

# **Can the Reflective Practice of Action Learning Enhance Criticality in MBAs?**

**A Bourdieusian Analysis of Organizing  
Learning Sets in the Pakistani Business Schools**

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# Can the Reflective Practice of Action Learning Enhance Criticality in MBAs? A Bourdieusian Analysis of Organizing Learning Sets in the Pakistani Business Schools

## **Submission**

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this Ph.D. thesis, entitled "*Can the Reflective Practice of Action Learning Enhance Criticality in MBAs? A Bourdieusian Analysis of Organizing Learning Sets in the Pakistani Business Schools*", is my own work and has not been submitted in the same form elsewhere. This thesis has been developed, within the agreed limits, for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Management Learning and Leadership under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Dr. Caroline J. Gatrell and Dr. Valerie S. Stead at the Department of Leadership and Management, Lancaster University Management School, UK

*Farooq Mughal*

To *Aneesa* my wife and our daughter *Zuha*;  
who stood by and believed in me,  
and to the good times ahead

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this doctoral study is to explore the cultural complexities of organizing action learning at three Pakistani business schools with the intention of investigating whether reflective practice can be established as a self-sustaining feature of MBA education. The study informs about the cultural conditions shaping the reflective practice of Pakistani MBA students in action learning by challenging their taken-for-granted assumptions and encouraging habits of critical thinking. However, with a lack of literature that documents the use of action learning in non-western cultures, the empirical insights generated by this study shed light on the difficulties surrounding the potential realization of reflective practice in the Pakistani MBA. This qualitative study is pivotal in filling this gap by providing academics, facilitators and practitioners with a cultural understanding about the organization of reflection in action learning and its situated perspective in a non-western context.

This study argues that gaining an understanding of the embodied dispositions of action learners is a significant factor in fostering pedagogies of action within a given cultural context. The data obtained through set observations and interviews with 31 Pakistani MBA students over a 16-week period is indicative of the friction between predisposed, embodied, dispositions (e.g. gender, power, emotions, identity) and action learning's reflexive character. An explanatory framework, drawing upon Bourdieu's theory of practice (i.e. habitus, field and capital) helps reveal: cultural dispositions embodied by participants that structure reflective practices, the politics and emotions mobilized during reflection that legitimize power-relations, and the embodied practices shaping group dynamics in the action learning space. The study contributes to action learning practice in the Pakistani MBA and similar contexts, and in particular cautions practitioners to consider culturally sensitive ways of developing a collective space conducive to reflective dialogue. In conclusion, this study emphasises the need to recognize culture and its relation to reflection – i.e. to acknowledge the challenges of embodied dispositions to action learning, the psychological and political implications they have for organizing reflective practice in sets, and the complex interaction between action learning and the embodied and situated culture of Pakistani MBA students.

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## *List of Abbreviations*

AL	Action Learning
ALS	Action Learning Set
CAL	Critical Action Learning
CALR	Critical Action Learning Research
CDE/CDS	Critical Design Ethnography / Critical Design Studies
CME	Critical Management Education
CMS	Critical Management Studies
CoP	Communities of Practice
DAI	Degree Awarding Institutes
DBR	Design-based Research
EBS	East-city Business School
ELT	Experiential Learning Theory
HE	Higher Education
HEC	Higher Education Commission of Pakistan
HEI	Higher Educational Institutions
HR/HRD	Human Resource Development
L=P+Q	Learning = Programmed Knowledge + Questioning Insight
LPP	Legitimate Peripheral Participation
MA	Masters of Arts
MBA	Masters of Business Administration
MBS	Mid-city Business School
NBEAC	National Business Education Accreditation Council
NCRC	National Curriculum Review Committee
Pak	Pakistan
SLT	Situated Learning Theory
UK	United Kingdom
UREC	University Research Ethics Committee
WBS	West-city Business School

## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction**

The aim of this introductory chapter is to set the context for the reader about my doctoral study. This chapter is divided into five parts. In the first part, I briefly reflect on the motivation for this study, which comes from my experiences as an MBA student and an academic within Pakistani business schools. In a way the reflective account helps locate the study around my personal and professional identity. The second part introduces my research by presenting an overview of the assumptions that form the basis of my intellectual journey. The third part directs the attention of the reader towards the intellectual puzzle (i.e. the research question) which lies at the heart of this thesis. The fourth part sets the scene for the reader by setting out reasons for choosing to study the Pakistani MBA and action learning. It also provides a rationale for using a qualitative research strategy alongside Bourdieu's theory of practice to make sense of the empirical data generated by the study. Lastly, I present the organization of this thesis by indicating the division and distribution of chapters.

#### **1.1. The Lived-Experience: A Personal Reflection on Locating the Study**

The motivation for this study came from my professional identity as an academic, researching and teaching MBA courses in Pakistan. Having twelve years of experience in studying and teaching management education, I have learned to suppress and silence my emotions and experiences in the context of the functionalist, technicist and hierarchical pedagogies I experienced in Pakistan. My perception of the MBA is humanistic, and thus respects students as socially constructed beings, and draws on an inclusive approach to studying management (e.g. Reynold & Trehan, 2001). This has always prompted me to initiate change, at least in my own methods of teaching at a Pakistani business school, where I am working as an

assistant professor. During my early practice as an academic, at a public-sector university in Pakistan, I relied heavily on teaching methods that were either case-based or involved lecturing. I must admit that my scope remained narrow, just like that of any other individual shaped by the Pakistani educational system: a system that is traditionalist in nature and relies on a culture of power-position and authority. Being educated in Pakistan meant to suppress any conscious thought that either questions or critically evaluate the dominant position of experts bombarding students with heaps of knowledge. Unfortunately, I practiced what and how I was taught as a student.

As a student, I always felt the discomfort of being invisible in teachers' lectures – who having the expertise to teach, were not to be questioned or otherwise face consequences. When I became an academic, I also felt that students had normalized such traditional practices, which to some extent made them unresponsive to original thinking. They have learnt to favour rote learning as a means of passing exams. Although I remained dissatisfied with my approach, this was and is the game played by many business schools in Pakistan. As I grew in stature as an academic, I developed intentions to design an educational programme which was student-centred and which valued action, reflection and experience. However, I felt that I was far from realising such ambitions.

During my early academic practice, I received an opportunity to acquire foreign exposure – an experience of western education when I joined Lancaster University, UK, to enhance my knowledge through a master's programme specializing in HRD. This was not only an opportunity to acquire knowledge, but also to groom my professional skills and understand teaching practices by *learning how to learn*. My time in the UK gave me a new perspective on management education – one that I intended. The master's programme was student-centred, unlike the ones which I had experienced earlier and felt to be teacher-focused (e.g.

Reynolds, 1998). This programme was designed to connect action, reflection and experience to theory (Pedler, 1997). It introduced me to new avenues of learning such as experiential learning, reflective learning, critical thinking, etc. I remember that in my Design and Dynamics module, I was introduced to action learning, a pedagogy that resonated with my thoughts. Acquiring knowledge about action learning led me to the works of Reginald Revans – the founding father, whose philosophy has led me to pursue a pedagogy of action within this study.

The motivation to change my methods of learning came from Pedler's (1997) statement, which summarizes the idea that management education is:

'[...] shifting from subject-centred to student-centred, from content-driven to context and process-driven, from talking to listening, from expert to exemplar and from power position to personal authority' (Pedler, 1997: p.191)

Although my postgraduate degree at Lancaster was not an MBA, it still made me think about the variety of learning methods used for imparting management education. I thought if I could utilize some of these methods in the MBA programmes where I taught, I might encourage a change in the ways that management is taught. Upon my return to Pakistan, I shifted my practice from traditional and content methods to more process-oriented, reflective and experiential practices. I felt that students preferred experiential methods to traditional ones. However, at times they were reluctant to be empowered, as the social order demanded that the teacher should be in power, and on other occasions group work failed as students of different genders were required to work together. This failure was mostly attributed to social and cultural differences, which meant either that men or women felt uncomfortable, as most of their schooling had been in single-sex schools and colleges. It also highlights aspects of a male-dominated society in which the voice of female students on the MBA was submerged under the masculine discourses (Gatrell & Turnbull, 2003). The failure of these methods for

the Pakistani MBA was due to the mismatch of western and eastern learning practices, which then motivated me to study the cultural incongruities faced by approaches that develop student practitioners who are able to connect action, reflection and experience in the Pakistani context. The idea was to develop student practitioners, managers to be, who have the ability to critically examine everyday practice, make visible the hidden tensions and challenge the taken-for-granted in the learning process. This marks the beginning of an intellectual journey during which I question the significance of culture in learning.

## **1.2. Overview of the Study**

This thesis explores the notion of reflective practice in action learning, beyond western borders, to study the complexities of enhancing criticality in MBA students at three Pakistani business schools. This research adds to the literature which argues for MBA education to knock down ‘smoke-screens’ and ‘silos’ of functionalism by moving away from traditional US case-based approaches which provide managerialist and technicist knowledge (Feldman, 2005: p.217). This thesis echoes critical voices in the management learning and education literature which stress the need to re-develop MBA programmes to acknowledge the changing context of management education and practice (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2012; Welsh & Dehler, 2007; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002, etc.). In doing so, this doctoral study offers a basis of cultural understanding for developing an action learning programme which encourages reflective practice within Pakistan’s hierarchical and power-structured MBA context (e.g. Grey, 2004).

In this, the study questions the pedagogical discourses in Pakistani MBA education (Wilson & Howard, 2012; Khurana, 2007; Datar et al., 2010; Starkey et al., 2004, etc.) and adds to the rethinking of its design by advocating a reflective process which sensitises learners towards the social, cultural and political context inherent in everyday practice (e.g. Currie & Knights,

2003; Grey & Antonacopoulou, 2004). It thus sheds light on the challenges faced by critical and reflective forms of management education in liberating themselves from the social, cultural and political discourses of Pakistani MBA education (e.g. Boje & Arkoubi, 2009). The study also presents the challenges confronting such a critical pedagogy within a context which is accustomed to hierarchical modes of learning (Reynolds, 1998; 1999a). The cornerstone of this study is its emphasis on the organizing process underpinning reflective insight from a cultural perspective. It provides an insight into the emotions and feelings mobilized by reflective practices which are experienced by Pakistani MBAs.

In addition, this study builds on the literature that calls for an evaluation of the challenges and complexities of critical management pedagogy in the MBA arena (Currie & Knights, 2003). It contributes to the exploration of the possibilities provided by critical pedagogies and the barriers they encounter within the particular institutions and contexts in which they are implemented (*ibid.*). The study of an action learning programme within Pakistani MBAs whose foundations lie in critical and reflective practice is one example of this critical pedagogy in action. This study recognizes not only the need to adapt management education to the changing cultural context (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2006), but also to promote independent thinking which acknowledges the complexities of social life (i.e. social, political and cultural ideologies) (e.g. Dehler et al., 2001). The action learning programme in this study provides a space in which to research the cultural character of Pakistani MBA students engaging in reflective practices which challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions (e.g. Marsick & O’Niel, 1999). In doing this, the study also sheds light on the changing educational roles of learners, facilitator, design and process and practices in the critical process of learning (Dehler et al., 2001).

During this study, the action learning sets emerge as spaces where power was de-centralized, boundaries obscured and taken-for-granted beliefs were problematized (*ibid.*). This led to an examination of the role of critical management education within the Pakistani MBA context, adding to the literature that calls for understanding the application of critical pedagogies in different contexts and conditions (e.g. Currie & Knights, 2003; Grey et al., 1996, etc.). The findings of this study explain the challenges and complexities of a critical pedagogy of action in the Pakistani MBA, which aims to enhance learners' awareness towards reflective and transformational possibilities. It also poses questions about the effectiveness of such critical pedagogies in either encouraging or inhibiting learners as they seek to achieve solutions to their complex problems in a given cultural context. Samra-Fredricks (2003) argues that overlooking social and cultural problems related to critical approaches might result in the failure of such programmes. This study advances what Samra-Fredricks (2003) proposes: to understand how 'the taken-for-granted social/moral, political and economic' assumptions have been threaded into individuals' experience in the first place to advance an understanding of how these elements of culture shape learning.

This thesis has wider implications for MBA education, and for other teaching situations which aim to introduce critical pedagogies in eastern contexts. At the outset of this study, I would like to state that my view of management education is that it is about seeking knowing: i.e. knowledge which is socially constructed and situated within the context in which it is practised. By this, I mean that my theoretical perspective views 'management as a social practice' and managers as socially constructed beings (Reed, 1989). It means that within the context of this study the existing cultural notions of learning, which Pakistani MBA students have embodied, are challenged. The culture embodied by these students represents knowledge about their social world 'that is inseparable from [their] bodies, [their] language and [their] social history' - in short, from their embodied character (Varela et al., 1991:

p.148). My study seeks to bring forward this character by shedding light on the tensions between the embodied learning dispositions (e.g. gender, power, emotions, identity etc.) and action learning's reflexive practice in the Pakistani MBA.

Also, taking a critical perspective towards management education and practice (Harding, 2003), I view management learning through a similar lens. In the absence of any evidence suggesting that Pakistani MBA shares this view of management learning, I aim to design and deliver an action learning programme which 'embodies the principles of critical reflection, sense-making and co-construction of meanings' as part of my study (Anderson, 2008: p.3). Action learning is one approach that provides 'comrades in adversity' an opportunity to 'reflect on real-life experience to solve unfamiliar problems' (Revans, 1983; Raelin, 2006). By suggesting action learning, I do not propose it as a core pedagogy for the MBA, but as an alternative way to answer critics through its critical and reflective design elements. It also provides an opportunity to help bridge the gap between action learning and its practice in a non-western context (Marquardt, 1998; Dilworth & Boshyk, 2010). This study suggests that what underpins action learning's success in the Pakistani context is the degree to which embodied practices gives way to more reflective means, that depends on the durability of these dispositions. This study, therefore, explores the cultural context of the Pakistani MBA, which shapes students' learning practices and is in turn likely to shape the design and processes of action learning. The themes generated by this study's interpretive framework thus help guide practitioners and academics in Pakistan, and contexts alike, for developing culturally sensitive programmes that foster critical thinking without ignoring the context.

### **1.3. Research Question**

My research question for this study is:

#### **Can the reflective practice of action learning enhance criticality in Pakistani MBAs?**

The intention underpinning this exploratory study is to reveal the cultural complexities of organizing action learning in the Pakistani MBA and to examine its ability to enhance the criticality which traditional Pakistani MBA pedagogies find difficult to achieve. This study captures the experiences of Pakistani MBA students as action learners in a programme that encourages reflective practice in order to engender a critical awareness of taken-for-granted assumptions. I therefore break the central research question down into sub-questions, which help to understand the cultural character of Pakistani MBAs and their learning practices along with their experience of organizing reflective practice through action learning. These sub-questions, which also act as the specific objectives of this study, contribute to the central research question, and are:

- What cultural dispositions underlie participants' perception of the differences between the traditional Pakistani MBA pedagogy and their practice of action learning?
- What does MBA students' experience of organizing reflection informs about action learning's practice in the Pakistani context?
- What social dynamics do Pakistani MBAs display (and reflect upon) as shaping their action learning set interactions?

These questions aim to explore the learning practices (inter-actions, events and processes) in which students engage to integrate action, reflection and experience and thus examine their knowledge base within the social context of action learning sets. The key issues of individual and collective agency during different phases of action learning, for example critical

reflection, group functionality and emotions, were elicited in post-action learning set interviews with the Pakistani MBA students. The accounts reported in this study are taken as reflections of events that capture the social dynamics of the four groups of Pakistani MBA students during and after the work of the action learning sets. Representative accounts and observations were collected from 31 MBA students for this study, and the relatively small sample size is because of limitations on time and commitment constraints. Action learning sets are demanding activities, especially during the busy schedule of MBA studies. In this light, I do not claim that this study is representative of the larger population of MBA students in Pakistan. However, the perspectives which emerge in this study are comparable to those in the literature on areas of cultural limitations and action learning practice. The hallmark of this study is the interpretive approach underpinning its methodology, which generates qualitative data. This approach also sets the ‘data’ within its context and uses participants’ own meanings to elaborate instances of action learning practice – thus providing empirical evidence which contributes towards answering the overarching research question.

#### **1.4. Setting the Scene**

##### ***The Pakistani MBA within the Higher Education Structure***

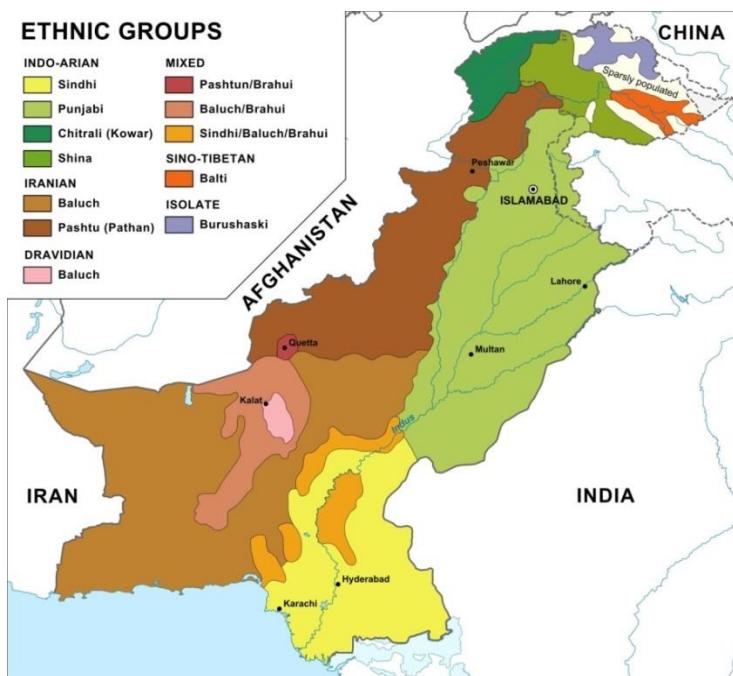
This study is located within Pakistan, a country of 193 million<sup>1</sup> people and the 6<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the world<sup>2</sup> with total land area of 803,943 sq. km (more than three times the land area of the United Kingdom), ranking it 36<sup>th</sup> in the world (Malik, 2012). Besides a long coastline on the Arabian Sea (of approximately 1,045 km), Pakistan yields its diversity with its neighbouring countries (BBC, 2016). Pakistan shares its borders with India to the

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics provided by the Pakistan Census and Population Organization ([www.census.gov.pk](http://www.census.gov.pk)) – [website accessed on November 6, 2013 at 09:15 am]

<sup>2</sup> United National Statistics on the most populous countries in the world – World Population Prospects 2012 Rev, Published by United Nations Population Division [website accessed on November 6, 2013 at 09:25 am]

east, China in the northeast, Afghanistan in the northwest and Iran to the southwest, making it highly strategic on the world map – see map below (Malik, 2012). Pakistan is divided into four provinces - Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan and Khyber Pathun Khwa (KPK) – and the federally administered capital area of Islamabad. The federation also administers the disputed areas of Baltistan, Gilgit and Azad Kashmir, which are still disputed areas nearly 70 years after independence in 1947. In terms of cultural diversity, each province has its own culture, with altogether 60 languages being spoken in the country, while Urdu is the national and English is the official language. The English language has been adopted due to the heritage of British colonial rule up to 1947. Rauf (1988) notes that the major religion in the country is Islam (and so the full name of the country is the Islamic Republic of Pakistan) while Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs are in a minority. Despite its economic growth, Pakistan faces a number of challenges, which include population, poverty, corruption and militancy.



