the world, implying a ‘correspondence theory of truth’; *where statements provide a direct match with observed phenomena.*

This predisposition towards the variable analytic tradition amongst management researchers that is oriented towards objectivity is also reflected in the attitude of practitioners involved in this research project. This is evident in the QMs/BIMs search for research outcomes that can be realised in numeric form, described here as ‘management’s preoccupation with metrics’. However, this ongoing issue regarding metrics can be seen in the light of Schon’s (1995) statement on the dilemma of rigor or relevance.

*The practitioner is confronted with a choice. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to his standards of rigour, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems where he cannot be rigorous in any way he knows how to describe?*

(p. 28)

The focus on metrics which can be ever so appealing to the institutionalised epistemology of mainstream management research, was put forward time and time again by the QMs/BIMs involved in the research project. It was suggested by one quality manager at the second Steering Group Meeting, that the purpose of using a research tool such as the Business Excellence Model (1998) was to obtain the ‘*required metrics*’. Below are two other instances relating to the focus on metrics.

PF: *The excellence model has all the metrics in it.*

Excite: *How do you actually distribute knowledge or awareness of you quality management processes. Do you do it by your hard manuals, do you do it by*

*memo, do it by word of mouth, do you do it by computer? That will give you some metrics.*

This so-called ‘over-reliance on metrics’ is best understood by revisiting the current issues surrounding management practice, particularly that of construction management practice. This is made clear from aspects of this research relating to practitioner’s preference for ‘abstract’ information; and from reviewing extant management literature the increasing appeal for measurement-based management tools. For instance, Kaplan and Norton (1996), point out that the balanced scorecard (BSC) approach has ‘evolved from an improved *measurement system* [for measuring rates of progress in continuous improvement activities] to a *core management system*’. It is noted by Kagioglou et al. (2001), that BSC is one of the tools created within a field of study that aims to identify the right number and type of performance metrics, in a manner that is integrated to the specifics of the organisation. A confirmation of such practice was evident in the use of the BSC by one of the focal organisations. An adapted version of the BSC, incorporating the core concepts of the <sup>3</sup>EFQM excellence model was used by Abel. This constituted the integration of the elements of a measurement system with a continuous improvement tool, which was used as a strategic business improvement tool.

### **3.2 Practitioner Focus For an Action Oriented Research Instrument**

From the original five QMs/BIMs who formed part of the ‘Culture of Quality’ Research Steering Group, two withdrew on grounds of major restructuring within the organisation. The other members of the Steering Group comprised three academic research members (referred to henceforth as the ‘academic research team’ and distinguished as Rsch 1, 2 and 3); additionally the academic research team was supported in carrying out fieldwork by one other academic researcher from a neighbouring university. The QMs/BIMs insistence on a much more clearly defined research methodology than what was presented by the academic research team was a critical argument leading to a review of the research methodology.

Note 3: Although reference in this thesis is made only to the EFQM excellence model or conversely the BEM excellence model, they are used interchangeably to refer to the common fundamentals of excellence.

The focus on metrics by the QMs/BIMs was carefully taken into consideration, as and when, such a need was seen to fit with the research objectives. Thus, it is important to view related aspects of this thesis regarding relevant theoretical discourse (see section 2.8) amongst members of the ‘Culture of Quality’ Steering Group as constitutive of the process of communicating a shared understanding. This is a fundamental presupposition based on the rationale of a relationship that relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control. Hence, the organisation involved in undertaking this research, in all its complexity, is conceived as oriented towards co-operative action within the ‘collaborative’ framework of the research.

From the Researcher’s perspective, some important considerations regarding alternative research methodologies and pre-understandings regarding collaborative research were taken into account in attempting to work out a suitable strategy that would enable access to ‘rich’ data. Attention being primarily focused on methods for enabling a more thorough insight into aspects of the practice of construction management: which in this case, is recognised as the practice of QMs/BIMs involvement in research for developing a methodology for continuous improvement.

In the process of discussions with QMs/BIMs from the five original participating organizations involved in the research project, it became clear that their concerns were focused on the specific area of *continuous improvement*. Negotiations and discussions, between members of the Steering Group, eventually centred on a proposal forwarded by one of the QMs/BIMs to use the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM, 1999) excellence model framework as the main research instrument.

A suggestion was put forward by one of the QMs/BIMs to focus on the ‘enabler’ criteria of the model. Hence, the academic research team devised a framework that included the key aspects of the ‘enabler criteria’ (see Appendix ii, for sample) of the BEM and the EFQM excellence models (referred to as the EFQM/BEM framework). This is seen as the construction of a model for assessment, accepted by the QMs/BIMs

as appropriate for intended purposes, and undertaken as part of an exploratory research initiative based on a revised research methodology.

### **3.3 Epistemological Underpinnings of Diverse Approaches Towards Data Construction (Interpretation)**

The research project can be described as identifiable within a <sup>4</sup>‘collaborative’ research framework. The initial five ‘collaborative partners’, who are major contractors within the UK construction industry, willingly participated in the research project based on the original EPSRC proposal GR/M07564. Each focal organisation was represented by a Quality Manager or Business Improvement Manager, as a key member of the research project Steering Group. The research strategy is seen to have evolved out of ‘open’ discussions based on QMs/BIMs ‘unease’ with regards to the original research instrument. Aspects of these discussions are treated as theoretical discourse, ensuing from problematic validity claims. Thus, the revised research strategy was to basically identify each organisation’s ‘strengths’ and ‘areas for improvement’, based on the ‘technique’ of self-assessment. The self-assessment data was to be the basis for benchmarking amongst the three participating organisations.

The negotiations and deliberations for a viable research methodology, and the undertaking of the self-assessment process essentially constituted the first phase of the COQ research. It was confirmed at one of the Steering Group meetings that the second phase was to involve the participating organizations in a benchmarking exercise with each other (on specific areas to be jointly agreed upon) based on the findings of the initial first phase. Additionally, it was agreed for a similar exercise to be undertaken with a second group of three companies, before moving on to the second phase.

The Steering Group meetings essentially focused on research objectives that primarily concerned the QMs/BIMs, in terms of objectives related to continuous improvement that were application-based. The QMs/BIMs often relied on the logic of traditional

Note 4: Inverted commas are used to signify a difference of meaning intended from that which is commonly understood.



accounting, with regards to resources being made available for the purpose of the research project by their respective organisations. Thus, the academic research team was expected to deliver 'justifiable returns'. This was the main argument in negotiations for research outcomes that were evaluated on the basis of providing 'value' to participating companies. Hence, an important aspect of this thesis, is that of the participating practitioner's rationalisation process; as to what constitutes '*useful*' research - the need for '*tangible*' outcomes, which they saw as being achievable based on a research methodology which involved a *clear research design*.

The QMs/BIMs are seen as being oriented towards dominant research methods of having a systematic approach with a clear and programmatic, sequential 'easy-to-understand' description of method. This approach places emphasis on the 'plan' which is conceived by the QMs/BIMs as providing a representation of 'reality'. Following Seymour (1996), this is seen as 'primarily about managing the process of interpretation', which however is often rationalised as representational, which however ignores the essentially indexical nature of plans. Additionally, this approach by QMs/BIMs is seen as practitioner's attempt at representations of actions before the fact (see Suchman, 1987; p. 51) which can become the focus of attention at the expense of the practice; and is described in various parts of this thesis as the desire for objectification.