**Figure 1-1: Map of Pakistan with Ethnic Distribution<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>3</sup> Source of Map: [http://spearheadresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Pakistan\\_ethnic\\_map.jpg](http://spearheadresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Pakistan_ethnic_map.jpg)

The educational system in Pakistan is based on two distinct streams, i.e. ‘traditional religious-based’, also known as Madaris (plural), and ‘modern formal-based’ (Malik, 2012: p. 2). The literacy rate in the country stands at 58.5% (with males at 64% and females at 44%, although female literacy in the northern areas is less than 3%). The higher education sector is undoubtedly one of the fastest growing educational sectors in the world (Sastry, 2004), especially since 2002 with the formation of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan.

Business school education arrived in 1955 with the establishment of the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) in Karachi as the first Pakistani degree-awarding institution to initiate an MBA programme. This was in affiliation with the Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania, USA. From the early 2000s, there was significant growth in Pakistani business schools after the establishment of the HEC, which created a demand for the MBA degree. Under the auspices of the HEC, the number of universities and degree awarding institutes (DAIs) had grown to 162<sup>4</sup> (in both the public and private sectors) by 2014, as compared to only one institution of higher learning at the time of independence in 1947. Furthermore, student enrolment in business education had increased to 51,077 in 2011-12, compared to 39,182 in 2004-2005. The enrolment for Pakistani MBAs also grew from 20,381 in 2005 to an estimate of about 27,000 in 2012, mostly owing to the privatization of education in the country. In line with its regulatory powers, the HEC established the National Business Education Accreditation Council (NBEAC)<sup>5</sup> in 2008-09 to control the mushrooming of business education programmes offered by universities and DAIs. So far, the NBEAC has accredited 30 MBA programmes offered by 70 universities in Pakistan.

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<sup>4</sup> List of Recognized Universities by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, ([www.hec.gov.pk](http://www.hec.gov.pk))

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.nbeac.org.pk/index.php/accreditation>

During my work as an academic and researcher at a business school in Pakistan, I was concerned about two emerging themes from the critique of global MBA education. First, if educational practices failed to advance, Pakistani business would be left behind in the modernisation process. Second, ethical concerns might create a domino effect, affecting the demand for Pakistani MBA education. The MBA programmes account for most of what may be termed modernized education in Pakistan. They have been formalized in the light of social and cultural values by universities as social institutions to support Pakistani society in terms of boosting the country's economy. With the arrival of business education during the mid-1950s, with the help of the Wharton Schools of Business and Finance, the country saw a shift from the colonial British education system to an American system (Khan, 2006). This transition affected faculty, the curriculum and pedagogical practices in higher management education by bringing in technicist values and Americanized course structures (ibid).

The Pakistani MBA is heavily influenced by American business education, which imparts a managerialist view. Thus, implementing action learning in the MBA will require an in-depth understanding of the socio-political context, especially in a country like Pakistan where religion and culture go side by side. Higher education in Pakistan is not only about personal development - it has a wider *societal role*, which is directly proportional to maintaining a social and moral order in line with acceptable cultural practices. It is my belief that if the Pakistani MBA is to sustain itself in the next decade, it needs to focus on critical and reflective means of education. Education thus cannot be provided in isolation, especially when it is shaping a nation and is closely intertwined with its society and culture (Lyon & Edgar, 2010). Therefore, the Pakistani MBA provides an excellent platform for introducing critical thinking to would-be managers, aiming to challenge traditional learning practices in Pakistan - practices which hinge upon 'selecting, classifying, distributing, transmitting, and

evaluating educational knowledge that reflects both the distribution of power and the principle of social contract' (Malik, 2012: p.5).

### ***Why Research 'MBA' Education?***

Globally, Hay & Hodgkinson (2006) indicate that the MBA remains a popular choice for many who are interested in learning about management practice. However, academics and practitioners have increasingly started to question the significance and value of the MBA in the modern-day organization (Vaara & Fay, 2011). Jain & Stopford (2011) propose that one of the causes of problems with the MBA is the use of functionalist and hierarchical approaches to learning. Moreover, Gosling & Mintzberg (2006) note an over-emphasis by business schools on structured and cased-based learning approaches, which can be another area of concern. The growing literature further suggests that business schools have started reflecting upon their learning approaches and started to attend to critical and reflective management practices (Currie et al., 2010).

Over the past two decades, critics have questioned MBA programmes in terms of their ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Arain & Tipu, 2007). Jain and Stopford (2011) assert that MBA programmes are still taught with pedagogical approaches used by business schools in the 70s and 80s, despite the exponential growth in business and the economy globally. While business schools have incorporated significant functional changes in their MBA curricula, critics like Gosling and Mintzberg (2006) have challenged them for their structured learning and traditional monologue and cased-based approach. Moreover, Grimby (1993) criticized MBAs as being quick and smart in responding to various management problems through theories, formulae and mechanistic knowledge, but failing to develop students as original thinkers who take the multiple realities of complex business problems into account.

Antonacopoulou (2010) pushes the argument further by suggesting that the primary model of business schools' is inconsistent with best management practices and that there exists little research knowledge as to what constitutes 'best management practices'. Building upon this, Currie et al. (2010) emphasize that business schools need to take a reflexive and critical approach to management education by interconnecting theory and practice. The changing nature of management practice calls for sustainable management education, which aims to provide a lasting learning experience for MBA graduates. Business education must not be isolated as a translucent functional learning schema, but provide an integrated learning process that 'challenges conventional wisdom and situates management theory and practice as form of socially and politically driven ideology' (Currie et al. 2010, p.2). The sustainability of management education is grounded in reflexivity and criticality, which are two essential ingredients for the harmonious interaction of theoretical knowledge and real-world practices of management. Soros (1995) asserts that the culmination of a business education must be a 'reflexive character' that is able to thoroughly understand organizational dynamics in a practical manner rather than a sightseer who studies organizations in books, theories and cases.

Mintzberg (2004) suggests that business schools might benefit by focusing on 'soft areas' including interpersonal, cognitive and thinking skills in response to these criticisms. Datar et al (2010) urge academics to shift from traditional pedagogies towards reflective, critical and experiential practice focusing on self-development through action learning. The Pakistani MBA, which is influenced by American ways of teaching such as lectures, case studies, role-plays and simulations, might benefit from action learning. In addition, Currie & Knights (2003) argue that it is time for business schools to adopt a more critical approach by incorporating the true essence of critical management education. Proponents of criticality in management education like Currie and Knights (2003), Alvesson and Willmott (2012) or

Reynolds (2011) have spoken out for the transformation of management education to critical management education and of pedagogy to critical pedagogy. Employing a critical perspective for the MBA helps challenge the ‘one-sided thinking’ which primarily focuses on ‘managerialism’ and ‘turbo-capitalism’ (Grey, 2002). Therefore, this study will provide impetus to MBA education in terms of recommendations to strengthen the link between theory and practice and to develop socially responsible student practitioners.

### ***Why Study Action Learning?***

Since its inception in the 1940s by Reginald W. Revans, action learning has gained wide acceptance in the western world (Marquardt, 1998). One factor contributing to the use of action learning, especially in education, has been a growing debate over harnessing pedagogical methods which are experiential and learner-centred (McGill & Beaty, 1996). Revans’ inter-university consortium with Belgian universities provides a useful example of action learning at work on real-time organizational problems in management education (Mumford, 1997). Regardless of the overwhelming success of action learning in Anglo-Saxon institutions, it has largely been invisible in other parts of the world (Dilworth & Boshyk, 2010). Marquardt (1999) asserts that ‘despite its growing success in Western cultures, [...] action learning has been infrequently implemented in the remaining 90% of the world’ (p.149). Even after the Belgian experience of Revans, action learning very little contribution has been made to the literature regarding the influence of culture on action learning practice and design (Mumford, 1997).

Years after Mumford and Marquardt’s observations, the use of action learning has increased only slightly in East Asian and North African countries such as China, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Egypt and Zambia (Dilworth & Willis, 2003; Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010). However, other countries in the South Asian, Middle Eastern and African regions such as

Pakistan, Bhutan, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh are seen as having untapped potential for action learning practice (Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010). There is a lack of empirical studies of action learning which focus purely on the influence of culture and cultural practices on its design and process (Marquardt, 2001). The question, which arises here, is whether the design or processes of action learning are incompatible with eastern cultures or whether there is simply little awareness of its potential in these countries, despite Revans' claim that learning from one another and experiences or actions can be transferred across cultures (Revans, 1982: p.373). However, for cases like Pakistan – a developing country -, Revans (1982) stresses that they must deal with learning in their own ways. His implicit theme is critical in nature, and revolves around empowerment and emancipation (Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010). In an example of the emancipatory use of action learning in African countries, Revans stressed that:

‘education of the African must be secured through attack on his present poverty [...] he must learn, not so much from the scholarship of the European, as from solving the problems that lie before him in Africa’ (Revans cited in Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010: p.373).

Furthermore, Revans' philosophy aims to make learners aware of their experiences by reflecting on the taken-for-granteds. Apart from the simplistic notions of action learning design and practice, Sasaki (1990) recounts a discussion with Revans about the inapplicability of action learning in Japan. Sasaki (1990) quotes Revans as saying that there was much to learn about Japanese culture and way of management: ‘it is better to see and touch these issues with your own hands’ (p.viii). However, it is difficult to engage with action learning practice without prior knowledge of cultural learning practices and patterns. Marquardt (1999), for example, argues that the implementation of action learning might be subject to failure in the Asian context as social hierarchies play a critical role in education (gender, class position, race, caste etc.). Moreover, the questions of opening up within groups, honesty and reciprocity are socially structured issues (Pedler & Attwood, 2011). Also, issues of diversity within cultures – cultures within cultures, religious affiliations and

class systems - can undermine learning in action learning, and this constitutes an important gap in the action learning literature.

### **Which Research Strategy?**

Since the primary focus of this study is the action learning activity itself, a complimentary research strategy, which acknowledges the dynamic, complex and socio-political context of learning, was necessary. The action learning programme in this study was not designed as a research method, but as a learning space to capture MBA students' struggles to negotiate with its critical design and socially inclusive process (e.g. Vince, 2008: p. 97). Embedding an action learning programme in an MBA's natural habitat resulted in the co-creation of a distinct social space that was at odds with its socio-historical context. The critical task as a researcher was to situate action learning within the Pakistani MBA in such a way that student practices are rendered meaningful in terms of their historical, social and cultural significance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A qualitative, abductive research strategy was found useful as a means of eliciting participants' interview accounts by drawing on the ideas and meanings used by them to reflect upon their experience of action learning (Balikie, 2000; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). The rationale for choosing a qualitative strategy was broadly based on the theoretical choice of a means of interpreting the complex character of the socio-political and cultural context and its influence on action learning practice, which was by obtaining in-depth data from MBA students themselves, i.e. through observation and interviews (Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The role of MBA student accounts is of particular significance in this study as it allows the situated character of participants' learning practices to be described as instances of culture-in-action. Furthermore, this increases the need for adopting a qualitative approach as it allows participants the opportunity to give voice to their feelings as well as drawing on their ability

to make sense of their experiences (Eisner, 1991). In my study, I embark on an intellectual journey within the lives of MBA students to understand the complex and dynamic reality of producing and reproducing culture in action learning (Malik, 2012; Clendinin & Connolly, 2000). Being associated with these MBA students for an extended period of time allowed me to understand the process by which they actively construct meanings around their practices (e.g. Merriam, 1998). The interpretive component of this qualitative approach allowed me to view the MBA students' accounts from their standpoint and to acknowledge the 'feelings and thoughts' which were mobilized as a result of action learning (Vince, 2008: p.97).

Researching culture from an interpretive perspective, as pointed out by Alasuutari (1995), is akin to a historian trying to excavate a historically 'unique-episode' through a 'critical inquiry' process of examining textual accounts (p.13-14). In a qualitative approach to studying culture, the researcher analyses participants' accounts to compare and contrast homologous structures and dissimilar accounts within data sets (Silverman, 2013). Thus culture, when broken down into social practices, leads to the creation of 'typologies of social action' (Alasuutari, 1995: p.14). A qualitative approach offers flexibility in the study of social actions to allow culture to be presented as meaningful. In this study, I examine cultural context by participating in the lives of MBA students in order to voice their experiences: describing their ability to accommodate themselves to newer forms of learning such as critical reflection (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; Silverman, 2013; Alasuutari, 1995).

### **Why use Bourdieu?**

The reason for using Bourdieu's philosophy was mainly his generative approach – transcending the subjective-objective debate - to understanding culture. I was first introduced to Bourdieu through an article entitled '*How can a Bourdieusian Perspective Aid the Analysis of MBA Education?*' by Vaara and Fay (2011). Their work was helpful in making sense of

the debates over the MBA in the literature by applying Bourdieu's notions of 'economy of exchanges' and the 'rules of the game' (p.27). Having reviewed Bourdieu's own work, I found his theory of culture to be influential in helping me make sense of how culture works within the field of education. Pierre Bourdieu was one of the dominant French sociologists of the twentieth century. His work includes influential writings on culture, education, literature, language, the arts, religion, science and photography, etc. (Bourdieu, 1993a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990a; Bourdieu, 1990b; Bourdieu, 1988; Bourdieu, 1984a; Bourdieu, 1977a). I must state that it is not within the scope of my research to study class structure and structural inequalities from a sociological perspective, but I use his concepts broadly to understand culture and practice. In the passages below, I briefly summarize how Bourdieu places his concept of culture within his generative ontology, which extends beyond the realist and anti-realist debates. His theoretical concepts of habitus, field and capital help provide an integrated perspective on social practice within the Pakistani MBA context.

For Bourdieu, studying culture is largely driven by the desire to make clear the meaning of human-action within society. DiMaggio (1979) asserts that one of the key social dilemmas which Bourdieu attempts to deal with in his cultural agenda concerns the domination of hierarchical and stratified social systems, which exist and are continuously reproduced without any societal confrontation or conscious recognition on the part of a society's members. Despite anthropological definitions that reduce culture to 'a socially-historically specific, internally shaped symbolic system', Bourdieu goes beyond this to respond to the challenge presented by dominant structures within society (Calhoun et al: 1993 p.14). According to Swartz (1997), he tries to explore this societal dilemma by suggesting an assessment of the 'cultural resources, processes and institutions' held by its members, by virtue of which they are hierarchically classified as having dominant positions (p.6). Furthermore, Bourdieu asserts that 'all cultural symbols and practices' such as art, religion,

taste, language, science – even philosophy – exemplify the hunger to achieve social distinction (Swartz, 1997).

Bourdieu's theory of cultural relativity assumes cultural practice to be a product of class habitus and position in a social system, and that there is no position outside of the social system which agents can occupy (Bourdieu, 1990). The theory has attracted criticism and debate over the years (Brubaker, 1993), but continues to provide impetus to cultural studies because of its firm theoretical and empirical groundings (Bourdieu, 1984; 1990). Bourdieu's (1990) sociology of culture presumes that agents are located within social systems. It is in their interest to occupy strategic positions within these systems (social spaces or fields) which are determined according to the amount of cultural capital they possess/consume (ibid). Bourdieu (1984) suggests that agents are continuously struggling with each other to achieve capital – power that enhances social position - and those who possess capital are able to exercise power over others.

Here, central to my thesis is his notion of *practice*. Bourdieu, in constructing his cultural theory, problematizes the notion of culture – which is traditionally considered as a system of values, beliefs and ideologies. However, Bourdieu (1973) presents culture by relatively examining power and social practice to avoid naïve and generalized assertions about cultural conduct. This is Bourdieu's critical cultural theory, in which cultural practice is problematized to reveal how power structures practice, how practices legitimize power, and what practices construct power, rather than assuming practice to be a product of culture (values or beliefs), as for example in the Hofstede classifications of culture. Therefore, Bourdieusian philosophy helped my research work in two ways: by shaping debates on culture and cultural practice in theory; and providing an explanatory framework (i.e. habitus, field and capital) to make sense of Pakistani MBAs culturally conditioned learning practices.

## 1.5. Organization of this Thesis

After having outlined the purpose of this study, I would like to draw the attention of the reader to the structure of this thesis. Apart from this introductory chapter, this thesis comprises 10 chapters, divided into four parts – as also illustrated in a comprehensive roadmap in figure 1.2, on page 24.

The different sections and chapters of the thesis are briefly described below:

### ***Section One: Literature Review***

*Section One* reviews existing literature to locate the study within its broader context. The section covers key literature that informs my theoretical understanding underpinning this study, and consists of three chapters:

- **Chapter 2** on *management learning and education* aims to provide an overview of key theoretical traditions, i.e. cognitive, situated and critical, which inform learning and the practice of management with the key emphasis on reflective practice.
- **Chapter 3** on *action learning* reviews the relevant literature to establish an understanding of action learning theory and practice. It further describes its development within the educational sector and from a cultural perspective to draw attention towards its critical variant, i.e. critical action learning.
- **Chapter 4** on *reproductions of culture* draws on the works of Bourdieu. It describes his key thinking tools of habitus, field and capital, before moving on to describe his theory of symbolic and cultural action.

## **Section Two: Research Methodology**

*Section Two* on research methodology discusses the choices that inform my research design and strategy for collecting empirical data worthy of a doctoral study. This section is divided into two chapters:

- **Chapter 5** on *research design and strategy* sets out the philosophical and methodological assumptions which form the basis of my research strategy. It discusses the research framework underpinning this study and addresses the issues of ethics and of the reliability of data.
- **Chapter 6** on *fieldwork and analysis strategy* describes the qualitative approach to designing field methods. It also introduces the reader to the design considerations in the development and delivery of the action learning programme around which the study is based, before presenting the data analysis and organization strategy.

## **Section Three: Analysis and Findings**

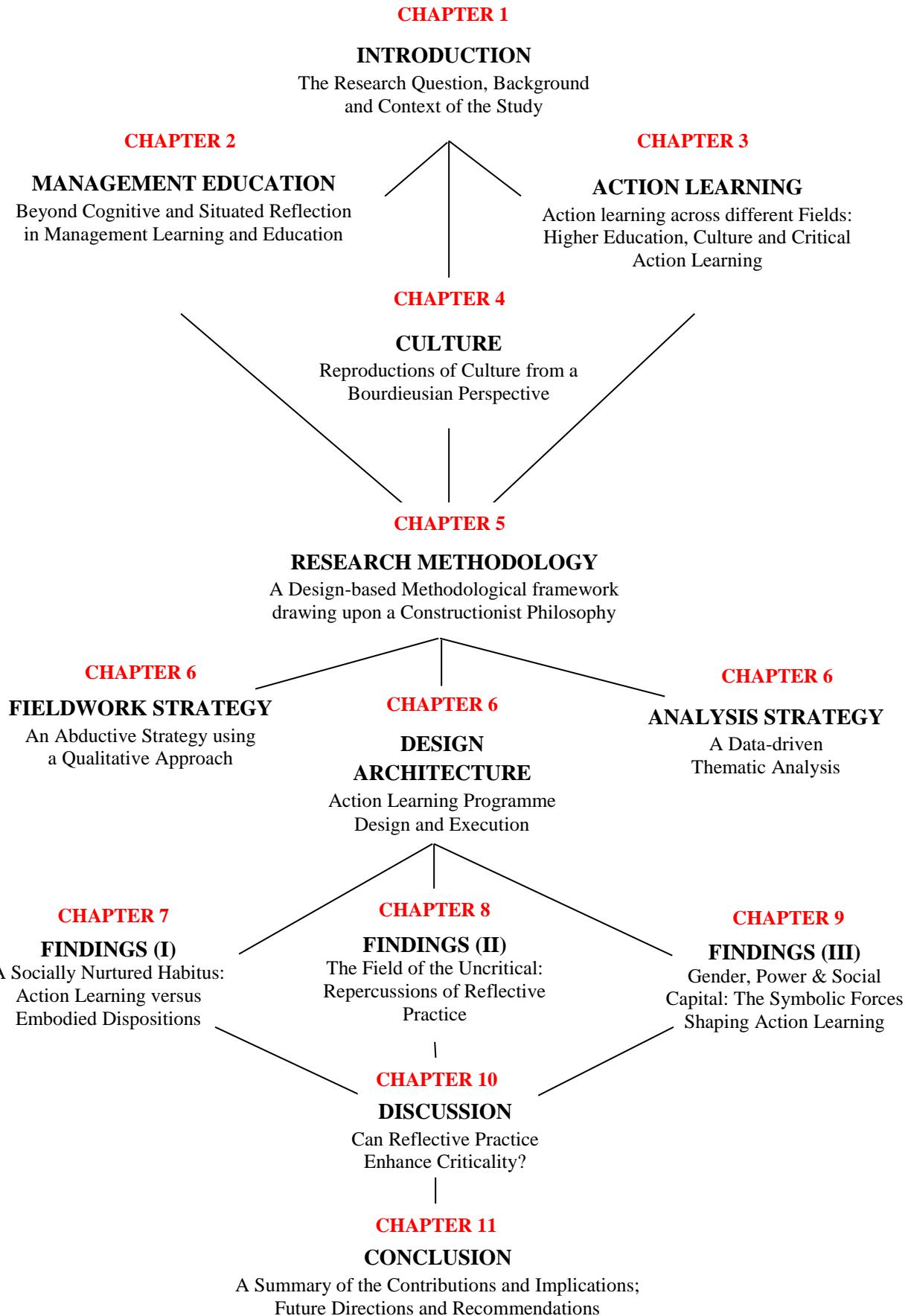
*Section Three* presents the findings that emerged from this study's theoretical, methodological and programme design considerations. This part is divided into three chapters:

- **Chapters 7, 8 and 9** report the findings under three meta-themes, i.e. *an embodied sense of place, the universe of the uncritical and symbolic forces of culture*, each described along with quotes from the data. These chapters discuss themes and sub-themes to inform readers about cultural incongruities, participants' accounts of organizing reflective insights and the complexities which action learning is likely to face in the Pakistani MBA.

### **Section Four: Discussion and Conclusion**

*Section Four* discusses the key findings in the light of the literature reviewed in Section One of this thesis. This section is spread over two chapters:

- **Chapter 10** on *discussion* pulls together the three meta-themes discussed in Section Three to provide an overall perspective and an answer to the research question outlined earlier in the chapter.
- **Chapter 11** *concludes* this doctoral study by providing a reflection on the thesis. It summarizes and outlines the contributions made by this study before drawing out its limitations and implications. Finally, the implications of this study are presented for learning designers, practitioners and academics intending to use action learning in the Pakistani MBA context.



**Figure 1-2: Thesis Roadmap**

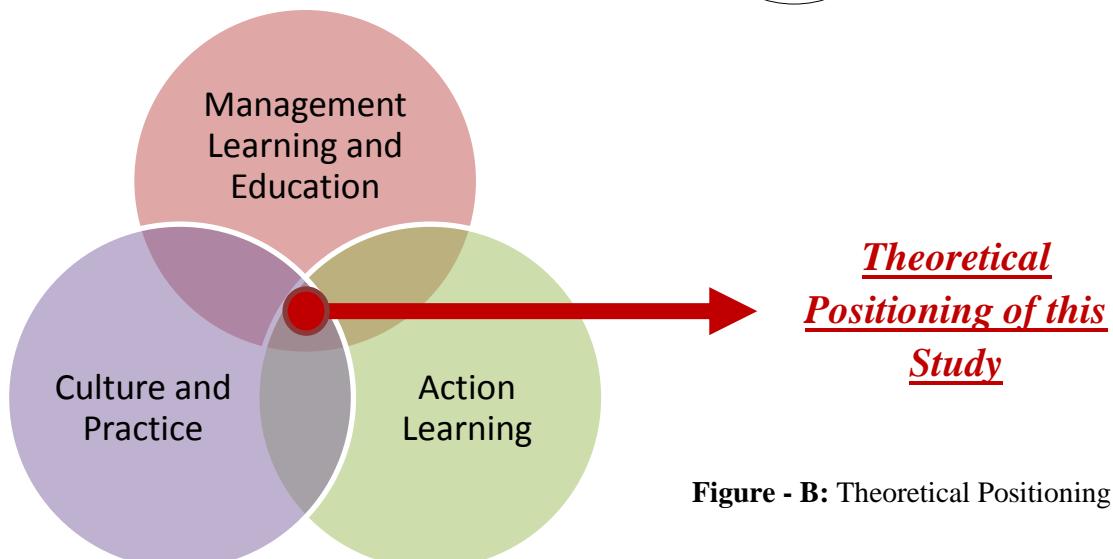
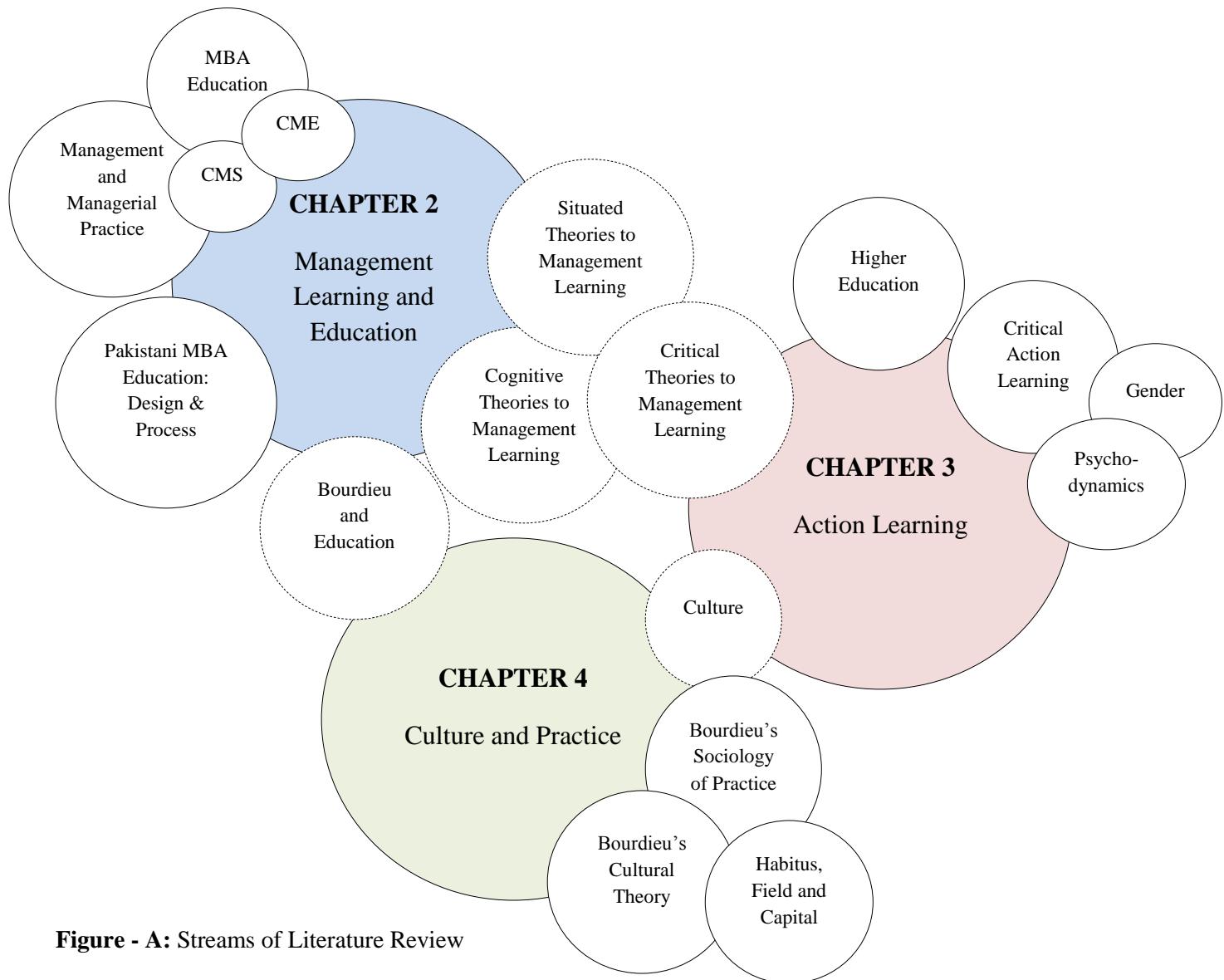
## **Section One**

### **Literature Review**

To reiterate, the central research question which this study aims to explore is whether the reflective practice of action learning can enhance criticality in Pakistani MBA students. This research question calls for a study that takes into account three aspects of learning: *reflective practice*, *action learning* and *the cultural context of learning*, which this section aims to address in order to develop a theoretical framework within which to conduct this study. This section thus reviews literature that discusses critical concepts surrounding reflective practice in management learning and education, action learning's theory and practice, and cultural reproductions in society. It is important to understand these aspects of the research question as this helps lay foundation for a study that examines the possibility of a critical and reflective pedagogy of action in the Pakistani MBA: a pedagogy where students adopt active roles as reflective practitioners to examine assumptions and develop action plans based on critical insight. Therefore, this section helps develop the theoretical foundations of this study by reviewing, in particular, reflective practice across situated and cognitive learning theories, critical variants of action learning practice and the critical cultural theory of Bourdieu.

Overall, in its three chapters, this section explores debates surrounding advances in reflective approaches to management education and action learning theory and practice, and presents a more focused discussion to develop a critical understanding of culture and cultural practice. A supplementary figure, i.e. Figure A below, presents the three streams of literature reviewed in this study, i.e. management education, action learning and culture. It also shows the different concepts reviewed within each stream and the links between them and other streams

in the literature. Another supplementary figure, Figure B locates this study and helps to contextualize it within the context of the literature reviewed.



Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the changing nature of management learning and education in the light of critical management studies (CMS). It draws upon the emergence of critical management education (CME), which ‘understands management as a political, cultural, and ideological phenomenon’ by giving voice to individuals and managers practising it (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003: p.15). It then focuses on reflection and reflective practice as key tenants of critical management education. This chapter informs readers about how the literature approaches reflective practice and highlights the potential drawbacks of such an approach to management learning and education. It further develops an argument that stresses the need to move beyond narrower conceptualizations of reflective practice in order to make it meaningful for learners. The review then draws upon different learning theories in the area of management learning and education to suggest a move beyond the cognitive and situated reflection which traditional theories focus on, towards engendering a critical sense, i.e. critically reflective practice.

Chapter 3, on action learning theory and practice, reviews the key literature that formulates its body of knowledge. In the first instance, this chapter informs readers about developments within action learning as a learning practice, from Revans’ (1983) philosophy to its contemporary variants. Then it focuses on critical action learning – a practice that aims to ‘debunk conventional wisdom’ on management theory and practice and challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions which it harbours (Willmott, 1997b: p.173). The core features are discussed in relation to the traditional aspects of action learning practice, before a review is presented of its extensions into other sociological disciplines such as gender, power and systems psychodynamics. The review finally offers insights on how action learning has been cross-pollinated with other fields like culture and higher education, etc.

Chapter 4 sheds light on culture from a social constructionist perspective. It informs the reader about the assumptions upon which individuals internalize culture and its practices. The chapter draws upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu to develop a critical understanding of culture and cultural practice. Bourdieu's thinking tools such as habitus, field and capital provide insights into an integrated system of practice embodied by individuals, as well as offering a context for developing a critical understanding of culture which breaks with the notions of existentialism, structuralism and objectivist and substantialist thinking proposed by some realists. The critical theory of culture and cultural action as proposed by Bourdieu (1977; 1984) argues for cultural relativism, in which culture is not only limited to cognition, but is also situated within a particular context that can be relatively different to that of other groups, communities or societies.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Beyond Cognitive and Situated Reflection in Management Learning and Education**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is twofold as it reviews the literature in management learning and education: firstly, to develop an understanding of how reflective practice can enhance criticality in learners, and secondly to establish the significance of reflection across theoretical perspectives on learning. This chapter urges a move beyond narrower conceptualizations of reflective practice by reviewing learning theories that counter technical rationality and encourage critically reflective learning (Willmott, 1997b; Schön, 1983). In the context of the growing debates about traditional management education, especially in the context of the MBA, a critical perspective addresses and tries to develop a holistic understanding of the social and political complexities influencing individual practices (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2012; Willmott, 1994; Reynolds & Vince, 2004a,b; Currie & Knights, 2003).

A critically reflective practice has a tendency to recognize and make visible the political dimensions and power irregularities between learners, experts and the social context which otherwise are hidden in management education (e.g. Mezirow, 1991a; Reynolds, 1999a,b; Giroux, 1981). In this study, the literature is reviewed to lay a foundation for understanding the possibility of a reflective practice that can enhance criticality in the Pakistani MBA. As this study draws upon action learning, the literature review in Chapter 3 also acknowledges reflective practice as a core design element in its philosophy which enables learners to develop insights with others to solve complex problems (e.g. Vince, 2004b). Therefore, in relation to the overarching research question of this study, the chapter is helpful in cutting

across dominant perspectives to situate reflection in the learning literature and develop an argument that urges a move beyond cognitive and situated levels of reflection towards engendering a critical sense (e.g. Reynolds, 1999). This is accomplished in two steps, reflected in the two parts of this chapter. The first part situates reflective practice within the broader literature of management learning and critical management education, and goes on to develop the ground for its practice in the higher education context. This part also focuses on identifying potential challenges and drawbacks to reflective practice. The second part discusses in detail the essence of reflective practice across dominant perspectives in management learning, i.e. cognitive and situated, to present a case for looking beyond the cognitive-situated split of learning to engender a critical sense of reflective practice.

## **2.2. Reflective Learning in Management Education**

### ***The Changing Context of Management Learning and Education***

Management learning, according to Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997), is:

‘[...] an area of both professional practice and theoretical inquiry, and has as a special concern with the linking of these two domains in a way that advances both. Professional practice adds to management learning theory, and theoretical insights add to practitioners' activities’ (Burgoyne & Reynolds, 1997: p.1)

The term management learning has wider application as a subject area seeking to understand the design, process and dynamics of learning to better manage organizations (Fox, 1997: p.25). Anderson (2008) adds that academic institutions are now increasingly focusing on ‘learning’ and the ‘learner’, by replacing the terms ‘education’ and ‘student’ from their academic practice (p.25). The use of the term *learning* in this study is similar to what Anderson (2008) suggests that:

‘The notion of learning [...] embraces the idea of the learner becoming much more active in the process of gaining new knowledge and understanding rather than being the passive recipient’ (Anderson, 2008: p.25).