The approach to data construction (interpretation) is based on Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, relevant to analysing the life-world, is seen as an appropriate methodology for understanding and analysing relevant aspects of the research which constitute the communication of intersubjective understanding in order to achieve shared understanding. However, as part of the process of text production (authorship), an epistemological position based on a constructivist/constructionist perspective is maintained that allows for a multi-perspective view regarding issues within the context of the research project. Following Salipante and Bouwen (1995), the approach here is towards a relational interpretive theory for research based on social constructivism/constructionism. Central to such a posture is that of the participating practitioners within the research project moving away from a traditional positivist

position of a passive research subject; thus opening up possibilities for alternative approaches and diverse methodologies for understanding and interpreting the research process. It is in this sense, that the interpretive approach (relying on second-level constructs), which locates situatedness in the use of language and/or social interaction (first-level constructs), is undertaken using Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action. This is seen as an appropriate methodology for achieving interpretive understanding, wherein 'shared understanding' is seen as critical to the process of communicative action of participants, who are engaged in a joint enterprise, allowing for joint collaborative action.

Following Gergen (1994), it is "the replacement of the individualized orientation to understanding and action with a relational investment" (p. xi). This understanding is informed by a social constructionist epistemology of 'becoming', which is centred around the notion of the '*generative*' *capacity of action*. Additionally, it is seen as most appropriate to describe the process of working out a 'research methodology' for the COQ research project based on an interpretive understanding whilst retaining a constructivist position on the cognitive aspects that relate to the concept of 'learning' and 'practice'.

Following Gergen (1995), constructionism is seen to have passed through its 'critical moment' and is ready to take on a 'generative' role in 'offering an orientation towards creating new futures, an impetus to social transformation' (<http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/kgergen1/text8.html>). It is suggested in this thesis that by discarding the disciplinary approach towards the use of *an* appropriate methodology for conducting research and the production of a thesis as 'text', it is possible for accommodating current initiatives within management research that allows for converging research and practice. The COQ research project is seen as providing the relevant context for such an approach based on practitioners' active participation in research. This is seen as an attempt to bring into focus the aspect of reflexive practice as a potential for innovative research, which is relevant to a social constructionist understanding of practice (in terms of research), and the construction of *research-in-*

*practice*. Here, subjects become participants and thus understanding is expanded through *relational reflexivity*. This is made possible based on a reflexively dialogic approach to researching practice as proposed by Gergen and Gergen (1991).

It is in this sense, that I use a one-stage model (unlike Schtuz's two-stage model) of interpretation in the performative mode - which is the ethnographic aspect of this thesis, with the participant observer role seen as an auxiliary function (see Habermas, 1986). However, as proposed by Gergen (1998) 'to take it further', I have resorted to interpretive reflexivity as an approach towards a social constructionist/constructivist posture regarding issues that are not conceived to be within the interests of the QMs/BIMs. This is specifically with reference to the *relational* and *social learning* aspects of practice. However, this is attended to without 'imposing' my commitment for a 'generative' approach regarding key issues and phenomena, allowing for the QMs/BIMs' to 'freely' pursue their interests.

However, as a researcher I was constantly engaged in discourse regarding problematic validity claims relating to emergent issues. Thus, the approach that I have taken is an orientation towards reaching understanding, primarily to engage in a performative mode (see Habermas, 1986) in order for a one-stage model of interpretation. Additionally, I engaged in reflexive dialogue with practitioners in one-to-one interviews as a form of relational reflexivity that allowed for generative theorising. My participant observation role can be described as being along the continuum of mostly-participation to mostly-observation. A simplistic view towards my engagement as a researcher can be described as that of mostly observation for conducting ethnographic research, and to mostly participation in instances of engagement in action research.

As pointed out by Gergen, M. (1995), "for constructionists the meaning of any event or statement depends on how it is negotiated within context. [...]. The meanings made are considered partial, tentative, historically finite and dependent upon their co-creators. They are continuously open to reinterpretation, never objective or clear-cut" (p. 99).

This is the rationale for using a social constructionist approach to analyse issues on self-assessment and benchmarking, and additionally ‘collaborative practices’ - which is seen as the basis for inter-organisational benchmarking. It is important to point out that a *constructivist* approach is incorporated in this thesis as a methodology to account for the “making of meaning via phenomenological experience, cognitive mechanisms, and other internal processes attributed to autonomous single individuals” (Gergen, M. 1995: p. 99).

The approach in this thesis towards *constructionist writing* is a combination of both procedural and reflexive. According to Manning (1998), “the procedural version emphasises that the ways in which we interpret activities are an important part of those activities” (p. 161). Drawing on Manning’s views, Velody and Williams’ (1998) describe the ‘procedural’ version as that which “generates detailed descriptions of naturally occurring events and which seeks to produce an account of the underlying orderliness of such events; whilst ‘reflexive, in which explicit attention is paid to the process of analysis itself” (p. 6).

### **3.4 Accounting for a Transdisciplinary Approach Using a Bridging Methodology**

Taking into account the myriad of sensibilities and intelligibilities within management discourse, it is important to situate the methodological underpinnings in constructing this thesis. Firstly, it is important to point out that Habermas’ work regarding the concept of *verstehen* and communicative action is not viewed here on the basis of his claim in terms of an unfinished project of modernity. For Habermas (1986) “social actions can be distinguished according to whether participants adopt either a success-oriented attitude or one oriented to reaching understanding” (p. 286). Through *communicative competence*, it is claimed that participants are able to distinguish situations in which they are causally exerting influence *upon* others from those in which

they are coming to an understanding *with* them; where reaching understanding is considered to be a process of reaching agreement.

Use of Habermas' concept of communicative action as a basis for critical analysis of the QMs/BIMs 'posture' and 'interests' towards this collaborative research is seen as unproblematic. In this thesis, the notion Habermas' theory of communicative action is recontextualised on the basis of 'communicative rationality' in a communal sense. Thus, the term '*communal rationality*' (see Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1998). Following Gergen and Thatchenkery (1998), this is seen as a generative effort. According to them, "generative efforts may include reinvigorating the theories of the past, redefining or recontextualising their meanings so as not to be lost from the repository of potentials" (p. 31).

According to Habermas (1986), the "rationality problematic cannot be avoided in basic concepts of social action and in the method of understanding meaning" (p. 136). As such, both Habermas and the <sup>5</sup>postmodernists conceptions of language are seen as relevant for critical understanding and analysis, allowing for a critically informed understanding of the possibility of alternative constructions. This is seen as crucial in understanding what is termed as postmodernist social forms and phenomena which involve multi-perspective issues (see Green, 1999); providing an alternative theoretical framework to that of positivism. However, consistent with a constructionist perspective, following Gergen and Thatchenkery (1998), "the concept of individual rationality is found both conceptually flawed and oppressive in implication" (p. 22).

Thus, here rationality is in terms of making sense, where making sense is seen as a communal achievement - what is termed as '*communal rationality*'. In this sense, "to argue rationally is to 'play by the rules' favoured within a particular cultural tradition" (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1998; p. 22).

Note 5: As a point of clarification, reference in this thesis to the term postmodernism is in relation to a world view which is reconceptualising how we experience and explain our world (see Rosenau, 1992, cited in Gephart Jr., 1996; Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1998).