Management learning aims to provide a body of knowledge, which is then applied to the areas of management education and development. The terms management education and management development, as Fox (1997) suggests, exceedingly overlap one another but tend to differentiate in their focus (p.22). Management education, Anderson (2008) adds, focuses on activities that higher and further educational institutions provide to teach, managers and the would-be managers, knowledge about management theory and practice (p.5). While Cullen and Turnbull (2005) suggest that, management development is like an overarching field which has ‘emerged from a range of disciplines [...] which either frame the reality of management or reframe the reality experienced by managers’ to improve managerial performance in organizations (p.336).

The recent advancements in literature on management education, drawing on critical management studies, propose the introduction of more critical and reflective ways of learning the art of management (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012). The goal of critical management studies, according to Alvesson and Willmott (2012), is to see beyond the apparent ways of achieving productivity, profitability and growth.

‘In critical management studies (CMS), *best management practice* is not a matter of identifying the most technically rational means of achieving currents ends (e.g. profitable growth). Rather, *best practice* evaluated in terms of its contribution to the realization of the progressive objectives of social justice, greater autonomy, responsibility, democracy and ecologically sustainable development’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012: p.28, emphasis added)

The critical aspect to management aims to address the wider problems which have emerged in the recent past (such as corporate scandals, unethical practices, de-humanized workplaces, economic depressions etc.) to acknowledge the broader implications that organizations have over society (e.g. Khurana, 2007; Grey & Mitev, 1995; Willmott, 1994; Pfeffer & Fong,

2004 etc.). The pressure for developing newer ways to learning have brought the two fields of management education and development together by academic institutions, business schools in particular, to re-think their managerialist pedagogies (French & Grey, 1996; Fox, 1997). However, the critical school of thought faces challenges to implementing alternative (critical and reflective) approaches to learning management in business schools.

The challenges evolve in light of how business schools primarily view their 'mission' to providing a 'pool' of academically qualified business graduates, from which organizations 'select their future generations of managers' (Reed & Anthony, 1992: p.596). More so, what this thinking has done, as Grey and Mitev (1995) argue, is that it has commercialized management education by making business schools 'producers' and students as 'consumers' of knowledge (p.159). The debate over business school education (curriculum and pedagogy) has emerged in light of the propositions made by the critical school of thought. Proponents of the critical school (e.g. Willmott & Alvesson, 2012; French & Grey, 1996; Currie & Knights, 2003 etc.) argue for a critical management pedagogy which can be thought of as an alternative to countering the managerialist epistemology, i.e. positivistic, technicistic, and functional approaches to management learning. The critical management pedagogy encourages reflective insight, questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions and empowering learners to take account of the social, political as well as emotional perspective to management practice (Willmott, 1994; Vince, 2010).

Arguing for making the learning process meaningful to encourage critical thinking, Willmott (1997a,b, 1994) stresses that management education could become more significant by making learning sites insightful through 'cognitive [...] and experiential insights generated by [the process of] action learning' (p.106). With the introduction of action learning, a way of developing intellectually, emotionally and socially by a group of people solving real-world

problems using reflective insight (Pedler, 2012), the focus has shifted towards critical management pedagogy which encourages reflexivity. The notions of critical reflection in classrooms (Reynolds, 1999b), classroom as reflections of real world (Reynolds & Trehan, 2001) and critical classrooms (Currie & Knights, 2003) offer alternatives to the traditionalist managerialist philosophy imparted by business schools. Mintzberg's (2004) polemic on MBA education confronts the managerialist pedagogy that aims to isolate the individual from its context through simulations, role-play or case-study methods to learning about managerial issues in organizations. French and Grey (1996) stress that managerialist pedagogies tend to create a false sense of knowledge transfer from the classroom to the workplace. Grey and Mitev (1995) note that the managerialist pedagogy

‘[...] replicates common-sensical views by treating management as a morally and politically neutral technical activity. Hence management education becomes primarily concerned with the acquisition of techniques, regardless of the context of their application’ (Grey & Mitev, 1995: p.152)

They further suggest that in order to debunk managerialist perspectives to management practice, the critical management perspective helps to:

‘[...] analyse management in terms of its social, moral and political significance and, in general terms, to challenge management practice rather than seen to sustain it’ (Grey & Mitev, 2004: p.152).

Given how Grey and Mitev (2004) indicate CME to challenge technical-rationality and develop a holistic understanding of management practice, reflection can play an active role in promoting criticality within learners (e.g. Reynolds, 1998; Vince, 2002). Cunliffe (2004) also suggests that reflective practice in management education is important as it enables learners to think ‘critically’ about their ‘own assumptions and actions [...] to develop more collaborative, responsive, and ethical ways of managing organizations’ (p.408). A significant aspect of reflective practice is that it makes individuals aware of the assumptions that

underpin their thoughts, beliefs and actions. It also brings to surface the relations of power which otherwise have been hidden in the form of taken-for-granted assumptions about individuals' position and focuses on challenging hierarchies (Vince, 2002). However, making visible and challenging beliefs and power-positions might result in the production of fears and anxieties, which again act as sites for learning about feelings, people and relationships (Vince, 2002). Therefore, reflective practice acts as a key tenant to critical management education promotes 'different ways of thinking about management learning and practice' (Cunliffe, 2004: p.408).

### ***Reflection and Reflective Practice in Learning: Opportunities and Challenges***

Eraut (1994) defines reflection from two perspectives. First, as a cognitive act, it refers to 'interpreting and understanding cases or situations by reflecting on what one knows about them' (ibid. p.156). This aspect attunes an individual towards a form of deliberation in which previous knowledge, experience or events are taken into account with the possibility of shaping unformulated thoughts and actions. Second, as a metacognitive activity, it refers to transforming cognitive thoughts into actions by reconceptualising actions and situations by way of reflective dialogue (ibid.). The reframing of thoughts pursues a critical process in which individuals engage in questioning the assumptions they make towards conceptualizing their actions and experiences (Barnett, 1992). Reflection plays a significant role in action-oriented pedagogies, which encourage reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983; Munby, 2012). Similarly, Brockbank and McGill (1998) suggest that reflection, like in action learning, consists of a twofold perspective that comprises of actions to think over knowledge (cognition) and engaging faculties of thought for critically assessing what shapes that knowledge (meta-cognition) to transform practice (p.83). They further add that reflection

is valuable for learning in the higher education context, given its ability ‘to encourage deeper levels of learning’ (*ibid.* p.70).

Engaging in reflection, or reflective practice according to Barnett (1992), enables individuals ‘to develop [their] capacity to keep an eye on themselves, and to engage in critical dialogue with themselves in all they think and do’ (p.198). Reflective practice encourages a ‘reflexive process’ which critically interrogates the basis of thoughts and actions of individuals by creating a dialogic relationship between practitioners and their thoughts (*ibid.*). The idea of reflective practice finds its roots in the works of Schon (1983) who promoted the idea of reflective practice to enhance individuals’ ability to look beyond the immediate, for the sake of improving performance. According to Brockbank and McGill (1998), reflective practice in the context of higher education can prove beneficial in three ways. First, learners can engage in reflective practice to enhance their ability to learn. Second, it can also help to unearth practices, which are taken-for-granted by individuals and articulate a way of improving them. Third, it can contribute to making individuals aware of their own ways of learning and practicing and their position within the process – thus promoting critical awareness i.e. reflexivity.

Reflexivity, according to Bleakley (1999), refers to ‘an interrogation of the conditions under which, for example, notions of identity, such as ‘autonomy’ and ‘personal agency’, are constituted and accepted as valid, or are culturally legitimised’ (p.322). Reflexivity is not just a means of people to becoming aware of themselves but it is an essential pre-condition to becoming a critically reflective practitioner. Reflexivity, therefore, ‘requires the means to critically engage in self-monitoring [...] and self-confrontation’ or to examine actions and experiences which have been taken-for-granted (Brockbank & McGill, 1998: p.51). The ability to become a reflexive practitioner provides necessary grounds for engaging in

reflective dialogue with their self to becoming self-aware of the situations and actions in which they are situated in. The reflexive process tends to culminate with critical thinking – a holistic view of the self in relation to the world (Bleakley, 1999).

In spite of the benefits reaped through reflection, Harvey and Knight (1996) argue that reflective practice is becoming a catchy term that is termed by scholars as a solution to MBA education. They suggest that while reflection is useful in becoming better practitioners, ‘it can easily be self-conforming’ (p.160). They further caution that the transformatory potential underpinning reflective practice must not be taken for granted. Reflective practice in context to the critical literature poses transformative potential for changing lives (e.g. Knights & Willmott, 1999). The existing literature highlights the challenges of reflective practice for learners and practitioners from three distinct viewpoints, which I have presented below:

- Emotions, power and diversity – reflection has the potential to make visible the ‘socio-dynamics’ of the society and therefore calling into question the ability to openly challenge sensitive matters and thus brings along issues of social hierarchies into play. Implicitly, if not explicitly, as a result emotions are provoked which demarcate distinct boundaries between learners as powerful or powerless. This concept concurs with Vince’s (2002) visualization of emotional trigger in group learning. Reynolds (1997) suggests that countering emotional barriers is essential in critical reflection, which helps by making sense of how emotions and feelings shape individual identity in the broader social context.
- Transformatory potential of reflection – reflection has the tendency to have a transformatory impact for individuals who experiences it at deeper levels. Rather, experiences of a critical reflection can have varying consequences for different people and not necessarily emancipatory. For example at the individual level, reflection can

help unearth the contradictions in the learning process, which may or may not fit well with the broader social setup. However, critical theory is obstructed with a multitude of challenges such as isolation of individuals at societal levels including social hierarchies, social status and structures.

- Disruptive potential of critical reflection – it is noted that where critical reflection locates actions and experiences in relation to the ‘self’ (Reynolds, 1997), at the same time it might create disruptive consequences (Brookfield, 1994). Critical reflection might be incoherent within a larger context as the group set up is a smaller space to challenge others and self. Weil & McGill (1989) argue that to some extent critical reflection is limited to the self, whereas it does not rectify the wrong.

### **2.3. Beyond Cognitive and Situated Reflection: Towards Engendering a Critical Sense**

Historically, the conception of reflective practice was invisible as learning was thought to be imbued in behavioral change (Bass and Vaughan, 1966). As a behaviorist conception, learning is traditionally focused on outcomes of the process, rather than the design or process itself. Bass and Vaughan (1966) define learning as ‘a relatively permanent change in behavior that occurs as a result of practice or experience’ (p.8). This idea of learning isolates the learner and the process from its context by reducing it to observable behavioral change, thus presenting it as a product of knowledge gathering. Reynolds (1999b) suggests that such an approach has given rise to the traditional classroom-based pedagogies, which are hierarchical, having a knowledge expert and a passive receiver of knowledge. These hierarchical pedagogies, in light of Reynolds (1999b), restore the power dynamics with the all-knowing teacher who prepares individuals for the reproduction of knowledge through evaluation of the observable behavioral. Anderson (2008) critiques these classroom pedagogies by suggesting that they ignore ‘the role of individual and group cognitive processes and casts the learner as

an unsuspecting and unthinking being, ready to be changed in whatever way is deemed desirable by the educator' (p.25). In this section, I review dominant theories in management learning and education literature to argue for moving beyond cognitive and situated perspectives of reflection, towards engendering critical self-awareness.

### ***The Cognitive Perspective***

The cognitive perspective views learning to take place within the 'minds' of individual learners (Fox, 1997b: p.729). This perspective considers learning as a personalized activity with which academics, practitioners and educators help learners focus on their problems (ibid.). Learning is regarded as an internalized process in which learners consume knowledge within settings that facilitate learning and development. A possible major drawback of the cognitive perspective is its inability to acknowledge the social, political and cultural context in which the learning occurs (Reynolds, 1999a). Within the cognitive perspective, I discuss two key perspectives: '**reflection**' and '**experiential**' learning.

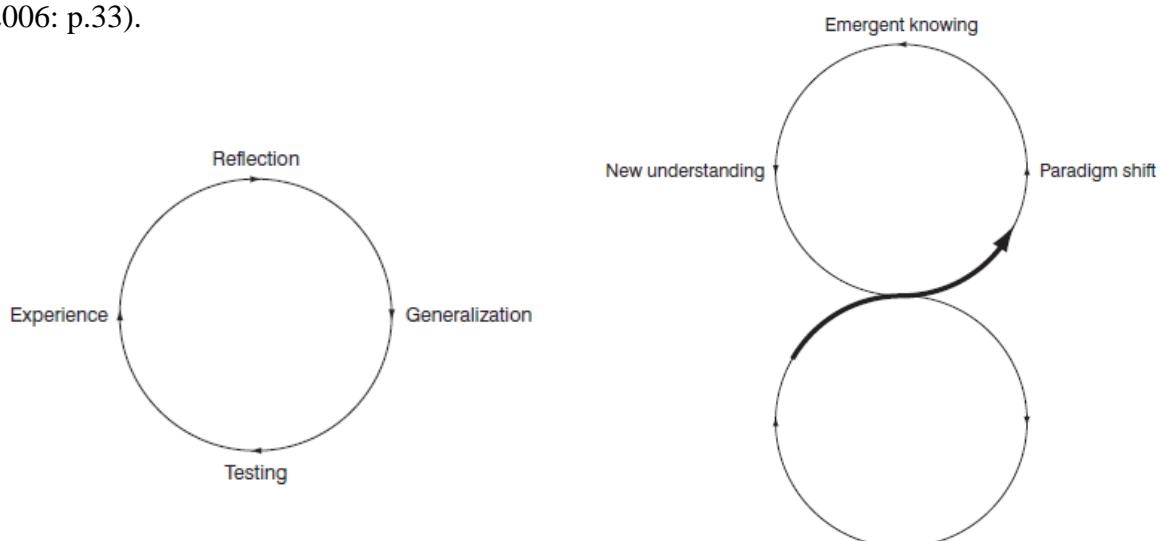
Traditionally, **reflection** in the cognitive domain has been used for bridging management theory with practice to improve performance: reflection as a 'cognitive activity' involving individuals to analyze the practicalities of the world (Kemmis, 1985). Reflection revolves around assumptions, which we develop to give meaning to the world. Brookfield (1995: p.2) suggests that 'assumptions are the taken-for-granted beliefs about the world, and our place within it, that seem so obvious to us as not to need to be stated explicitly'. He further adds that, 'assumptions give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do. Becoming aware of the implicit assumptions that frame how we think and act is one of the most puzzling intellectual challenges we face in our lives' (p.2). Brookfield (1995: p.2) indicates that reflection is usually based upon 'three broad categories' of assumptions:

- '*Paradigmatic assumptions*' - assumptions which individuals use to make sense of the world around them;
- '*Prescriptive assumptions*' - assumptions which emerge from the social world surrounding the individual to provide an understanding of how things are done;
- '*Causal assumptions*' - assumptions, which arise as a reaction to what happens around the individuals' social world;

Fook and Askeland (2007) consider reflection as a process for bringing into account the aforesaid assumptions. These assumptions are usually a product of our experience that determines the nature of our practice. Reflection, therefore, for practitioners has been an important contributor to the cognitive perspective. With regards to the practice perspective, Donald Schon's concept of the 'reflective practitioner' could be considered as key contribution towards reflective practice (Schon, 1983). Schon (1983) defines reflective practice as a practice in which individuals think about themselves and learn from their actions and experiences. From an educational viewpoint, Schon opposed the technical and rational knowledge base provided by academic institutions. He further argues that the learning design supporting management education must avoid resulting in a problem-solving exercise, to finding the best solution for a problem, and ignoring the problem setting, the process for achieving solution and the alternative ends to a problem. Reflection, according to Schon (1983), is susceptible to a kind of rigor that is both like and unlike the rigor of scholarly research and controlled experiment (p.ix). For Schon (1983) it was not just reflection, rather 'reflection-in-action' that contested the concept of 'technical-rationality' imparted by academic institutions (p.21). Technical-rationality, in Schon's (1983) view, is unable to resolve the predicament of 'rigor or relevance' which often leads to the 'crisis of confidence in professional knowledge' (p.3-42). Rather, he suggests that 'our knowing is in our action',

i.e. ‘reflection-in-action’, through which we can attain insight into ourselves and about the processes in which our actions are embedded (p.49).

Another key contribution to the reflective perspective was provided by Argyris and Schon (1974) known as the single-loop and double-loop learning. The idea behind this concept was to propose a strategy for ‘improving the way things are done and learning that transforms the situation’ (Brockbank & McGill, 2006: p.33). The single-loop learning aims to acquire knowledge and skills for immediate success, but tends to ‘maintain an existing situation’ (Redmond, 2006: p.43). Adequate amount of reflection may be involved in achieving improvement in the situation or performance, but the underlying values and ways remain unchanged – see figure 2.1. The single-loop learning aims at day-to-day management of organizations and usually involves four key steps in its cycle: it starts with reflection on situation, then moves on to generalization to further test the knowledge in a situation, and ends with the resultant outcome of that experience (Brockbank & McGill, 1998). While, the double-loop learning is a type of reflective learning in which ‘assumptions about ways of seeing things are challenged and underlying values are changed’ (Brockbank & McGill, 2006: p.33).



**Figure 2-1: Single-loop and Double-loop Learning**  
[Source: Brockbank & McGill (1998) and McGill & Brockbank (2006)]

According to Argyris and Schon (1974), double-loop learning tends to question the taken-for-granted assumptions i.e. to change perceptions or views. The double-loop learning essentially carries out the same steps as single-loop but aims to add the knowledge gained from an experience to result in a paradigm-shift, usually resulting into emergent knowledge which then goes on to developing a new understanding of practice and the situation (Brockbank & McGill, 1998) – see figure 2.1 (above).

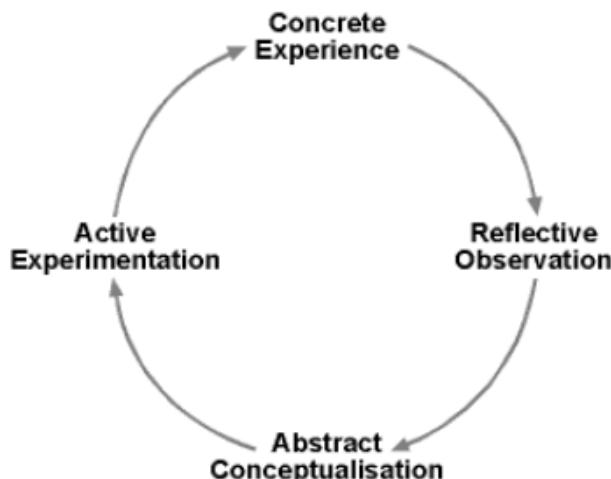
A recent study on the use of single-loop and double-loop learning in a developing country's context suggested that looped-learning could be used to enhance individual awareness towards repeated failures (Peeters & Robinson, 2015). The study also indicated that by using loops, teachers' awareness towards adapting certain learning methodologies could be enhanced by not only reflecting upon their actions but also questioning their role and beliefs in the process (ibid. p.214). As a critique to this study, it overlooks the significance of the context in which the looped learning takes place i.e. a developing country. The inconsistency of the loops is exposed in a way when reflections of teachers are imposed upon student-learners as best practices. Greenwood (1993) argues that the loops ignore the 'names and frames which governs [...] practice' i.e. context (p.1187). Therefore, the loops tend to contribute towards cognitive development of learners in making them aware of their own actions without situating them and the process in their context.

The concept of single-loop learning is somewhat similar to the idea of *experiential* management education, in which:

'[...] goals are set on the basis of theory, action is taken and, on the basis of [...] experience and reflection, a new action or plan is [then] devised' (Brockbank & McGill, 2006: p.33).

Experience plays a significant role in experiential education which facilitates the process of knowledge creation, sense-making and knowledge transfer in teaching, training and

development. Since its conception by John Dewey in the mid-1930s, experiential education has been used in multiple disciplines including sociology, anthropology, science and research due to its interdisciplinary nature (Carver, 1996). However, David Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning has greatly contributed to the expanding philosophy of experiential education. Kolb's experiential learning cycle is an influential theoretical model within management education that illustrates the nature of experiential learning in a cyclical manner (Vince, 1998). Kolb's (1984) model defines learning as, "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984: p.25).



**Figure 2-2:** Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle

[Source: Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall]

Kolb further suggests that the cycle begins from the third assumption: when a learner interacts with the environment. The learner tries engaging with the situation and attempts to resolve problems, which results into individual insight and knowledge creation (Vince, 1998). The learner is assumed to learn by reacting to the demands of the situation through two aspects of knowledge: 'acquisition and transformation', while each consisting of further two phases (Kayes, 2002) – Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle is presented at figure 2.2.

The learning cycle, as presented in figure 2.2., suggests that in the acquisition part the individual first acquires knowledge of the situation by gaining first-hand knowledge (i.e. concrete experience) and then breaking it down into meaningful bits (i.e. abstract conceptualization). The second dimension, ‘transformation’, is responsible to help individuals to reflect upon their experience (i.e. reflective observation) and stimulating the learner to interact with the situation (i.e. active experimentation) to resolve problems (Kayes, 2002). Lastly, the learning cycle comes back to the point where it started i.e. concrete experience as a result of active experimentation, and the learning cycle assumes that the learner would now learn to choose a different strategy to solve problems, if they remain unresolved (ibid.).

Despite experiential learning’s significant contribution to management learning, the model has some limitations. Kolb’s model focuses on individual experience and this experience is shaped by actions and events, but the experience is not considered as being shaped by ‘social power relations’ (Vince, 1998: p.307). In a way experiential learning extends itself into the context but to marginally acknowledge how social reality affects individual experience. The model naively situates experience in an apolitical environment where individuals’ position in society is unquestioned – which Vince (1998) criticizes as ‘a particular dynamic of oppressive relations’ (ibid.). He further adds Kolb’s model was a significant contribution in informing about the importance of experience but it was conceived far too long ago and management practices have since changed. What the experiential learning cycle lacks is the element of critical reflective practice, which questions ‘assumptions that underpin organizing [process] in order to make power relations visible’ (Vince, 2002: p.63). Kolb’s model tends to generalize experiences and actions which are aimed to solve the problem (Vince, 1998), most probably through a trial and error strategy in order to make an informed decision.

The use of reflection and experience in management learning has been a key feature in transforming learning practices. Certainly what this has done is to provide ideas to researchers about how reflection and experience are key ingredients in bringing about change. One such perspective, which hovers between the cognitive and critical perspective to management learning, is ‘transformative learning’ – a concept suggested by Mezirow (1991b). Kitchenham (2008) quotes the transformative learning center (TLC) to define transformative learning as a ‘deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions’ (p.104). Mezirow’s transformative learning is influenced by three key ideas: Kuhn’s (1962) paradigms for scientific discovery; Freire’s (1970) theory of conscientization – i.e. developing consciousness; and Habermas’ (1984) domains of learning – i.e. technical, practical and emancipatory (Kitchenham, 2006: p.105-109). In earlier works, Mezirow (1978) proposed 10 phases to achieving transformation, which started from a problem, carrying through a course of action and ending with a reintegration of experience into one’s perspective. However, a later revision in the theory suggested that within transformative learning, three types of learning occur through three learning processes (Mezirow, 1985). Firstly, *instrumental learning* aims to work with what the learner already knows about the problem or the situation; secondly, *dialogic learning* inclines the use of questioning to achieve a broader understanding of the problem and alternative solutions; and thirdly, *self-reflective learning* focuses on bringing about the change in personal practice to solve the problem. Within each learning type, Kitchenham (2006) further notes that, there are three learning processes that operate: ‘*learning within meaning schemes*’ – evaluating existing knowledge; ‘*learning new meaning schemes*’- acquiring new knowledge; ‘*learning through meaning transformation*’ – redefining the problem in light of existing and new knowledge schemes (p.111). Much later, Mezirow (1995) further refined his transformative learning theory from a constructivist perspective by identifying the three types of reflection, which

individuals deploy to solve problems. These are *content reflection* – reflecting on existing knowledge and situation; *process reflection* – reflecting on the process through which existing meanings are assigned to a problem and new meanings are formulated; and *premise reflection* – transforming meanings in light of knowledge schemes (Kitchenham, 2006: p.115).

Although the ‘transformative’ process draws its roots from the notion of ‘critical theory’ giving reflection the degree of criticality (Fook, 2004: p.40-41), reflection to an extent entices experience which serves as a tool for learning and a point for reference (Fook & Askeland, 2007). Despite a powerful learning scheme as transformative learning, Usher (1985) stresses that what distinguishes the cognitive perspective is its reflection-on-experience: as being a ‘thoughtful’ and ‘productive’ aspect of decoding an individual’s experiences of the world. Reynolds (1998: p.186) suggests that reflection aids in making sense of the ‘experience’ gained. This sense making also reckoned as ‘learning from experience’ is usually done through ‘one’s own thoughts’ or ‘with the help of others’ ideas’. According to Kolb (1984) learning and reflection go hand in hand. He proposes that ‘learning’ from ‘experience’, generates *insightful* ‘knowledge’ that is actionable (p.38). Reynolds (1998: p.186) is skeptical of Kolb’s (1984) as it restricts reflection in a cyclical process.

Reynolds (1998) further focuses on Schon’s (1983) work to elaborate reflection, as a ‘process of surfacing, testing, and evaluating intuitive understandings which are intrinsic to experience’ (p.186). Schon (1983) considers that the learning through reflection outweighs learning through institutions, as the earlier incorporates ‘experience’ as a learning tool. Reynolds (1998: p.186) quotes that, ‘the concept of reflection in experiential learning also embraces an evaluation of alternative explanations and courses of action and of assumptions on which these are based’. Therefore, in Reynolds (1998) view, reflection is a powerful tool to unearth

the deeply-rooted assumptions that govern our experiential encounters with the world. It is merely more than just a thoughtful process, but one that invigorates new course of action leading to newer experience with a greater degree of understanding of the taken-for-granted knowledge. Deeper versions of reflection, which draw upon a critical perspective, hinge on challenging the underlying assumptions with the intent of transforming existing views and will be discussed later on.

### ***The Situated Perspective***

The situated perspective to management learning moves beyond a cognitive, psychological, understanding of the learner and the learning process. Fox (1997) suggests that the situated view primarily applies the insight drawn from psychology, anthropology and sociology to study the ‘practical and social learning processes going on outside classrooms, processes [...] which [...] the cognitive [perspective] have tended to ignore’ (p.27). Brown et al. (1989) argue that educational methods, which draw upon cognitive psychology:

‘[...] assume a separation between knowing and doing, treating knowledge as an integral, self-sufficient substance, theoretically independent of the situations in which it is learned and used’ (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989: p.32)

The didactic methods to education arising from cognitive psychology aim at transferring knowledge, which consists of decontextualized but a formal set of predefined knowledge (Fox, 1997). Brown et al. (1989) further note that

‘the activity and context in which learning takes place are thus regarded as merely ancillary to learning – pedagogically useful, of course, but fundamentally distinct and even neutral with respect to what is learned’ (Brown et al. 1989: p.32)

The situated perspective to management learning, as Fox (1997) suggests, situates cognition and the learning activity within its learning context. It argues that ignoring the context in which knowledge is produced overthrows the notion of providing robust, and sustainable,

knowledge to managers. One such study reported by Nicolini et al. (2016) uses the notion of situated learning to develop a community of learners within the healthcare sector. The study aimed to reconcile ‘different ways of organizing knowledge’ with the expertise of medical practitioners to take into account the changing context of medical practice in the UK (ibid. p.255). The basic premise of situated learning in their study was to understand how learning, for medical practitioners, is rather ‘a process of becoming socialized in a particular way of doing and knowing’ i.e. integrating learning with situated practice (p.256). They further stress that learning, as a situated activity, is in fact a process of ‘absorbing and being absorbed in the “culture of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991: p.95 cited in Nicolini et al. 2016: p.256-257). Their study demonstrates that medical education is often preoccupied in imparting scientific knowledge, which finds little relevance to actual practice and therefore recognizing the ‘voices’ surrounding medical encounter could result in the development of a learning culture (p.261). Hence, learning could be fostered by taking into account what the social context of medical culture has to offer for practitioners.

The situated learning domain itself has been raised upon key theoretical ideas provided by Vygotsky, Lave and Wenger etc. Moreover, theoretical insights provided by Brown and colleagues also help to outline the assumptions made by the situated perspective to learning, which are: The first assumption argues about how ‘situations structure cognition’ (Brown et al. 1989: p.32). They note that informal use of language allows learners to internalize words that are context-dependent, rather context-neutral. The second assumption suggests that ‘concepts are both situated and progressively developed through activity’ (Brown et al. 1989: p.33). This assumption implies that knowledge acquired might be useful to gain insight into the problem, but the learner may remain unable to apply it in a situation. The third assumption notes that behavior, actions and belief-systems are embodied within learners at an earlier-age (ibid.). They suggest that learners get a chance to ‘practice and observe’ practices

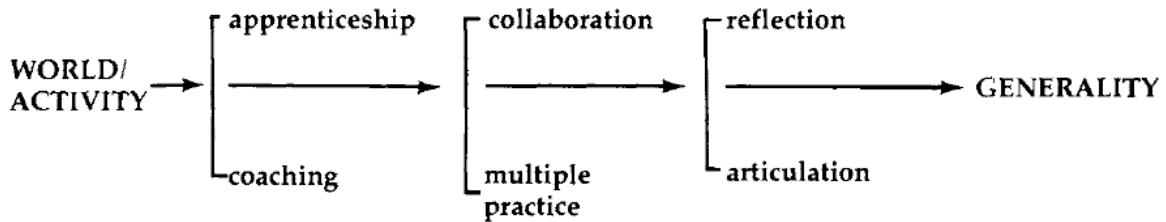
of mature members of community through which they enculturate themselves as future, competent, members (p.33). The fourth assumption is critical in this concept as it suggests that practices are ‘framed by its culture’ (p.34). Brown et al. (1989) further state that their ‘meaning and purpose are socially constructed through negotiations among present and past members’ (p.34). The meanings imparted upon certain practices formulate the authentic knowledge of the culture, which in most cases is taken for granted by the cognitive learning approaches. Lastly, the final assumption states that informal learning during ordinary, authentic, activities provides an implicit sense of authentic knowledge of a culture (p.35).

Brown et al. (1989) therefore propose to strengthen the cognitive perspective to learning by structuring learning activities to include indexical, contextual, meanings for generating insight. Their idea of ‘cognitive apprenticeship’ tries to ‘enculturate students into authentic practices through activity and social interaction in a way similar to that evident – and evidently successful – in craft apprenticeship’ (p.37). According to this learning model, the learning is considered an embedded activity, which generates insight into solving complex problems through a holistic understanding of the underlying problem. These learning activities, though linear in nature as shown in figure 2.3 (next page) – unlike cognitive learning cycles, utilizes some form of facilitation or coaching for the learner within a collaborative (collective) environment that aims to organize reflection over practice for articulating key insights about the problem and the situation (ibid. p.40).

Lave and Wenger (1991) make a key contribution to the situated perspective through their work on the situated learning theory. Within this theory, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that:

‘[...] any complex system or work and learning has roots in and interdependencies across its history, technology, developing work activity, careers and the relation between newcomers and old-timers and among co-workers and practitioners’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991: p.61)

### Students' Progress from Embedded Activity to Generality



**Figure 2-3:** Brown et al. (1989) Model for Cognitive Apprenticeship

[Source: Brown et al., 1989; JS Brown, A. Collins, P. Duguid; Situated cognition and the culture of learning. Educational Researcher, 18 (1) (1989), pp. 32–34]

They further argue that many studies on learning tend to ignore the social aspects of the learning process and the influence that the social activities and context have on learning. The works of Vygotsky (1987) also suggest that the cognitive development of young individuals takes place within social interaction of the more competent members of society. Vygotsky (1962) further suggests that the area in which this development takes place is the 'zone for proximal development' – an area where co-construction of knowledge takes place. The works of John Dewey (1933) also provide some pragmatic insight on how the social context influences learning, but his scientific understanding reduces learning within the bounds of institutionalized thinking. Such influences to studying learning have resulted in understanding the concept of learning in practical terms i.e. 'learning-in-practice' (Fox, 1997: p.27). However, the key tenant to Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory is their concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (LPP) (p.35). The notion of LPP suggests that:

'[...] learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move towards full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community' (Lave & Wenger, 1991: p.29)

To understand situated learning, LPP offers a way to take into account the relationship of the learner with others and its environment, and about 'activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice' (ibid.). In this sense, LPP moves beyond the notion

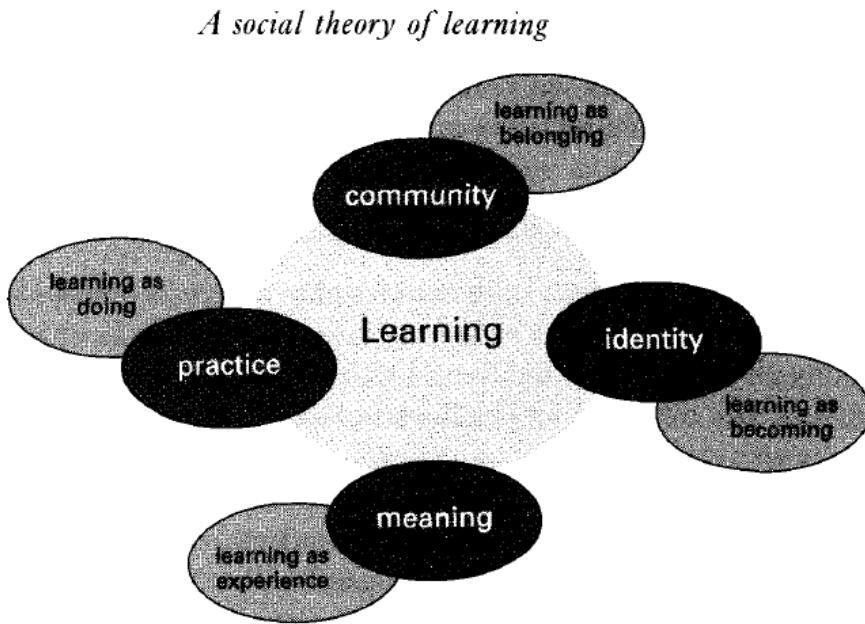
of cognitive apprenticeship, also proposed by Brown et al. (1989), as it acknowledges not only the historically and culturally situated process of learning, but it provides an understanding of ‘learning-in-practice’ coupled with the identity of individual learners. LPP can be considered as a ‘descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991: p.35). A breakdown of the notion of legitimate peripheral participation brings into focus three key aspects: the term legitimacy entails that the individuals act as members or agents of society that defines their sense of belonging. The element of *peripherality* suggests that the individual is likely to assume a range of roles in its capacity as a social agent, whereas participation draws attention to the complex notion of positionality of the individual within a community. However, the term has been used in full as legitimate peripheral participation by Lave and Wenger (1991) to exemplify that learning is inherently a social process.