Importantly, the resort to *constructionism*, in this thesis is mainly as a *mode of advancing critique to that of understanding conditions of possibilities*. Without being prescriptive, or dogmatic in any shape or form, such a diverse methodologically informed approach can be seen simply as a theoretically-informed approach to qualitative research, which can be broadly described as *participatory research* (see Thomas, 1993). Following Miller (1997), the approach taken in this thesis is to use ‘the *bridging approach*’, which “focus[es] on using several methodological strategies to link aspects of different sociological perspectives, not to discover indisputable facts about a single social reality” (p. 25). The sociological perspectives in this thesis relate specifically to:

- Critical analysis in certain spheres based on a postmodernist perspective on rationality. Wherein rationality is seen as an inherent feature of communal participation, and to speak rationally is to speak according to the conventions of a culture.
- Understanding communicative action as being based on the ‘presupposition’ of being oriented to reaching understanding (based on Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action) in a situated context;
- A constructionist (postmodernist) view towards ‘becoming’, which is centred around the notion of the ‘generative’ capacity of action;
- The mode of understanding that is sought through interpretive understanding based on a performative attitude, which forms the basis of ethnographic description; broadly seen as that of participatory research.

A key feature of this research is that the data collected was primarily on the basis of face-to-face interaction, although open-ended questionnaires were resorted to as a form of ‘triangulation’ (see Appendix v and vi). As pointed out by Denzin (1978), triangulation is a research strategy that involves using several methods to reveal multiple aspects of a single empirical reality.

The strict adherence to a particular methodology can be seen as allowing methodology to dictate the scope of the research, and it is mainly with such a pre-understanding that the approach towards this research has been exploratory. In addition, it was seen as most appropriate to carry out an ethnographic study which allows for description as well as explanation, with the potential for presenting phenomena in new and revealing ways (see Hammersley, 1992). The approach towards data collection has been guided by the precept forwarded by Thomas (1993). According to him, “good ethnography requires flexibility. The collection of data may be the one area where flexibility is the most crucial, because our study can be no better than the data we collect” (p. 41). Based on such an exploratory approach for conducting research, the focus of this thesis has emerged as that of a detailed description of ‘collaborative’ research between academia and particular quality and business improvement practitioners (QMs/BIMs) from a select number of construction contracting organisations. These QMs/BIMs are a particular group that is oriented towards achieving business excellence through the purposeful activity of benchmarking based on self-assessment data, as part of an integrated methodology for continuous improvement.

Henning (1998) points out that “the researcher’s use of a theoretical perspective or framework that is consciously and unconsciously adopted as a guide during the research process has an important impact on all stages of the research [...] .” (p. 94). This view is shared by Layder (1998), who notes that, “[...] research is connected to basic philosophical issues and in a literal sense can never be theory neutral” (p. 22). Additionally, it is pointed out by Gergen and Thatchenkery (1998), that it is “only when commitments are made to a given theoretical perspective (or form of language), that research can be mounted and methods selected. The *a priori* selection of theories thus determines, in large measure, the outcomes of the research – what may be said at its conclusion” (p. 23). Thus the claims of positivism to provide ‘objectively neutral’ findings, unsullied by prior epistemological or theoretical assumptions, has been shown to be false (see Layder, 1998; p. 22). In this sense, by having taken a transdisciplinary approach, this thesis is seen as allowing for a more inclusive approach towards research. Thus, following Miller (1997), using a bridging approach, “two or more analytic

formations may be linked and made mutually informative” (p. 24). This is seen as expanding and elaborating the analytical potential of qualitative research

Following Hammersley (1992), it is conceived that empirical phenomena is descriptively inexhaustible, such that “we can make multiple true descriptions of any scene” (p. 24). According to Hassard (1996), “postmodern epistemology suggests that the world is constituted by our shared language and that we can only “know the world” through the particular forms of discourse our language creates” (p. 47). He argues that “as our language games are continually in flux, meaning is constantly slipping beyond our grasp and can thus never be lodged within one term” (p. 47). Hence, the practice of self-assessment, benchmarking and the aspect of collaboration in the context of the research project is described and interpreted based on a postmodernist ontology of *becoming*, which emphasises a transient, ephemeral and emergent reality (see Chia, 1995).

Following Clegg (1990), Gephart Jr. (1996) points out that “the analysis of postmodern social forms or eras can be conducted with or without postmodern methods. However, it is claimed by Gephart Jr. (1996), that “modernist (positivist) theories or methods cannot capture the variegated forms of postmodern existence and are bound to reproduce, represent, or value the very rational, modernist structures and values [...] that are in *retreat*” (p. 41, italics added). According to him, modern organisational theorizing, is seen to be retrospective, in that it assumes ‘organisation’ to be an accomplished phenomenon.

### **3.5 A Research Methodology Based on a Postmodernist Ontology**

Phase one of the COQ research essentially involved participant observation, which accounts for the critical ethnographic methodological stance informed by a constructivist epistemology. This is described in detail in Section 7.3 and 7.4, in terms of a constructivist narrative of self-assessment and benchmarking. Gergen and Gergen, (1991), view constructivism as being based on a wholly cognitive ontology, and that of social constructionism as being micro-social. Fundamental to both these versions is the



constitutive process of reality construction that sees the researcher as a ‘scientific’ inquirer who is, simultaneously a participant in the world. Both versions also take issue with the modernist idea that a real world exists that can be known with objective certainty (see Hoffman, 1992).

Additionally, the approach in this thesis, following Gergen (1994), is to move beyond critique to the possibilities of human science in a constructionist mode. Gergen (1994) sees critical appraisal as central to a constructionist view of human science; as *critique is seen to expand the possibility for construction*, and form a significant origin for cultural transformation. It is in this sense that critical ethnography is seen as an appropriate methodology for the study of postmodern social forms. As proposed by Gephart Jr. (1996), “[...] careful, insightful ethnographies will be necessary to penetrate and uncover the real but hidden life of organizations, which is unknown to outsiders and to modernist theories of organization” (p. 42). In this sense, the Researcher is not constrained to practice an objectivist epistemology by being committed to a realist ontology (see Guba, 1990).

Following Adorno et al. (1976), it is noted by May (1996) that, “positivism turns human relationships into nothing more than abstract categories through a failure to examine the conditions under which they develop and are sustained. In this sense it represents part of the increasing desire to control the social and natural worlds in the name of profit” (p. 41). Thus, in this thesis an interpretivist approach that concentrates upon the process of inter-subjective understanding is supplemented with a critical posture as an adequate methodology. Additionally, the critical project is taken further by attempts to provide a constructionist perspective to research issues; and constructivist analysis for understanding dominant forms of discourse and theorising.

Thomas, (1993) identifies critical ethnography as a style of analysis and discourse which is embedded within conventional ethnography. According to him, “*conventional ethnography* refers to the tradition of cultural description and analysis that displays

meanings by interpreting meanings. *Critical ethnography* refers to the reflective process of choosing between conceptual alternatives and making value-laden judgements of meaning and method to challenge research, policy and other forms of human activity” (p. 4). The approach of engaging in fieldwork as a participant observer rather than assuming the possibility of direct fieldwork as a ‘neutral’ observer is consistent with postmodernist thinking. Following Van Maanen and Gephart Jr. (1996), I share the view that “ethnography is used to describe the actual situated behaviours composing the everyday features of organization, behaviours that are often displaced in formalist, modernist descriptions” (p. 42). However, here, the notion of ‘the actual situated’ character of the ethnographic description is seen as an interpretive stance within an interpretive forestructure of critical ethnography, which is conceived as a perspective that is historically and culturally located.