The other key aspect of the situated learning theory is the concept of ‘communities of practice’ (CoP), which was further developed by Wenger (1998b). As a separate concept, CoP draws heavily on what Wenger (1998b) terms as a ‘social theory of learning’ (p.3). He further states that the ‘primary focus of this theory is on learning as social participation’ (p.4). Wenger (1998a) highlights the notion of participation as referring

‘not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities’ (Wenger, 1998a: p.4)

Therefore, Wenger (1998a) suggests that a social theory of learning must explore, identify and integrate the elements which characterize ‘social participation as a process of learning and knowing’ (p.5). The components which Wenger (1998b) identifies are, as given in figure 2.4: *meaning* – constructing knowledge to experience and understand the social world; *practice* – socio-historical perspectives which stimulate action; *community* – the social

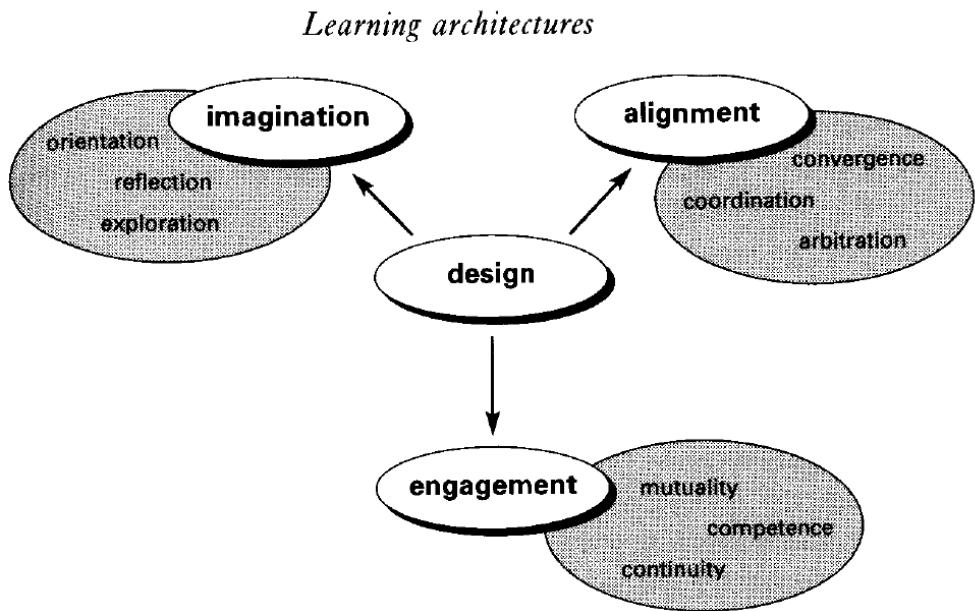
configuration that provides a sense of belonging; and *identity* – individual histories of being and becoming as members of a community within the wider social context (p.5).



**Figure 2-4:** Wenger's (1998a) Social Theory of Learning

[Source: Wenger, E. (1998): Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press]

The social theory of learning in Wenger's (1998) view is a critique of the organizational and educational designs which separate the social activities of learners in the process of teaching knowledge. This institutionalized version of imparting knowledge is decontextualized and irrelevant to acquiring competence in treating problems for sustainable solutions. Wenger's (1998) learning architecture provides further insight into designing educational programmes which acknowledge situational precursors influencing learning. The three elements, as depicted in figure 2.5, which he describes critical to a learning design are *imagination* – strengthening faculties of thought by encouraging 'orientation, reflection and exploration' of problem areas; *engagement* – providing an interactional environment which promotes 'mutuality, competence and continuity'; and *alignment* – learning that contributes to the problem through 'convergence, coordination and jurisdiction' (p. 237-239)



**Figure 2-5:** Architecture for Learning Designs

[Source: Wenger, E. (1998a): Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press]

Wenger (1998a) stresses that such a learning architecture helps accomplish learning that aids in longevity of learning within learners. Developing such architecture, for Wenger (1998a) required engaging with a range of other sociological perspective such as theories of social structures, practice, identity and situated experience (p.12). Despite the significance of taking the social context of the learner and learning into account, the situated learning theory has possibly been shortsighted in considering the historicity of learners and the assumptions upon which they construct their social reality and identity (e.g. Contu & Willmott, 2003). Lave and Wenger (1991: p. 42) do acknowledge the 'hegemony over resources for learning' and the 'unequal relations of power' that influence how individuals act but fall short of describing how their actions are embedded within its historical context. Contu and Willmott (2003) analyze the situated learning theory by arguing that 'historicizing' is an important precondition to situating learning within its context (p.287). They further emphasize that Lave and Wenger overlook the notion of historicity as it departs from their idea of 'situatedness' to a more established notion of learning based on internalization' (ibid.). Historicity of learners

moves beyond considering learning as a universal process by situating the context in its historical development of how actions of learners have been internalized in the first place. Therefore, the situated perspective to management learning pushes itself away from how the context has been embodied by learners to focusing on how learners are embedded within it.

### ***Organizing Critical and Reflective Practice***

The critical perspective to management learning, emerging from the tradition of critical management studies, aims to ‘radicalize and politicize the curriculum and to engender new ways of conceptualizing and problematizing’ management practice (Anderson, 2008: p.40). However, the critical perspective does not dismiss the cognitive or situated perspective rather it makes individuals conscious of not only their beliefs, actions and thoughts but also their socio-political context in which learning is taking place. It, therefore, deliberately aims to make individuals conscious of their surrounding context and also to challenge the taken-for-granted perspectives internalized by them during their socialization with that context (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012).

Perriton and Singh (2016) suggest that the critical perspective to management education has the ability to ‘disrupt and destabilize the idea of management as a disinterested [act]’ (p.77). Durante (2009) also points out that it is difficult to impart a reflective practice that encourages either critical reflection or reflexivity in business school context given their distinct bias of favoring technical-rationality. Perriton and Singh (2016) argue that despite the effectiveness of critical practice to management education, it will still be challenging to impart it as an overarching pedagogy in business schools. They further add that:

‘There are many different educational paths that can lead to critical engagement with the social impact of management practice; however, when these approaches are framed as *complimentary* to normative and technical approaches elsewhere in the business school [...] criticality is subsumed in the general debate about what constitutes ‘good teaching’, further

complicating the search for critical management education as a stand-alone concept' (Perriton & Singh, 2016: p.77)

Traditionally, Mingers (2000) suggests that the use of 'criticality' in management education aims to address the managerialist notions of management. He further argues that the idea of introducing criticality needs to focus our 'attention away from management as a class-based hierarchy towards managing as an activity' (p.222). For Mingers (2000), the term critical in management education explores two key dimensions of management practice:

'[...] the crucial or vital, issues facing management and organization [...] and the idea of adopting a critical stance towards the accepted, managerialist, assumptions underpinning most management education' (Mingers, 2000: p.224)

The learning process underpinning the critical perspective to management learning draws upon the use of practices like 'critical thinking' (Fisher, 2001) and 'critical reflection' (Reynolds, 1999a,b) under an overarching notion of 'critical management pedagogy' (Currie & Knights, 2003). Critical pedagogy in management tends to radicalize the learning 'content and process', moving beyond a mere reflection over experience or thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to management practices (Anderson, 2008).

The key elements of critical reflection and critical thinking act as cornerstone of critical management pedagogy which attempts to lead higher-level learning by making conscious the taken-for-granted knowledge, experiences or practices. The term 'criticality' – or 'being critical' is deeply-rooted in the concept of 'critical theory' that aims to uncover social practices to unearth the alterations in the society (Rosenberg, 1988). Critical theory historically evolved from the Frankfurt School (founded in 1923) and is attributed to the works of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Horkheimer (1982: p.244) suggests that as a theory it is grounded in the idea to 'liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them'. Moreover, critical theory is 'multidisciplinary' in nature and full of complexities. The theory aims to provide a holistic view of the social practices carried out in

the society with the intent to critique the ‘society’ and its so-called ‘culture’ (Rosenberg, 1988).

Carr (2001) notes that the philosophy of critical theory runs parallel with that of postmodernist thought, which aim to criticize functionalism, positivism and scientificity. He further states that critical theory ‘separates itself from both functionalist/objective and interpretive/practical science through a critical epistemology’ (p.209) It also rejects the concept of a highly structured and a disciplined world. The critical approach aims to change circumstances by empowering individuals to take charge of their own practice. It addresses issues of power and politics and challenges the relationships, which are tied with their knots (Ogbor, 2001). The critical perspective to learning could be further expanded from the critical management pedagogy’s viewpoint to understand its purpose within the broader management learning literature.

The notion of ***critical pedagogy*** attempts to humanize and democratize classrooms (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012). McLaren (1995: p.34) defines pedagogy as the ‘the process by which teachers and students negotiate and produce meaning’. Freire (1993) commented on pedagogy to be an integral part of the educational process that entails learning directed to change the behaviour of individuals. He further suggests that learning needs to be permanent to have been successful. Accompanying pedagogy with criticality yields ‘critical pedagogy’, which imparts learning by taking into account a holistic approach of the environment and spans beyond the duration spent in a classroom (Jasso & Jasso, 1995). Wink (2000: p.119) considers ‘critical pedagogy’ as not only a ‘method’ but a ‘way of life’. Yamada (2009: p.12) stresses that critical pedagogy utilizes ‘continuing dialogue’ towards learning. Critical pedagogy focuses on what is ‘outside’ and how it structures the ‘inside’ of a classroom. It acts as a catalyst to provide in-depth learning and a bonding agent to bridging ‘theory with

practice' (Yamada, 2009). Critical pedagogy tends to engage individuals with 'action' as a means of 'practicing to what is learnt'. Giroux (1988) stresses that theory and practice are two different 'objects' if they are let alone, but expanding learning to avenues outside the classroom might connect knowledge with practice. He quotes that 'knowledge becomes fertilized by practice and practice is guided by knowledge; theory and practice both change their nature once they cease to be separate' (p.50). Critical pedagogy embraces the changes in the real world to generate learning (Freire & Macedo, 1987: p.35)

The design and process of critical pedagogy probably could be best explained using Giroux's (1981) four-fold classification of pedagogues who adapt traditional to critical forms of learning. Reynolds (1999b) adds that the critical aspect to pedagogy tends to focus more on the process of learning and the learner to engender a conscious sense. Giroux (1981) compares two schools: '*theory*' on one axis, consisting of 'content-focused radicals' and 'strategy-based radicals'; and '*practice*', on the other which consists of 'critical radicals' and 'process radicals'. Reynolds (1999b: p.540) states that content-focused radicals are those 'whose emphasis is on presenting more politicized ideas through the curriculum' while strategy based radicals follow traditional classroom pedagogical styles which are 'typically influenced by exponents of student-centred learning'. The latter are usually influenced by the works of Freire (1970) and Knowles (1980). Giroux (1981) indicates that content-radicals use conventional pedagogical approaches, while process-radicals focus on 'less hierarchical methods' (as cited in Reynolds, 1999: p.540). Currie & Knights (2003: p31) summarize Reynolds (1999b) presentation of Giroux's (1981) work as:

' [...] traditional education that adopts traditional content and traditional process, strategy based radicals that adopt a traditional content and critical process, content focused radicals that adopt critical content and traditional process, and finally critical pedagogy that adopts a critical content and a critical process' (Currie & Knights, 2003: p31)

Critical pedagogy harnesses two key techniques in its pedagogical practice: *critical thinking* and *critical reflection*. Although there is little distinction between the two practices, but I have tried to present them as two different yet overlapping aspects of critical pedagogy. In my opinion these are crucial aspects of a critically reflective practice.

Mingers (2000) considers ***critical thinking*** as ‘the ability to evaluate the validity and strength of arguments and proposals’ (p.224). He further suggests that critical thinking consists of four key aspects (p.225-226):

- Critiquing the Rhetoric – evaluating other people’s knowledge;
- Critiquing the Traditional – assessing suppositions;
- Critiquing Authority – challenging power-position;
- Critiquing Objectivity – searching for underlying values;

In a way, critical thinking highlights the transition of knowledge from a learned to the learner in an educational process, holding substantial value for enthusiasts who claim critical thinking to be an essential learning outcome (Kuhn, 1999). Critical thinking is now recognized as a skill that enables individuals to fully-participate and grasp the entirety of the world they live in. Fisher (2001) argues that imparting ‘thinking’ as a skillset within education has been practiced by many educators. Many of these have tried devising their courses in such a way to ‘implicitly’ or ‘indirectly’ impart ‘thinking skills’ (p.1). Kuhn (1999: p.16) reflects on educators willing to incorporate thinking as part of their educational process by indicating if there was enough basis to create a ‘knowledge-base’ to allow thinking to ‘transpire’. However, thinking merely for random thoughts may not be counted as thinking-productively, although they are considered as thoughts but thoughts without a definitive goal. Idea of ‘thinking’ as a significant skill has emerged radically, especially with educators focusing on more ‘explicit’ approaches to incorporate such skillsets within business school

graduates (Fisher, 2001: p.1). Yamada (2009: p.12) suggests that ‘thinking’ is a skill, if structured with ‘innovative’, ‘imaginative’ and ‘problem-solving’ approaches could lead to ‘critical-thinking’. McPeck (1981: p.18) nurtures the notion of skill to ‘the extent that critical thinking is a skill, it is teachable in much the same way that other skills are teachable, namely through drills, exercises or problem solving in an area’. Literature on thinking suggests that much of the term, itself is delicately interwoven in the subject-context, and the process of decontextualizing thoughts to educate one-self through intra-cognitive interaction is like trying to attain criticality.

**Critical reflection**, as a core element of critical pedagogy, is similar to what Mingers (2000) explains about critical thinking. The difference could be sought in a way that critical reflection draws its roots from reflective practice, but it is slightly different as it aims for empowerment and emancipation of learners. In his work, Reynolds (1998) considers the degree of ‘criticality’ to provide impetus to reflection and reflection triggers action in a given ‘context’. Reynolds (1998; 1999) notes that critical reflection encompasses five key principles that warrant its inclusion in the critical perspective to management learning:

- Questioning of the taken for granted assumptions: knowledge, experience and practices;
- Organizing collective insight – moving from the individual to the collective perspective of learning;
- Examining the relations of power;
- Empowers and emancipates for a socially-just and democratic perspective;
- Counteracts objective and rational knowledge claims by making conscious what was hidden as ‘sectional interest’;

Reynolds (1998) contrasts Mezirow's work with Kemmis, and suggests that the latter provides a comprehensive understanding of critical reflection to be emancipatory in nature and that consider the social context. Kemmis (1985: p.145) defines critical reflection as an emancipatory approach 'aimed at freeing people from the dictates of taken-for-granted assumptions, habits, tradition, custom, domination and coercion and self-deception'. Reynolds (1999a) further draws on the work of Habermas as it considers the social, political and contextual significance into the critical reflective process, unlike the Deweyan traditionalist thinking. Reynolds (1999b: p.538) presents the characteristics of critical reflection which constitute of a 'commitment to questioning' the taken-for-granted beliefs or assumptions, 'process of power and ideology' to uncover the 'structures, procedures and practices', 'a social perspective' that considers the society rather than an individual, and 'fairness and democracy' to weigh the actual realities in the society.

Lastly, Reynolds (1999a) also warns management practitioners and academics about the possible pitfalls to critical pedagogy, a similar concern voiced by Brookfield as the dark side of critical reflection (1994). The possible pitfalls can lead to isolate individuals who pursue this technique as it challenges the prevailing social order. Other members might find this practice as being hostile i.e. challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions, and may sideline the individual aiming to employ these in their daily practices (Reynolds, 1999). Also critical reflection could pose disruptions and resistance to students in classroom-based environments who have not yet experienced critical methods. Currie and Knights (2003) also note that from a cultural context, critical methods may seem invasive and intrusive to eastern cultures as well as some western societies. Currie and Knights (2003) further state that academics pursuing a critical philosophy may seem to pose as superior and yet be bound within chains of social and moral obligations in educational programmes. Therefore, students and teachers

could superficially adapt critical methods for the sake of their educational programme, which might conceal the disparity of power (Perriton & Reynolds, 2004).

## **2.4. Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to review key theoretical perspectives on reflective practice in management learning and education. The chapter highlighted the significance of reflective practice as a catalyst for promoting critical thinking and awareness in management learners. The rationale for selecting this aspect of management education comes from my research focus, which considers reflective practice as a key way of developing criticality. The extensive literature on management learning and education also consistently points to reflection as a possible way of improving MBA education (Kelliher & Reinl, 2014). In addition, this chapter examines the literature to bring to the fore how reflection has been developed as practice across two dominant perspectives on learning (i.e. cognition and situation), before proposing that there is a need to develop a critically reflective practice.

A key outcome of this chapter is an understanding of how reflective practice is bound to shake up hierarchies in the learning space, making reflective practice a key element for scrutiny, for example within a Pakistani cultural context (e.g. Yeadon-Lee, 2013). The hierarchical positions of learners, experts and context are likely to create tensions that have the potential to impede learning if the complexities of the learning space are overlooked. Using the notion of reflective practice, especially in the form of action learning, to enhance criticality in Pakistani MBA students, is likely to result in sites of cultural tensions, which in turn can reveal the complexities and challenges of culture (e.g. Trehan & Pedler, 2009). However, within the context of this study these may also transform Pakistani MBA students by enabling them to develop a critically reflective practice that challenges their taken-for-granted assumptions and facilitates habits of critical thinking (e.g. Willmott, 1997).

Lastly, the review of the literature on management learning and education helps identify three important themes for developing a theoretical understanding of reflective practice. These themes suggest that reflection from a critical perspective:

- challenges beliefs, values and actions – provoking reflection on practices by drawing out differences and commonalities between the learner and her surroundings;
- transforms perceptions of the self – developing newer perspectives about the self in relation to others. Learners develop a tendency to create parallels between themselves and others; and
- creates awareness of social relations – makes learners aware of the relations of power and the context within which they are situated in relation to others. This creates emotional distress and concerns that people might hold back.

The chapter highlights the need to develop critical forms of management education, which acknowledge not only cognitive and situated perspectives but also aim to empower learners and democratize classrooms for deeper learning to occur. These considerations are especially useful in the context of the Pakistani MBA, as the existing culture is normative. Therefore, knowing how reflective practice works across different domains of learning can develop a deeper understanding of its use within this study and the Pakistani cultural context.