It is important to note that intellectual and personal involvement with research subjects is central to ethnographic research (see Thomas, 1993). A central theme of this research, is the prioritising of practitioner problems as the focus of research. This, in a sense, is seen as attending to the criticism levelled at conventional ethnography, which maintains a separation of research from practice, which is claimed to be inherited from the scientific model (see Hammersley, 1998: p. 74). It is argued by Hammersley (1998), that certain traditions overestimate the contribution that research can make to practice. However, in this research, the participatory research approach that focuses on the practitioners’ concern for a contribution of research to practice within a collaborative framework, which allows for practitioner research. is seen to allow for such possibilities.

According to Chia (1995), “what is real for postmodern thinkers are not so much social states, or entities, but *emergent relational* interactions and patternings that are recursively intimated in the fluxing and transforming of our life-worlds” (p. 581-2; italics added). Based on the theory of social construction of meaning, “the process of giving meaning to experience is only possible for a group of interacting individuals” (Solomon, 1987: p. 66). Such an approach is described by some commentators (see Gergen, 1994)

to be postmodernist, in terms of departing from foundationalist accounts of human knowledge and placing language as a primary concern. Thus, the approach taken here is underpinned by the claim that “meaningful language is the product of social interdependence, which requires the coordinated actions of at least two persons, and until there is mutual agreement on the meaningful character of words, they fail to constitute language” (Gergen, 1994).

As pointed out by Burkitt (1998):

*For constructionists, language is not a means of picturing or representing a reality that exists separately and independently of it, but a means of communication that only has meaning in the context of relationships, interdependencies and joint action.*

*(p. 123).*

Thus, Habermas’ (1991) theory of communicative action that includes a substantive theory (the theory of system and lifeworld) is seen to allow for an interpretive understanding of the QMs/BIMs’ ‘actions’. It is in this sense, that within the course of this research, and as part of the research, an in-depth understanding has been sought through participation; primarily in terms of the researcher as a participant observer. It is by such methods that I wish to provide useful insights into management practice, particularly in this case of the situated practice of ‘quality-and-business improvement’ construction managers.

Deetz (1995) points out that, “the ideal of science approaches the ideal Habermas suggests for open communication: to pursue a common understanding or unforced agreement as to what is a truth or shared knowledge” (p. 49). He proposes that:

*While many think of the production of knowledge as the application of methods and making observations, I think we can get further if we think of knowledge as the outcome of social interactions using claims about people and the world.*

*(Deetz, 1995: p. 48)*

The primary aim of this thesis is to allow for *generative* research based on the historical and culturally situated knowledge of the phenomena that is being researched, rather than simply attempting to interpret things as ‘*they are*’ or ‘*as they appear to the people studied*’. This historical and culturally situated knowledge is the interpretive understanding acquired through the research process and from extant literature. Thus, to summarise, the approach taken is that of acquiring an interpretive understanding, enabled by taking on a critical analysis that allows for providing a generative sensibility to the phenomena being studied based on a social constructivist/constructionist perspective.

### **3.6 Interpretive Understanding and the Participant Observer Role**

Habermas’ wider concept of rationality is seen as adequate in providing useful insights regarding ‘how’ the collaborative research was *constructed*. The approach to understanding the ‘construction’ of a ‘research methodology’ is based on Habermas’ view of ‘interpretive understanding’, *verstehen*. It is important to note that Habermas’ notion of *verstehen* is central to the aspect of coordination of action and that of interpretive access to the object domain (see Habermas, 1986; p. 136). It is noted by Brand (1990), that “the same communicative rationality which allows access to the object, also guarantees the possibility of critical distance and reflection” (p. 34). However, to reiterate a crucial point, in this thesis the notion of communicative rationality is taken to imply a ‘communal’ rationality (see Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1998). Additionally, following Habermas, reason is seen as being situated in subject-subject relations, and not in any one particular subject (see Brand, 1990; p. 10).

Admittedly, Habermas’ view of interpretive understanding *requires judging in the performative attitude*, by taking on a participative attitude. Elaborating on Habermas’ model of communicative action, McCarthy (1986; p. xv) notes that “social actors are outfitted with the same interpretive capacities as social scientific interpreters; thus the latter cannot claim for themselves the status of neutral, extramundane observers in their

definitions of actors' situations. They are, whether consciously or not, virtual participants *whose only plausible claim to objectivity derives from the reflective quality of their participation*" (McCarthy, 1986, p. xv). This implies that the social-scientist is seen to operate under fewer constraints that impede the 'switch' to a level of discourse; as the social-scientist is seen to be solely oriented towards communicative understanding.

Habermas views the participant observer role as an *auxiliary function* of assisting participation in the process of reaching understanding. This can be construed as the normative participant observer case, with regards to a participant observer being included to participate and observe an already '*existing practice*'. Thus, it is conceived that the participant observer is able to achieve 'shared understanding', based on being oriented towards communicative understanding. Taking these issues into consideration, and particularly in this case of legitimate participation, the participant observer (the Researcher) can be seen as not just pursuing participation as an end in itself; and so participation in this case is integral to the context of action. Hence, in this thesis the auxiliary function of the participant observer is seen as an added potential for communicative understanding (interpretive understanding) as the context is more fully grasped in terms of 'communal rationality'.

In addition, the argument with regards to altering the original scene through an active presence is minimised in this research, as the participant observer is a legitimate participant in activity that is focused on practitioner's concerns. As such the notion of '*legitimate participant observer*' is used in this case to distinguish between that of the participant observer (PO) in a positivist sense - who is recognised as being the metaphorical 'fly on the wall', not 'original' to the scene, and not altering it. Here, the legitimate participant observer (LPO) is part of the scene, and able to participate in the research process in a performative attitude which is not separate to, but integral of the research process. This mode of being involved as a legitimate participant serves also to explain the participatory action researcher's (PAR) ability to bring about change based

on a performative attitude. The researcher does not intend to discuss in any detail the merits or differences of the participant observer role or that of the participatory action researcher, just to note that the PAR is actively involved in the change process, as well. The role of the PAR is seen as having to act together in bringing about consensual change that is supposed to affect the wider lifeworld (wider practice), placing equal emphasis on the participatory action mode as well as the prerequisite communicative action mode.

### **3.7 An interpretive Approach Based on Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action Allowing for Reflexive Elaboration**

According to Gray (1989), "*collaboration* involves a process of joint decision making among key stakeholders of a problem domain about the future of that domain" (p. 11). It is further clarified, that "through dialogue and negotiation, stakeholders seek to hammer out a consensus on how to manage the domain" (Gray, 1999). A notable requirement for such involvement is identified as that of voluntary participation. It is within such a context that Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action is seen as useful as a tool for analysis and understanding of the goings-on involving members of the research Steering Group.

This research is seen as directly related to, and impacting on practice, as it is oriented towards the interests of the CoPs of QMs/BIMs involved in the research, who are at the same time in constant engagement with the wider concept of the Lifeworld (their wider practice). In this research I am engaged in interpreting the situated practice of quality and business improvement practitioners participating in the research project, using an analysis based on Habermas' concept of communicative action. This is enabled through judging the *validity claims* of actors in terms of communicative action; and the *effectiveness* of their action in relation to aspects of practice that are not able to be observed directly, or are subject of theoretical disagreement that constitute strategic action. This interpretive process was engaged in as an ongoing activity aimed at reaching understanding throughout the longitudinal research process. Thus, following

Habermas, I additionally adopt the performative attitude of a ‘virtual participant’ in interaction, able to assess validity claims that are aimed at achieving communicative action.

*The assertion that communicative action is a one-stage model of interpretation is not problematic.* According to Habermas (1986), the participant observer can still be broadly conceptualised as that of a ‘virtual participant’ in the performative mode, able to assess the *validity claims* raised during utterances. For communicative action purposes, the participant observer role is seen as a form of auxiliary function, as the main focus is that of observation in a participative mode. According to Habermas (1986):

*Those immediately involved in the communicative practice of everyday life are pursuing aims of action; their participation in cooperative processes of interpretation serves to establish a consensus on the basis of which they can coordinate their plans of action and achieve their aims. The social-scientific interpreter does not pursue aims of this kind. He participates in processes of reaching understanding for the sake of understanding and not for the sake of an end that requires coordinating the goal-oriented action of the interpreter with the goal-oriented actions of those immediately involved.*

(p. 113-4)

Here, as emphasised by Habermas, it is *only* illocutionary speech acts to which speakers connect criticisable validity claims that are treated as constitutive of communicative action. Communicative action is the symbolic expressions with which the actor takes up relations with at least one of three worlds. The three worlds are: the *objective*, *subjective* and *social*; which forms a reference system that is mutually presupposed in process of communication. Thus, according to Habermas (1986), the “*communicative model* of action refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of interpretation refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the

situation which admit of consensus” (p. 8). Additionally, “illocutionary results are achieved at the level of interpersonal relations on which participants in communication come to an understanding with one another about something in the world” (Habermas, 1986: p. 293).

It is in this sense, that meaning of communicative acts are understood, as they are embedded in contexts of *action* oriented to reaching understanding. This is seen as fundamental to providing an insightful interpretation in the performative attitude within the given context. Thus, interpretation of the research process is based on a longitudinal research experience focused on working together on certain ‘shared objectives’ for an extended period of time (close to three years). It is not disputed that the ethnographer’s account is an interpretation (Hammersley, 1998). As such the approach taken here is to use the concept of *verstehen*, as proposed by Habermas, to aid a *critical ethnographic study* of the situated practices of the particular quality and business development practitioners involved in the research.

Following Habermas (1986), action oriented towards success is classified as *strategic* action, in terms of following rules of rational choice and the efficiency in influencing the decisions of another rational individual, which attempts to achieve perlocutionary effects. Hence, it is possible to deceive other participants with regard to presuppositions under which illocutionary aims are normally achieved, which are however not satisfied. In this thesis, a ‘reflexive constructionist approach is undertaken in such instances by the Researcher, towards constructing possible elements within the context of the research project (see Gergen, M. 1995).

The reflexive constructionist approach is seen as a ‘breakdown’ in communicative action, allowing for a reflexive posture to generate and create possibilities. However, for the Researcher such ‘breakdowns’ allow for theoretical discourse arising from disagreement over validity claims, leading to agreement; or as in the case of strategic action, the inability to reach understanding. Thus, from a constructionist perspective,



although participants are possibly engaged in interaction regarding their practice based on certain unsatisfied presuppositions, this is seen to provide the basis for reflexive and constructive possibilities - a *reflexive elaboration* (see Gergen and Gergen, 1991). This was mainly through engagement with the QMs/BIMs in one-to-one interaction subsequent to such 'breakdowns' during Steering Group meetings. A prime example was the Researcher pursuing possibilities with respect to collaborative benchmarking, as opposed to competitive benchmarking.

The 'construction' of the research methodology is viewed from a postmodernist, and more specifically in terms of a constructionist perspective. Social constructionist scholarship is seen by Gergen and Thatchenkery (1998) to be emancipatory and expository; in terms of singling out the various aspects of taken-for-granted world, and attempting to demonstrate its socially constructed character. It is within this perspective, that critical ethnographic research is seen to fit in with current understanding of postmodern analysis. According to Gephart Jr. (1996) postmodern analysis, "defeats the tacit absoluteness or inevitability of social facts and meanings (social typifications) by demonstrating the historical specificity and uniqueness of meanings, by illustrating the ongoing evolution of these meanings and interpretations, and by demonstrating the social implications of different meanings or worldviews" (p. 35).

Hence, the focus in this research is on description, which is supplemented by analysing the situated practice of the QMs/BIMs involved in the construction of the 'research methodology' for benchmarking, utilizing the EFQM Excellence Model self-assessment process. This is interpreted in part, as the use of the EFQM Excellence Model\* as a sensemaking device (see Chapter 7). Here, sensemaking is best understood in terms of the assumption that shared meanings do not *exist*. As noted by Garfinkel (1967), members work to maintain a "sense" of shared meanings, and this sense is always fragmentary, historical, and situationally accomplished. It is in this sense, that the first phase of the research is interpreted. As the conditions of communicative action

\* The EFQM Excellence Model is based on Total Quality Management (TQM) principles

stipulated by Habermas, are seen to be fulfilled on the basis of a co-operative relationship and of 'communal rationality' amongst the CoPs of QMs/BIMs; inclusive of the Researcher - in terms of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) within this community (see Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1998).

## **CHAPTER FOUR: A REVIEW AND EXAMINATION OF TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT PRACTICES**

There are various rationalisations of the Total Quality Management (TQM) phenomenon, as noted by Yong and Wilkinson (2001). According to them, these rationalisations are often viewed within the framework of certain prevalent perceptions and interpretations of TQM. They are:

1. TQM as quality management;
2. TQM as systems management;
3. TQM as people management;
4. TQM as a new management paradigm;
5. TQM as re-engineering.

According to Tuckman (1994), TQM is coming to be seen as a separate managerial approach with an emphasis on changing the workplace culture. A common understanding that is shared by many commentators regarding the 'revolutionary' aspect of TQM as outlined by Deming is that of 'culture change'. This is noted by Shammastoma et al. (1998), who make an empirical observation regarding the adoption of BS 5750 by firms in the construction industry which is observed as being successfully complied with by well-run firms. Additionally, putting in place Quality Assessment (QA) and a number of procedures has not brought about improvements in communication and coordination in the construction process. They however argue that QA has been a step in the right direction towards TQM, which is seen as having the potential to bring about this change. It is pointed out by them that TQM is seen as requiring 'nothing short of a revolutionary cultural change' (p. 188). This view on culture change, with specific reference to the construction industry, is shared by McGeorge and Palmer (1997).

McCabe et al. (1995) note that in the construction industry, the transition from writing procedures to changing the culture is bound to be difficult, as it requires skills which are different to those employed in the pursuit of registration. Thus, it is evident that the 'quality' discourse in construction management research is tending towards creating a discursive link between quality and culture. It is in this sense, that the 'Culture of

Quality' research project is located within the discursive space created by the link between 'culture' and 'quality' in terms of attempting to establish the cultural conditions which are conducive to achieving high and continuous improvements in quality.

Within the context of various organisational change initiatives, commentators have been unequivocal in stating that Total Quality Management (TQM) epitomises recent developments in quality management. This view is shared by Wilkinson, et al. (1998), who state that: "[TQM] represents the most coherent and advanced approach in the area of quality." However in this thesis, taking into account that providing an overarching definition of quality is problematic (see Bounds et al., 1994: 45; Xu, 2000: 429), the delineating of discursive connections is seen as crucial to understanding such an amorphous concept. In attempting to demonstrate how 'quality' and 'standards' may have become discursive objects, Xu (2000), notes that,

*If conformance, through quality assurance, creates certainty and convergence, improvement demands more. It depends less on conformance than on a willingness and capacity to learn.*

(p. 434).