## CHAPTER 3

### Action Learning: Theory and Practice

#### 3.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the foundations of action learning theory and practice in the management learning and education literature. This chapter makes a significant contribution to exemplifying the philosophy underpinning action learning, which has the potential to challenge everyday practice (Dilworth et al., 2010), alter individual behaviour (Marsick & O’Neil, 1999) and reveal power relationships (Vince, 2004b; Stead, 2014). The emancipatory potential of action learning calls for greater scrutiny of its practices, especially in the context of foreign cultures (Willmott, 1994; Marquardt, 1998; Fenwick, 2003). Action learning is a powerful technique which has the ability to facilitate and transform actions through reflective insight, but it also mobilizes ‘conscious and unconscious [...] perceptions’ that can have a limiting effect on learners (Vince, 2008: p.93). Certain cultures have normative ways of acting in learning spaces and when challenged they can restrict action, for example in situations ‘when it is emotionally or politically expedient to refrain from action [or] when to avoid collective action’ (*ibid.*). In the context of this study, it is imperative to review the basis of action and practice in action learning, as the Pakistani MBA is normatively structured to reflect its wider culture. As normative practice, Pakistani MBA students are used to lectures, solving cases and isolating learning from its social context. The context in itself is not challenging. Rather, it is what challenges normative learning practices, which complicates the context. Therefore, in order to explore why the Pakistani MBA is a challenging context for organizing action learning, it is just as important to understand in what ways action learning challenges its assumptions, given its emancipatory power.

Enhancing criticality through reflective practice within the action learning process is likely to surface social and cultural tensions, which have the potential to illuminate the challenges of situating such modes of learning in a complex Pakistani context. In order to develop an understanding of how action learning works, I have divided this chapter into three parts. The first part provides an overview of action learning by briefly describing assumptions, typologies and design considerations. The second part of this chapter deals with an important variant of action learning, i.e. critical action learning (CAL), and addresses the debates surrounding critical action learning research (CALR), in areas like gender, power and psychodynamics. The third part discusses the application of action learning across different fields such as higher education and culture. It introduces key debates which problematize the practice of action learning in other social domains. The chapter then concludes with a brief summary of the key points covered.

### **3.2. Overview of Action Learning**

Since its inception in 1940s by Reginald W. Revans, action learning has gained wide acceptance in the western world (Marquardt, 1998). Historically, the concept of action learning traces its origins back to ‘action research’, proposed by Kurt Lewin in the 1940’s. However, it is different from action research because of its rich focus on action, self-development, self-reflection and critical evaluation of problems that deify solutions (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2008; Revans, 1983) and where change as a collective whole is not *a priori*. In his philosophy, Revans (1983) avoided defining action learning, but in his terms it is

‘a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical, that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problems, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve observable behaviour henceforth in the problem field’ (Revans, 1983: p.4)

The notion of action learning is grounded within Revans learning philosophy. Pedler (1997) quotes Revans' philosophy of learning by suggesting that in order for learning to occur, 'rate of learning needs to be greater than the rate of change' (p.85). Moreover, Revans' (1998) stresses that learning is based on two critical elements, which are: programmed knowledge (*P*) and power of questioning (*Q*). Learning in action learning revolves around Revans' infamous learning equation i.e. ' $L=P+Q$ ' (p.13).

Action learning has been recognized as a useful learning approach by a variety of experts, for example: consultants, trainers, researchers, and educators who have applied it in various setups with effective learning outcomes (Botham & Vick, 1998). Marsick et al. (1992) report the increasing use of action learning in corporations has mainly revolved around solving critical dilemmas, individual, team and organizational development. One of the aspects contributing to the use of action learning in education has been a growing debate over harnessing pedagogical methods which are experiential, pragmatic and learner-centred (McGill & Beaty, 1996). Revans inter-university consortium with Belgian universities provides a useful example of action learning at work on real-time organizational problems in management education (Mumford, 1997). Regardless of the overwhelming success of action learning in Anglo-Saxon institutions, it has hardly been used in other parts of the world (Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010). Marquardt (1999) asserts that, 'despite its growing success in Western cultures [...] action learning has been infrequently implemented in the remaining 90% of the world' (p.149). Mumford (1997) suggests that after the Belgian experience of Revans, action learning extended itself to various other European cultures, but unfortunately very little contribution has been made to the literature regarding the influence of eastern cultures on action learning practice and design.

### **Definitions, Descriptions and Assumptions**

Weinstein (1995) states that academics, researchers, practitioners and consultants describe action learning differently, which is a quandary in itself. This dilemma has emerged from Revans (1980) strong statement, stating that the ‘day action learning becomes explicable in words alone will be the day to abandon the practice of it’ (p.9). Action learning, therefore, has been subjected to a range of interpretations by a number of key texts in the literature (e.g. Mumford, 1997; McGill & Beaty, 1996; Weinstein, 1995; Pedler, 2012 etc.), making it difficult to pinpoint the concept. The reason behind action learning’s fragmentation, as argued by Marsick and O’Neil (1999), could be attributed to Revans’ gold standards which have opened it up to various expositions. Willis (2004) notes that Revans provided a ‘theory-intact’ through which action learning could be compared to other types of learning. She further suggests that there are almost 23 critical markers in Revans’ (1978) original conception of action learning to note the degree of variation when comparing to other forms of learning. These critical markers, as identified by Willis (2004), have been divided into three parts (p.17-18): ‘*rules of engagement*’ (*macro-level*), ‘*rules of set operation*’ (*meso-level*), and ‘*rules of individual participation*’ (*micro-level*). An adapted version of the checklist highlighting Revans gold standards, as compiled by Willis (2004: p.17-18), is provided at table 3.1 below.

Moreover, Revans (1981) himself suggested that

‘what makes action learning so difficult to understand is, when it is first mentioned, it is free from teachers, from any form of printed syllabus or regulations or even from any literature’ (Revans, 1981: p.11)

## REVANS GOLD STANDARDS

<b>Rules of Engagement</b>	<b>Rules of Set Operation</b>	<b>Rules of Individual Participation</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dominance of 'Q'</li> <li>2. Social engagement in problems</li> <li>3. Real-world Problems</li> <li>4. Experience-oriented learning</li> <li>5. Purposeful</li> <li>6. Reluctance of using 'P'</li> <li>7. Self-Organizing</li> <li>8. Engaging in Unfamiliar Tasks</li> <li>9. Demands Commitment</li> <li>10. Accurate Representation of evidence underpinning problems</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Small groups with regular attendance and egalitarianism</li> <li>12. Start-up workshop</li> <li>13. Reaching solutions</li> <li>14. Low facilitation with respect to self-organizing properties</li> <li>15. Tackles ill-defined problems</li> <li>16. Unlearning of false assumptions</li> <li>17. Promotes democratization</li> <li>18. Sincere clients</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>19. Demands intellectual curiosity and personal honesty</li> <li>20. Self-observation and reflection</li> <li>21. Locates learning in social interaction with other members</li> <li>22. Using tacit knowledge</li> <li>23. Favours alternate views and perspectives</li> </ol>

**Table 3-1:** Revan's Gold Standards

[Adapted: Willis, J. L. (2004) "Inspecting Cases against Revans' 'Gold Standard' of Action Learning", *Action Learning: Research and practice*, 1(1), April, pp. 11-27]

Despite Revans philosophical conception, other authors have approached action learning in a different way to suit a range of learning needs. Pedler (1997), for example, defines action learning as:

‘an approach to the development of people in organizations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning [...]. The method has three main components: people, who accept responsibility for taking action on a particular issue; problems or the task that people set themselves; and a set of six or so colleagues who support and challenge each other to make progress on problems’ (Pedler, 1997: p.340)

Pedler (1997) further notes that some of the ideas in his definition were disputed by Revans, especially the number of individuals that formulate an action learning set. However Pedler (1997) further acknowledges that what remains undisputed in Revans philosophy is his view

that ‘individuals learn best from working on real problems, by working together’ (p.230). A similar notion of action learning was also suggested by Mumford (1997) who suggested that action learning is:

‘[...] a planned and organized process for doing and learning, not a reactive post-experience view that something could be learned from a particular activity (desirable though that latter process is in itself)’ (Mumford, 1997: p.5)

Zuber-Skerrit (2002) observes that the various conceptions about action learning indicate that action learning is an ‘active process’ (p.114). He further notes that the mainstream concepts on action learning tend to emphasize that learning draws on action, experience and reflection through scientific practices of ‘discussion, discovery, trial and error’, given Revans’ scientific background (*ibid.*). For example Marsick and O’Neil (1999) consider action learning as an

‘[...] approach to working with and developing people that uses work on an actual project or problem as the way to learn. Participants work in small groups to take action to solve their problem and learn how to learn from that action’ (Marsick & O’Neil, 1999: p. 6)

They further add that often a learning coach might be added to the set to help facilitate members to balance their responsibilities and be able to keep the group on track to achieving their goals. McGill and Beaty (2013) also provide their understanding of action learning as:

‘[...] a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done. Through action learning individuals learn with and from each other by working on real problems and reflecting on their experiences’ (McGill & Beaty, 2013: p.11)

McGill and Beaty (2013) suggest that their concept highlights the continuous nature of action learning which aims at taking an active stance towards real-life problems and challenge those problematic issues. Passfield (1996) who exhibits action learning’s transformative potential in overcoming barriers to performativity has also put a similar perspective forward. He suggests that action learning is

‘[...] a process of collaborative transformation in which members of a social system transform themselves and their social system through participative reflection-in-action’ (Passfield, 1996: p.50)

Passfield’s (1996) concept is similar to learning in action as suggested by Schon (1987) in his notion of reflective practitioner, covered previously in chapter 2. These definitions and concepts help identify the key tenants of action learning which many authors have tried suggesting such as: action, learning, reflection, social learning, group work, challenging or questioning, and being supportive and sincere (e.g. Mumford, 1997). Although these elements highlight the constructive nature of action learning, but what underpins Revans philosophy is his scientific approach to learning. Originally Revans suggested that in order for learning to take place, the ‘rate of learning (L) needs to be greater than or equal to the rate of change’ i.e.  $L \geq C$  (Pedler, 1997: p.85). Moreover, learning (L) has two key elements ‘programmed knowledge’ (P) and ‘questioning insight’ (Q) (Revans, 1998: p.13). Adding up all these elements, for Revans (1998), resulted in an equation for learning, i.e.  $L = P + Q$  (Pedler, 1997). As suggested earlier, with the modification in action learning there have been changes to the equation in which other people have added more elements to strengthen the equation, such as organizing insight (O), implementation (I), action (A) and reflection (R) etc. (e.g. Vince, 2004b; Inglis, 1994; Marquardt, 1999; Weinstein, 1995). These additions suggest that learning may be incomplete without adequate reflection on past actions and experience and the resultant learning / action may be implemented to gain further insights into the problems (Spence, 1998).

Therefore in light of the above, action learning can be considered as a pragmatic approach which aims to question the taken-for-granted aspects of knowledge and experience to counter problems. Lawrence (1994) adds that questioning insight in action learning is extremely useful when ‘ready-made’ answers are not available for complex problems. Revans (1982) research further informs that puzzles have suitable answers from theory or instructional

knowledge (P) but real world complex problems have no specific answers and need to be solved through collaborative efforts of ‘comrades in adversity’ (Revans, 1983). Hence the action learning sets are formulated to tackle problems by bringing individuals (sincere critical friends or comrades) together in groups called ‘sets’ which are dedicated to learning.

### ***Schools and Typologies***

Yorks et al. (2002: p.19) state that ‘there are many doors in the house of action learning’. As discussed earlier, Revans (1982) philosophy focused on developing people while solving their problems ‘systematically’, but despite this different people, according to Weinstein (1995), seen action learning differently. However, action learning finds itself deeply rooted in the action-philosophy, which hinges on a pragmatic view of learning, as also noted by Kim (2007) that ‘the ontological entity of action learning exists in practice’ (p.14). Regardless of the variations within action learning practice, O’Neil and Marsick (2007) suggest that there are four broad schools of thought for action learning: i.e. tacit, scientific, experiential and critical reflection (p.160). Before discussing the design and process of an action learning programme, it might be helpful to skim through the theoretical underpinnings of these schools, as illustrated in table 3.2 (below).

<b>Schools of Action Learning</b>				
<b>School</b>	<b>Tacit</b>	<b>Scientific</b>	<b>Experiential</b>	<b>Critical Reflection</b>
Theory	Incidental learning	Alpha, Beta, Gamma; P&Q=L	Learning from experience	Learning through critical reflection
Practitioners	Dotlich & Noel; Tichy	Revans; Boshyk	McGill and Beaty; Mumford	Marsick; O’Neil; Raelin

**Table 3-2: Schools of Action Learning**

[Source: O’Neil, J. & Marsick, V. J. (2007). Understanding Action Learning: Theory into Practice – AMA Innovations in Adult Learning, AMACOM, NY]

The four schools of action learning are briefly described below:

- *Scientific School:* The scientific school draws its roots from Revan's work on action learning. In his initial philosophy, Revans (1982) visualized action learning as a learning technique for solving complex real-world problems using three interactive systems, which he termed as 'alpha', 'beta' and 'gamma'. The system alpha comprises of the interplay between three key components i.e. 'the learner's value system', 'the external system that affects the decision-making process', and 'the internal systems in which the learner works' (Sutton, 1997: p.55-56). The alpha system, as noted by O'Neil and Marsick (2007), is a 'survey stage' that consists of four key activities which a learner performs (p.169):
  - Hypothesis – identifying alternate routes
  - Experiment – trial and error for action
  - Audit – examining the outcomes
  - Review – evaluating the result of action and taking further decision for developing hypothesis

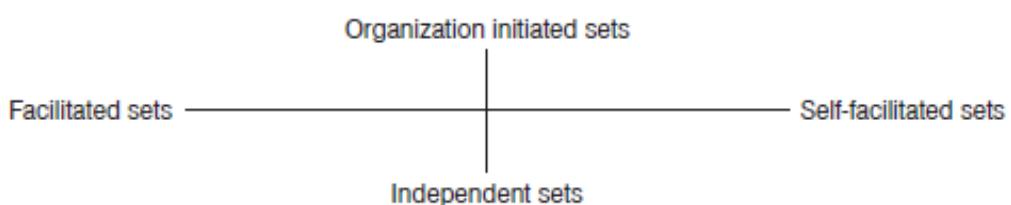
The system beta, according to O'Neil and Marsick (2007), is the 'learning process' which again aims to focus on the learner to recognize, accept and verify the results of action and then sincerely apply those to solve the problem (p. 170). The system gamma highlights the 'mental dispositions' of the learner to 'identify the discrepancies between what he first took to be the condition and what experience suggests that the condition was, and insofar as he is able to change his perception accordingly, we may say that the [individual] is learning' (ibid.). Dilworth (1998) suggests that the system gamma focuses on an individual's development by

emphasizing on the interaction between the learner and the situation/problem or environment.

- *Experiential School:* The experiential school, according to McGill & Beaty (2001), is theoretically based on the works of David Kolb's experiential learning theory. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory aims to focus on action, reflection, reflection-on-action, whereas in action learning practice the starting point for learning is action under this school. The distinctive feature of action learning which emphasizes experience as key ensures that learning takes place in all the four phases of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. The experiential school aims to draw learning by facilitating learners to learn from their experiences and to develop new action plans for approaching the problem situation, which is unlike accidental or informal learning (Bunning, 1992). McLaughlin and Thorpe (1993) suggest that members in an experiential action learning set aim to reflect on their experiences to structure the problem while others help organize reflective insight to further analyse the problem and ultimately pushing towards developing an action plan (ibid.). Under the experiential school, Yorks et al. (1998) note that, individuals learn through a constructivist approach in which they aim to construct meanings, focus on individual development and support in observing progress to achieve intended learning goals.
- *Critical Reflection School:* The critical reflection school draws out from the works of Fenwick (2003), Marsick and O'Neil (1999) and Mezirow (1998) etc. This school appreciates the notion of reflection on action, but suggests that mere reflection is insufficient to create any permanent change in the conditions which cause the problems. This approach, therefore, takes a deeper stance at solving the root-cause of the problem and to further encourage a transformation of the current practices which

contribute towards sustaining those solutions (Marsick & O’Neil, 1999). Marsick & O’Neil (1999) further add that ‘reflection is powerful, but critical reflection is more powerful’, as it is able to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions which cause the problems (p.6). Mezirow (1998) also proposes that critical reflection has the power to transform learners’ perspectives and in bringing about change. Moreover, Weinstein (1995) notes that proponents of this school tend to scrutinize their beliefs and values to gain a better insight of their problems, knowledge or inner feelings through critical self-reflection.

- *Tacit School:* The tacit or the incidental school, as suggested by O’Neil and Marsick (2007) focuses on informal or accidental learning, mostly, which takes place during practice or work. It thrives on the philosophy of ‘reflection-in-action’, thereby improving performance. Kerka (2000) considers this form of learning to lack any specific structure, and allow individuals to interact with real situations to work through their problems. Therefore, this school aims at an unstructured learning plan, mostly self-directed, that takes place within the activity causing problems through practices like observation, interaction or routine work (Rogers, 1997). This approach is considered suitable for adult learners on their jobs or in educational contexts where conflict-resolution, decision making, strategic policy development, social learning or problem solving are achieved (Yorks et al., 1998).