The discursive link between 'quality' and 'culture' is presented by Drummond (1992), who claims that "building a quality culture involves reversing fundamental assumptions about managing organisations. *The first of these assumptions which must be reversed is the concern for short-term profits*" (p. 18). Thus, the TQM culture is seen as an orientation towards customer satisfaction in contrast to that of a profit culture. For Tuckman (1994) with the advent of TQM, the focus has shifted from hierarchical images of power and control to that of market and exchange, and of 'customers' and 'suppliers'. However, he sees this as being masked by the exhortation of a 'culture change', in terms of adopting elements of Japanese work culture.

Analysing the complex effects of the quality discourse and the changes from its quality control roots, Xu (2000) notes that TQM has not radically outgrown its roots. In attempting to trace the evolution of TQM using discourse analysis of 'quality', Xu

(2000) notes that, the focus has changed from a systems approach, quality principles, conformance and improvement of standards; towards *participation* and *communication*. The relevance of this analysis is important, as it points out that the formation of knowledge on ‘quality’ has created a discursive space, which Xu (2000) demonstrates may have led to the concept becoming a discursive object; where the perception of quality is in terms of a fixed mode. Additionally, quality is seen by Xu (2000) to be fixed in numbers of representation with seemingly little ambiguity, for purposes of establishing a control mechanism.

#### **4.1 TQM - A Concept Amenable to Reification**

Green (1998) observes that, TQM “does not possess any universally accepted substantive content other than the rhetoric in which it is presented” (p. 380). It is observed by some commentators that the lack of a common theoretical and analytical framework to ground knowledge claims within certain areas of knowledge production has contributed to practitioners aspiring to generate their own meanings and formalisations. This is seen to be one of the main reasons for the lack of a generally accepted definition of TQM (see Yong and Wilkinson, 2001).

From the extant literature on TQM, as well as the growing number of organisations having some form of initiative associated with TQM, the impact that the principles of TQM are having on modern business is observed by commentators to be very profound. However, it is noted by Chiles et al. (2000), that as a body of knowledge, TQM has been largely atheoretical. They claim that it has remained amorphous and shrouded in considerable conceptual haziness and ambiguity (Chiles et al., 2000). In view of this, they make an attempt to contribute to theory-building using market process economics (MPE), which explains how process of dynamic change, adaptation, and learning are driven by entrepreneurial creativity. Additionally, it is claimed that MPE effectively provides the theoretical underpinnings of TQM’s three main principles - *customer focus*, *continuous improvement* and *teamwork* - as well as, related TQM topics such as

‘customer perceptions’, ‘adaptation in dynamic environments’, and ‘knowledge creation’.

According to Chiles et al. (2000), MPE is seen as a credible theoretical lens for *interpreting* TQM as a dynamic economic endeavour. This is illustrated by them in the use of MPE to resolve debates in TQM over incentive systems. From reviewing extant literature on TQM, they identify *four fundamental orientations of TQM: systems, customer, learning and change*. Based on these orientations, TQM is viewed as fundamentally a dynamic economic endeavour in which firms engage in order to adapt and survive in dynamic environments.

Kelemen (1999), however observes that there is a scarcity of empirical attempts to research TQM from a social constructivist perspective. The work of Munro (1995) and McArdle et al. (1995) are cited as being amongst the very few which documents processes of *‘interest translation’*: the process in which the explicit interests of the employees can be translated so that they become synonymous with the interest of top management. According to Kelemen (1999), in addition to *‘interest translation’* (see Latour, 1987) purposes, TQM is used for *‘examination’ purposes*; wherein “examination is a technique aimed at structuring a particular arena in such a way that it can be observed and monitored [...]” (p. 165).

Based on a Foucauldian analysis, Townley (1998) views TQM as a strategy for organisational governance. From such a perspective, TQM is seen as a process of constant measurement and improvement in quality. Hence, tools such as benchmarking which are integral to the implementation of TQM (see Munro-Faure, 1992) are necessarily aligned with such an approach. It is however argued in this thesis that this view on TQM, with its implications on benchmarking is constrained by the strict approach of using Foucauldian analysis in terms of ‘depth’. It is in this sense that a social constructivist/constructionist perspective of TQM and benchmarking, is seen to provide useful insights into the ‘emergent’ social forms that are seen to accommodate the social aspects of the process, specifically that of ‘learning’. Thus, based on an

exploratory research experience, *benchmarking within the context of continuous improvement - a basic concept of TQM*, is appropriately described and analysed in Chapter Six, informed by a social constructionist/constructivist epistemology.

## 4.2 Brief Insights into Alternative Views on TQM

The view that TQM is a process of constant measurement and improvement on quality, is based on the premise that decision making should be based on data; for that matter detailed data, better still comparative data (see Townley, 1998). According to Oakland (1989), measurement plays the following key roles in quality and productivity improvement:

- ensure customer requirements have been met;
- provide standards for establishing comparisons;
- provide visibility and provide a “score-board” for people to monitor their own performance levels;
- highlight quality problems and determine which areas require priority attention;
- give an indication of the costs of poor quality;
- justify the use of resources;
- provide feedback for driving the improvement effort.

According to Townley (1998; 198) people and their activities are made known in a particular way in order to allow for intervention and management with the aim of enhancing organisational governance. Thus, this knowledge is *constructed* through rules of classification, ordering and distribution, associated with concepts of rationality, measurement and grading. For Townley, this clearly “reinforces the image of technicist knowledge, accuracy and objectivity” (p. 198). However, in terms of organisational sensemaking, this *construction* of the discourse of quality in terms of measurement and improvement is seen as providing the frame from which cues can be extracted for sensemaking; which in turn allows for problem construction (problem setting).

It is pointed out by Schon (1983) that, “it is rather through the non-technical process of framing the problematic situation that we may organize and clarify both the ends to be achieved and the possible means of achieving them” (p. 41). According to Weick (1995), “problem constructions are invented and imposed in the interest of furthering one’s projects” (p. 89). In this thesis it is elaborated that the process of sense-making (utilizing the EFQM Excellence Model self-assessment process leading to collaborative benchmarking) allows for problem-setting, which is seen as an aspect of *managing the process of interpretation* (see Chapter Seven).

### **4.3 Total Quality Management - Rationale for a Social Constructivist Perspective**

According to Kelemen (1999), most of the management literature on TQM is of a modernist nature, which is seen as attempts to impose structure, clarity and intelligibility based on modernist approaches. For, Kelemen (1999), TQM is socially constructed and hence is not amenable to rational, objective and ‘ultimate’ explanations. This view is shared by Green (1998), who emphasises that TQM “does not possess any universally accepted substantive content other than the rhetoric in which it is presented” (p. 380). Additionally, it is argued that there is a primary focus on binary oppositions which is reflected in modernist approaches, and that this is premised on the knowing subject gaining knowledge of a known object. Therefore, Green (1998) suggests that TQM is best understood in terms of postmodernist discourse.

It is pointed out by Kelemen (1999), that different quality ‘experts’ emphasise different aspects of TQM. Some seeing it variously as: a ‘new way of thinking about the management of organisations’; ‘a comprehensive way to improve total organisational performance and quality’; ‘a systematic approach to the practice of management’; ‘an alternative to management by control’; ‘a paradigm shift’; ‘a business discipline and philosophy of management aimed at satisfying the customers in the market place’; and ‘as a totalizing narrative which silences any other voice but the most powerful one’ (p. 164). Bounds et al. (1994) observe that many managers have been frustrated by the elusiveness of the concept of quality, often being confronted with diverse and conflicting



definitions. From reviewing extant literature, it is suggested in this thesis that, this source of confusion is seen to extend similarly to Total Quality Management (TQM).

According to Flood (1993), TQM portrays a systems view for quality management. His conception of a 'a system' is:

*A set of richly interacting elements that imports and transforms inputs and boundary. Communication and control are two key concepts that help to explain this. The elements communicate with each other and the environment providing the information medium in which control procedures can be brought to bear and purposeful behaviour achieved. A system therefore is a complex communication and control network.*

(p. 88).

Hence, for Flood (1993), "TQM [is viewed as being] built ~~on~~ on the idea that an organisation is an interactive network of communication and control" (p. 47).

It is noted by Tuckman (1994) that, from its industrial roots associated originally with Just-in-time manufacture, "TQM has come to be seen as a separate managerial approach with far wider applicability and a strong emphasis on changing workplace culture" (p. 728). According to Xu (1999), mainstream management literature as well as mainstream management research has tended to follow a prescriptive norm. This, then, has required justification for non-conformance, and efforts to make the non-mainstream approach acceptable. This is evident from the work of an additional number of commentators in the field of management (Green, 1998; Townley, 1998) who share the view that Total Quality Management (TQM) is best understood in terms of postmodernist discourse.

Based on a social constructivist analysis within four organizations, which claim to have embarked on successful TQM programmes, Kelemen (1999) concludes that top management actively create and order organisational reality through quality initiatives. It is suggested by her that quality initiatives "allow top management to examine the

employees [...] and translate their interest [...] in accordance with the prevailing rationality” (p. 174-75). It is in this sense, that TQM can be seen as a set of practices and discourses in the hands of top management aimed at making the organization more transparent for control purposes, as well as a self-legitimising device in the pursuit of profit, rationality and workers’ submission.

Hence, following Kelemen (1999), it is suggested here, that in an attempt to explore the very process by which certain constructions dominate, it is necessary to focus on the most powerful. Besides taking this position, additionally, in this thesis a social constructivist perspective is taken as it “challenges the taken-for-granted meanings of social phenomenon and throws up other potential meanings, particularly those which may be suppressed” (p. 163). It is pointed out by Lynch (1998) that, “programmes and movements that have espoused constructivism are diverse and tenuously connected” (p. 24). Additionally, I recognise constructivism and constructionism is used often interchangeably (see Dean, 1998) with the knowledge that fundamental to both these versions is the constitutive process of reality construction which sees the researcher as a ‘scientific’ inquirer who is, simultaneously a participant in the world. Also both versions take issue with the modernist idea that a real world exists that can be known with objective certainty (see Hoffman, 1992).

In this thesis, however, following Gergen and Gergen (1991), a concerted attempt is made to distinguish between constructivism and constructionism. Thus, following Dean (1998), Foucauldian analysis, which is seen as oriented towards a constructivist [/constructionist] posture, is provided here with the understanding that “constructionism [/constructivism] should be approached, as with Foucault, less as an epistemology, or a sociological substitute for epistemology, and more as a technique or a mode of analysis that can be used with more or less subtlety, and for distinctive and variable ends” (p. 184). It is in this sense that such analytical descriptions are seen as useful in understanding the dominant and variable perspectives regarding TQM. The focus in this thesis on TQM is to situate self-assessment and benchmarking within the broader context of what is conceived as management tools.

## **4.4 The Practice of Introducing TQM Principles through the Self-assessment Process - A Constructivist Perspective**

The BEM and EFQM excellence models are underpinned by the fundamental concepts of Total Quality Management (BQF, 1998b) or business excellence. The model recognises that the various approaches towards achieving sustainable organisational excellence are based on the following fundamental concepts:

### **Leadership and consistency of purpose**

Leaders develop the organisation's culture. They drive the resources and efforts of the organisation towards excellence. Policy and strategy are deployed in a structured and systematic way across the whole organisation and all activities are aligned. The behaviour of the organisation's people is consistent with its policies and its values.

### **People development, involvement and satisfaction**

**People** is defined as all the individuals employed by the organisation, and others who participate in the task of serving its customers, directly or indirectly.

The full potential of the organisation's people is released through shared values and a culture of trust and empowerment. Communication and involvement are pervasive and supported by opportunities to learn and develop skills. Employee satisfaction is monitored and continually improved.

### **Customer focus**

A **Customer** is defined as the immediate customer of the organisation and all other customers in the complete chain of distribution of its products and services.

Customer satisfaction and other issues that influence loyalty are measured, analysed and understood. The delivery of value to the customer, the final arbiter of product and service excellence, is the primary focus.

### **Supplier partnerships**

**Supplier** is defined as any person or organisation providing goods, services, knowledge or information to the organisation.

Alliances and partnerships with suppliers are built on trust and integration where appropriate, generating value and improvement for both parties.

## **Process and measurement**

A **Process** is defined as a sequence of steps which adds value by producing required outputs from a variety of inputs.

Processes are understood, owned and systematically managed. Measurement and prevention-based improvement activities are associated with the daily work of everyone and with all processes.

## **Continuous improvement and innovation**

A culture of continually learning and improving is encouraged and innovation is welcomed and recognised. *Benchmarking* against 'best in class' is a key driver of improvement activities in all aspects of the organisation.

## **Public responsibility**

The organisation and its people have an ethical and environmentally responsible approach to all operations and strive to exceed the expectations and regulations of the community at large.

## **Results orientation**

Sustainable success is seen as being dependent upon balancing and satisfying the needs of all stakeholders involved. This includes the people employed, customers, suppliers, all those with financial interests in the organisation as well as society generally.

(BQF, 1998a: p. 2, italics inserted)

The practice of self-assessment as undertaken by the organisations involved in the research project is analysed in this thesis using a Foucauldian analysis. This is seen as most appropriate in order to understand the significance of current initiatives within the construction industry, as this form of analysis neither privileges the individual nor managerial intentions and strategies of control. It brings a focus to practices that structure social relations. This is not an *a priori* attempt towards deterministic and predictive theorising. Using Foucauldian analysis, the attempt here is to explicate the practices in order to understand local realities through the decentring of the subject (see Townley, 1998). In this sense, the practice of self-assessment is seen as the creation of an exhaustively detailed knowledge of the 'reality' to be governed, which according to Foucault requires the exercise of discipline. Thus, the knowledge acquired from the

self-assessment process is used in what is described by Kelemen (1999) as consulting-related initiatives of ‘fixing the way forward’. It is in this sense, that she claims that the alleged reason for relying on external consultants for their objectivity and neutral nature, are however that of enhancing the legitimacy of top management’s actions “which are typically directed at ordering the organization according to their preferred interests” (p. 171).

The formally recognized practice of self-assessment against the BEM/EFQM framework of excellence, is premised on the assumption that members of the organization subscribe to the concepts of business excellence, in terms of being earnest in striving for sustainable organisational excellence (see BQF, 1998, p. 4). According to Kelemen (1999), the wide support for the EFQM model by senior management is mainly due to “the attractiveness and simplicity of the EFQM model which assumes a causal relationship between organizational variables and an ‘objective way’ of measuring quality” (p. 170). It is evident that the approach to self-assessment, that ‘exposes members of the organisation to specific ‘standard’ criteria of excellence and the related sub-criteria, helps establish “a semiotic order, supplying a corpus of meanings, which is the very medium of action just as language is the medium which makes speech acts possible” (see Archer, 1988: p. 73).

#### **4.5 Quality and Business Improvement Practitioners Working to Establish a ‘Culture Oriented to Business Excellence’**

As part of the formal research process, each participating organisation undertook some form of self-assessment against the framework of the BEM/EFQM research instrument. This was based entirely on senior management decision. However, it is interpreted in this thesis that what was finally undertaken by the participating organisations was a form of practitioner research by their individual QMs/BIMs. The nature of practitioner research was directly related to the concerns of QMs/BIMs from either a quality or business improvement perspective that was aligned with the particular organisation’s business strategy. This, however is an interpretation from a specific local context, based on the orientation of the QMs/BIMs as is presented in selective excerpts below.

It was clear, that PF was interested to use the EFQM excellence model to challenge businesses within the organisation.

*PF: Where I am at the moment, is I'm just about to undertake merging of huge chunks of the business [...]. So what I'm looking for is who's got practical experience and knowledge rolling improvement across the group. In construction, the answer to that is zero [...]. ...we're using it [the EFQM model] in our day to day business, to change the business. That has nothing to do with assessment. What I do is I start off with the business ... determine the key business processes that we have to do superbly well to deliver these jobs.*

This approach is seen by PF as using the excellence framework beyond that of assessment, and more towards that of an organization-wide performance enhancement tool.

*PF: I don't really do any self-assessment. But I'm using the framework to tease out key objectives, key business processes, then underneath that we look at the processes and KPIs. So it gives a consistent message, consistent benchmark for everybody is the model.*

PF further emphasizing that the EFQM Excellence Model clearly having extensive appeal amongst management as it allowed management a means to address key issues in order to be able to produce the necessary results.

[...]

*PF: [...] . My benefit is that I've done it [the self-assessment] across the group, they've seen it make money, they have seen it make life easier, they've seen 'Building Down Barriers' happen, they've seen clients suddenly wanting to come back more. Whereas five years ago, it was me trying to change the culture, [...] . Now, there are twenty or thirty of us, [...] challenging everything all over the place. Asking why do you do it.*

In a Foucauldian sense, the creation of an exhaustively detailed knowledge of the 'reality' to be governed requires the exercise of discipline (see Townley, 1998). This seems to be notably enabled through the use of the EFQM Excellence Model. Burrell (1998) notes that "organizational superordinates do not create discipline through their actions or strategies. On the contrary, they are as much disciplined as their subordinates. Disciplinary power is invested in, transmitted by and reproduced by and through all human beings in their day-to-day existence" (p. 20). In addition, Burrell (1998) identifies the fundamental contradiction of Foucault's work in relation to organization theory as it focuses on the "reality of organizations in that they reflect and reproduce a disciplinary society. But to talk about them, to develop discourses and classification schemes for their analysis actively contributes to the reproduction of this discipline" (p. 26). This is precisely the action made possible through the use of the EFQM Self-assessment Excellence Model.

The reflexive mode in which the process of self-assessment is carried out, requires the input of information from members, who are engaged in an all-encompassing co-operative attempt to reflect and assess 'how' things are being done and 'what' is being achieved while on-the-job. The active process is a constitutive one, which has an impact in this ongoing 'construction of reality'. This was particularly evident within two organisations involved in the research. As feedback from the self-assessment, as well as focus group sessions generated noticeable instances of organisation members involved in relational sensemaking. Borrowing from McNamee's (1992) views on 'identity construction in the discourse of crisis in therapy', the self-assessment process can be viewed as a co-operative construction of an organisations identity. For the organisation members involved in the focus group/interview sessions, the 'language' and focus of the excellence framework provided a shift in their discursive realm.

In this sense, self-assessment can be seen as an apparatus of discipline, which involves the ideal of *self-management* by requiring the members of organisation to reflect on their work and contribution. In addition it allows for situating members within the overall assessment, which presents management with opportunities for placing

ownership of improvement activities based on analysis of assessment data relating to specific 'areas for improvement'. However, according to Clegg et al. (1998), "while the object of self-management may be to create a collectively reflexive and functioning entity, the subjects required to do this frequently remain doggedly individualistic in their historical constitution, present identity, and future possibilities" (p. 10). This approach towards self-management was attempted by Cain, one of the focal organisations. However, it was reported by Cain that such methods for 'placing' ownership on members was found wanting as members did not seem to respond according to management's 'strategic' aspirations.

Within the context of Foucauldian analysis, discipline is conceptualised as constitutive of existing power, and normalization is viewed as an instrument of power:

*In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them to one another. (Foucault, 1977: 184)*

The traditional connotations attached to power are replaced by what is viewed here as a neutral concept of power, which is explicated in the following proposition by Foucault.

*We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces: it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. (Foucault, 1977: 194).*

Additionally, in this research the assessments based on self-assessment data provided by members of the organisation, is seen as a commonsensical approach for constructing a sense of the sort of 'Business Excellence Culture' within the organisation in relation to the EFQM 'standard'. [In order to avoid confusion, the term 'standard' is used here in place of 'benchmark', which is explicitly referred to by PF in the above transcription]. This is evident from the following excerpt from the last Steering Group Meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2001.



Rsch 1: *I don't see a problem in saying that if you measure well on the EFQM you can say you have created a Quality Culture in your organisation. What I'm working on, that and we haven't got here, is to relate that to Academic Models of culture of organisations, of organisation culture; which is proving a problem.*

Abel: *In what way?*

Rsch 1: *Uh! Well, they don't address quality, I mean in a sense when you talk about changing the culture, what you are talking about is creating a culture in which people address quality. Whereas, if you remember, way back in the beginning when I brought along Hofstede's questionnaire, EXCITE (Ex) [this is a pseudonym for one of the original focal organisation representatives who withdrew from the project] in particular was very scathing and I don't think anybody was too keen on that, Uhm! It's a moot question really whether to what extent they can, any particular culture that those models identify can be said to, I don't know, to support the Culture of Quality.*

Abel: *In what context are you using the word quality?*

Rsch 1: *Well, not obviously the end product. But I would say the Culture of Quality is the process, is what people do; it's the way they think; the things they give attention; the things they don't give attention to.*

PF: *I would like that please to be included in there. Because the word quality is so narrow in this industry, they will read it as product, when what it means is just what you talked about. Oh! You must work in the quality department, ... First, when I first came here the 'cost of quality' was thought to do with my salary. Yeah!*

Rsch 1: *No idea!*

PF: *They still do, bloody[ ].*

Rsch 1: *Problem with [...].*

*PF: Needs some explaining to them. That's not what EFQM is about, not about quality. It's about being an excellent business, providing you are using quality in that context is fine.*

The argument put forward in this thesis regarding the use of the EFQM excellence framework as a commonsensical approach to frame an organisations 'excellence culture' is based on the ethnomethodological concern with 'reflexively accountable action' as proposed by Garfinkel (1967). This is viewed as an ethnomethodological respecification; which is to make order 'in-and-as-of-the-workings-of-ordinary-society' (Button, 1991). It is in this sense that the notion of a 'Business Excellence Culture' is conceived; in terms of the active demonstrable, accounting practices of members in direct relation to established current levels of practices provided for by the excellence framework. This is represented within an accepted quantifiable continuum as a profile of excellence in relation to the basic concepts of organisational excellence, as outlined in the EFQM excellence framework (see Appendix vii).

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