**Figure 3-1:** Types of Action Learning

[Source: McGill, I. & Brockbank, A. (2004). The Action Learning Handbook. Routledge Falmer: London]

Apart from these schools, action learning also differs in its design and process that changes based on the problems it aims to negotiate. Vertically, as depicted in figure 3.1, McGill and Brockbank (2004) propose that action learning sets can be initiated by organizations, on one hand, to support individuals to solve organizational problems and result in individuals' development. On the other, individuals can formulate them across an organization or community or departments to solve problems that individuals feel stop them from performing their jobs (ibid.). In addition, the sets that either the organization or individuals formulate can be facilitated by a set adviser or by individuals themselves, depending upon the problem and set composition. A facilitated set will consist of a facilitator or an adviser who takes on the responsibility of managing the set in terms of keeping it on track, intervening at sensitive or critical instance or making sure that the goals of the set are met. However, within self-facilitated sets the set members take on the task of managing the set themselves by sharing the responsibilities of a set facilitator to achieve the intended goals.

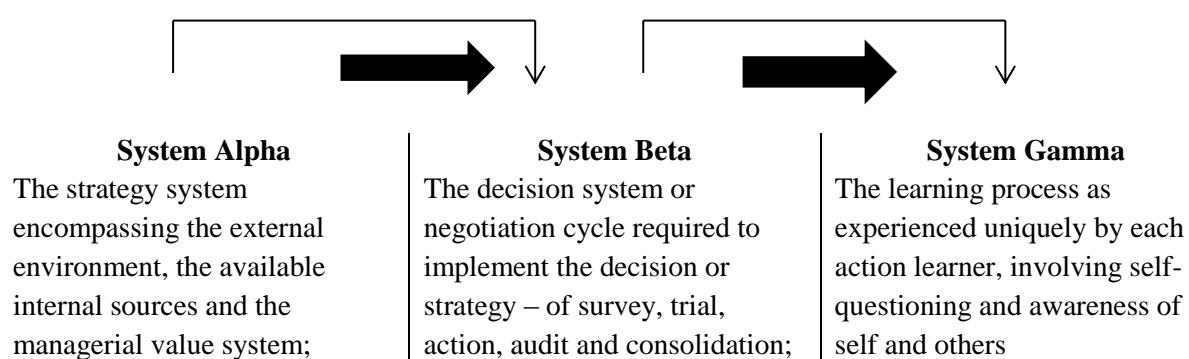
Additionally, Cho and Egan (2010) note that with the vast variety of action learning concepts in the literature, these schools and typologies have given rise to various forms of action learning practice. Some of the action learning variations found in literature are:

- business-driven action learning (Boshyk, 2011);
- action-mentoring (Pedler et al. 2005);
- inter-organizational action learning (Cho & Egan, 2010);
- critical action learning - CAL (Willmott, 1997c; Rigg & Trehan, 2004);
- auto action learning (Learmonth & Pedler, 2004);
- Reflective action learning sets – RALS (Nicolini et al. 2004);
- self-managed action learning – SMAL (Bourner, Beaty & Frost, 1997);
- project action learning (Cho & Egan, 2010);

- developmental action learning (Raelin, 2006);
- work-based learning (Gray, 1999);
- remote action learning (Pedler et al., 2005);
- Web-based action learning (Asensio, Hodgson & Trehan, 2000);

### **Design and Process**

Marsick and O’Neil (1999) stress that the design of an action learning programme is influenced by its underlying ‘philosophy, purpose, time frame, depth of change, and epistemology’ (p.172). The philosophy of action learning is derived from Revans (1971) general theory of human action, in which he discusses the process that formulates the core strategy of action learning practice – i.e. an integrated structure of systems alpha, beta and gamma. Simpson & Bourner (2007) indicate that what action learning in the twenty-first century is based on Revans general theory of human action but with the changing nature of society, additional factors need to be considered. In Revans original approach, i.e. the general theory of human action as illustrated below (Revans, 1971: p.33-67), system Gamma was an indicative of critical reflective practices while System Beta uses experience as the starting point for human action. A graphical representation of the action learning process, as proposed by Revans is provided below:



**Figure 3-2:** Revans General Theory of Human Action  
 [Adapted: Revans (1971: p.33-67) cited in Pedlar et al. (2013)]

The Revans' style of action learning is highly empowering as it reduces expert intervention and encourages participants to take control of their own learning. However this process of action learning when met with the task structure or problem which it needs to solve, then focuses on design that provide impetus to its process. Therefore, prior to designing an action learning programme, a design matrix as noted by Inglis (1994) is helpful in understanding how action learning works. The matrix consists of design quadrants representing task versus setting, to help identify which type of action learning design is likely respond to different situations/problems (see, figure: 3.3, below).

		TASK	
		Familiar	Unfamiliar
		1	3
SETTING	Familiar	1	3
	Unfamiliar	2	4

**Figure 3-3:** Task vs. Setting in Action Learning Projects

The first design quadrant suggests that when learners interact with a situation that comprises a familiar task in a familiar setting, in such a case they are usually aware of their surroundings, context, people or task. The second design quadrant indicates that when the situation comprises of a familiar task but in an unfamiliar setting, then the challenge is known to the learner and is likely to match their skills but the context or other members in the set may be unknown. The third quadrant consists of an unfamiliar task in a familiar setting. In this learning design, the challenges are new to the learner along with the environment but the learner already knows the people. The fourth design consists of an unfamiliar task in an unfamiliar setting where the challenge, environment and the members are unknown by the learner. These design quadrants are helpful in conceptualizing the type of learning design,

which is useful for the type of action learning programme in certain situations (Marsick, 1990).

Further to the design quadrants, the design elements of an action learning project need to be described for clarity in the learning design: many researchers and experts have suggested different design elements of an action learning project but these tend to vary based on the nature of the situation in which it is implemented. The most common design elements include: real-world problem (Dotlich & Noel, 1998); group of learners known as the ‘set’ (Marsick, 1990); a ‘set adviser’ or a facilitator (Inglis, 1994); ‘reflection’ (Marquardt, 1999); ‘questioning insight’ (Weinstein, 1999); and ‘commitment to learning and action’ (Dixon, 1997). These are briefly described below:

- *Real-World Problems:* An action learning problem is in fact a learner’s problem, dilemma or a challenge which does not have a straightforward solution (Gregory, 1994). This problem needs to be a real-world challenge that provides a vehicle for learning in the sets. Revans (1980) argues that ‘action learning is concerned with real people to tackle real problems in real time (p.309).
- *Action Learning Sets:* The action learning set is a group of individuals who usually range between 6 to 8 learners. These individuals combine to form the working group of the action learning set (Inglis, 1994). There have been debates around the exact number of individuals within a set, but Revans (1983) indicated that an action learning set comprises of a small group of people, but experts like Pedler (1997) have suggested 6 being the optimum size. Each individual learner within the set is known as the ‘set member’ (McGill & Beaty, 1996). These set members are infamously known as ‘comrades in adversity’ by Revans (1978), as these individuals are critical friends who challenge one another.

- *Set Adviser / Facilitator:* McGill and Beaty (1996) suggest that the role of a set adviser or facilitator is to support learning of set members by making them work on their real-world problems, facilitating interaction, encouraging critical discussions and ensuring learning objectives are being met. The role of the facilitator also allows him/her to intervene at critical points where discussions reach a stalemate or aggression, to calm individuals or to throw in questions to keep things rolling (Casey, 1991). O’Neil (1999) further adds that a set facilitator aims to give ‘structure’, ‘orientation’, ‘ongoing support’, ‘encouragement’, ‘information’, ‘resources’ and ‘attention’ to the set and its members. In some cases the facilitators arrange for logistics, space, time and other arrangements to ensure the set to run smoothly. Another aspect of the set facilitator could also be to provide timely feedback to its members to further refine the process of questioning and reflective insight to best approach the problems, solutions and actions.
- *Commitment to Action and Learning:* Within action learning, ‘action is not merely an enactment of the collaborative know-how; it is a type of practice which situates learning (Yeo & Nation, 2010: p.187). Therefore, action aims to generate new insight by breaking down the complex problems arising out of a situation into more simplified chunks for creating meaning and constructing future action (West & Chouke, 2003). Thus, seeking commitment to action and learning in an action learning programme involves the set to encourage cohesiveness, discuss real-problem, and develop trust and a sense of community (Becker & Billings, 1993).
- *Reflection:* Reflection in action learning, as noted by Dilworth & Willis (2003), remains an essential ‘component which critically examines one’s assumption in relation to what is occurring, that pushes the learning envelope’ (p.21). Revans (1982,

p.685) also concurs that the ‘responsibility is assigned to small groups, obliged regularly on what they are doing’ (p.685). Therefore, learning is accomplished through a “cycle of action, reflection and reflection on action – reflecting [...] on the norms [...] assumptions [...] and also on the working of the set’ (O’Neil, 1997: p. 248).

- *Questioning Insight:* Learning in action learning strongly depends on the questioning insight which takes place within the set (Hicks, 2000). Marquardt (1999) notes that, ‘action learning happens when set members question and reflect’ on the taken-for-granted assumptions. Therefore, questioning insight is an integral part of the learning process, and the set goes through different group development stages, whereby, the questioning plays a critical role, especially, in the ‘storming’ stage of a group (Dilworth & Willis, 2003).

### **3.3. Criticality in Action Learning**

With the advancements of critical approaches to management studies (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), there has been an increasing focus on applying abstract ideas of critical theory to action learning practice (e.g. Rigg & Trehan, 2004: p.149). Trehan and Pedler (2009) indicate that criticality in action learning can support learning through aspects of critical and reflective practice which aim to ‘explore underlying power and control issues, [and] actively engage in an examination of political and cultural processes’ (p.405). Rigg and Trehan (2004) further add that

‘If action learning (though broadly interpreted and open to contestation) is to do with collaborative enquiry, problem-solving and self-development, the potential for criticality in action learning derives from the tensions, contradictions, emotions and power dynamics that inevitably exist both within a group and in individual managers’ lives’. (Rigg & Trehan, 2004: p.150)

Critical action learning, therefore, aims to mobilize and apply concepts of critical theory to unearth individual and organizational practices for learning and improvement purposes, as they tend to move beyond traditional approaches to acknowledge the complexities of management learning and practice (Rigg & Trehan, 2004; Trehan & Pedler, 2009). This section wishes to explore the concept of critical action learning and review its distinguishing features in relation to traditional action learning practice as proposed by Revans (1983). Moreover, this section also highlights studies in critical action learning (CAL) by responding to the calls for using critical action learning research (CALR), for example, to understanding the power asymmetries in management learning within diverse contexts (e.g. Rigg & Trehan, 2015).

### **What is CAL?**

Critical action learning is imbued with concepts emerging from the field of critical management education, ranging from critical reflection to transformation and change. As a learning methodology, in Trehan and Pedler's (2009) view, 'critical action learning is a development of action learning' (p.405). From a historical perspective, critical action learning finds its roots within Revans' (1983) notion of 'comrades in adversity', which has been further been shaped through abstract ideas of critical theory. However, Revans' perspective to action learning is unlikely to acknowledge the power-relations and political dimensions of learning (Rigg & Trehan, 2004). Willmott (1994) argues that conventional action learning falls short of developing a critical aptitude, which challenges the taken for granted assumptions of management theory and practice and its intended objectives. He further emphasizes that associating critical theory with the notions of reflective practice arising from Argyris and Schon's (1974) work could harness critical perspectives that challenge conventional wisdom of managerial practice. As a result the aim of critical action learning is:

‘[...] to present and command an alternative to the seeming neutrality and authority of orthodox management theory as a means of opening up and facilitating a transformation of management practice’ (Willmott, 1997b: p.169)

Rigg and Trehan (2004) further note that a critical perspective to action learning can help shed light on ‘the tensions, contradictions, emotions, and power-dynamics that inevitably exist both within a group and in individuals [learners’] lives’ (p.150). Moreover, as pedagogy, critical action learning aims to treat these power-dynamics as essentially ‘a site of learning about managing and organizing’ (ibid.). McLaughlin and Thorpe (1993) add that individuals pursuing action learning are brought in close to their respective selves – i.e. developing a better understanding of themselves. In a way they become aware of:

‘[...] the primacy of politics, both macro and micro, and the influence of power on decision making and non-decision making, not to mention the ‘mobilization of bias (McLaughlin & Thorpe, 1993: p. 25)

Furthermore, a critical perspective to action learning might make visible learners’ struggles of everyday-life-practice, simultaneously developing ‘appreciation’ and ‘sensitivity’ towards the invisible power-relations (Willmott, 1997b,c). Therefore critical action learning aims to address the shortcoming of conventional action learning approaching by mobilizing ideas of critical theory to unearth power-relations, working with emotions and facilitate critical thinking in challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions (Rigg & Trehan, 2004). From an inquiry perspective, critical action learning research aims to ‘articulate a view of theory that has the central task of emancipating people from the positivist domination of thought’ (Carr & Kemmis, 1986: p. 130). Hence, Willmott (1997b) classically summarizes the notion of critical action learning in two ways, first as form of inquiry it tends to:

‘[...] explores how the comparatively abstract ideas of critical theory can be mobilized and applied in the process of understanding and changing interpersonal and institutional practices.’ (Willmott, 1997, p. 173b)

And secondly as a form of learning it

‘[...] focuses upon management as a lived experience with theory that debunks conventional wisdom, [learners] can be enabled to develop ‘habits of critical thinking [...] that prepare them for responsible citizenship and personally and socially rewarding lives and careers’. (Willmott, 1997b, p. 173)

### ***Distinguishing Features of CAL***

The core features distinguishing CAL from traditional action learning comprise of four key elements: ‘recognition of practical knowledge’; ‘collaboration and engagement; ‘critical reflection and change’ (Trehan and Pedler, 2009: p.409-413) and ‘organizing insight’ (Vince, 2004b; 2002). These are briefly described below:

- *Recognition of Practical Knowledge:* CAL tends to move away from the functionalist, technicistic and positivist approaches to management learning. It challenges that notion of neutrality, objectivity and a value-free practice. The critical in CAL aims to deconstruct preconceived notions, which are taken-for-granted by individuals to reconstruct ideas that are informed by an understanding of power-dynamics. Moreover, it emphasizes that the knowledge is situated within its broader socio-historical, cultural and political context and drives the risks of power, politics and emotions to influence learning and practice.
- *Collaboration and Engagement:* Vince (2004a) argues that critical action learning is more than a group process for individual development; rather it is a collective process for developing insight into group or community practices. CAL thrives on exploring the nature of relationships amongst individuals to identify social and cultural boundaries upon which collaborative relationship may be developed. A collaborative group process develops a sense of ownership and recognition, and encouraging learners to self-discipline, make collective decisions, and achieve a sense of community in practice. It broadly self-empowers individuals to engage in complex

issues by collectively challenging the practices advocated within a situation or context.

- *Critical Reflection and Change:* Critical reflection or reflection per se is a key tenant in the practice of action learning. Theories surrounding reflection on action and experience have informed and shaped action learning practice (Trehan & Pedler, 2009). It helps learners to get in touch with themselves through processes of introspection and self-reflection. However, critical reflection as discussed previously goes beyond reflection on action and experience to solve problems, to consider the wider social and cultural context in which the problem and the learner are situated (Reynolds, 1999b). Finally, Trehan and Pedler (2009) summarize that critical reflection aims to transform the existing perspectives of learners to encourage new insights. Therefore, it creates ‘new understandings by making conscious the social, political, professional, economic and ethical assumptions constraining or supporting one’s action in a specific context’ (Trehan & Pedler, 2009: p.412).
- *Learning from Organizing:* Vince (2004b) argues that some reflective processes tend to be rationally constructed in order to solve problems, but critical action learning urges the learner to engage with the political and emotional dimensions during learning. Furthermore, Rigg and Trehan (2004) add that ‘critical action learning as [an approach] emerges when these dynamics are treated centrally as a site of learning about managing and organising’ (p.150). In a way

‘action learning is not only a learning process through which to comprehend individuals’ experiences of action (learning from experience), but is also a reflection of existing [...] dynamics created in action (learning from organizing)’ (Vince, 2004b: 117)

As a key feature of critical action learning, the organizing process encourages individuals to learn from the optics created as result of questioning insight or reflection to learn about complex problems. Vince (2004a) further suggests that ‘action learning – as an organizing process – is a container for emotions (unconscious and conscious), and for power relations that reveal assumptions underpinning organization and that influence the possibilities of and resistances to learning and change’ (119-120). Therefore, informing us about the practical application of action learning in different contexts and situations.

### ***Extensions to CAL: Power, Gender and Systems Psychodynamics***

Although gender, power and psychodynamics exist as separate fields in their own right but with the growing emphasis of CMS on action learning practice, these concepts are being used to study how emotions, feelings and politics mobilized by learning could either prevent/aid learning (e.g. Vince, 2008; Stead, 2014; Vince & Martin, 1993 etc.). From a gendered perspective, Stead’s (2014) work on gendered power relations in action learning raises voice of women participants who experience male-dominance in sets. One particular participant from her study termed male-dominance in the group by entitling the culture of the set as being ‘testosterone-fuelled’ (p.426). However, what Stead’s (2013; 2014) studies suggest is the significance of power as a key construct in determining learning relationships. In the sets, the power-relations become apparent when participants resulting into interdependency and conflict (e.g. Molm, 1994) challenge these relations. The element of power in relationships explains the socio-political context of an action learning set, in which the interactions are influenced by the broader sociocultural context (Rollins & Bahr, 1976). Stead (2014) in her work on women leaders uses action learning as a way to highlight socio-dynamics of the wider society. The themes emerging from her work suggest how women leaders are

marginalized in the entrepreneurial sector, which is often associated with masculinity. Stead (2014) indicates how women leaders can feel as ‘outsiders’ in the action learning set dominated by males. The themes and accounts presented by Stead (2014) present deeper issues of gender power-relations, which due to the lack of women in leadership roles results in marginalization. This study highlights implications for gendered differentiation which can also be thought of in terms of ‘(in)visibility’ (Stead, 2013: p.63), in which the physical presence of females provides them with the visible physical presence while the stereotypical expectations and division of gender makes them invisible.

From a systems psychodynamics perspective, Vince (2004a) suggests that learning is ‘bound up with complex internal, inter-personal and social processes and dynamics and, particularly, with emotions and politics’ emerging from the learning situation (p.94). The psychodynamics arises from the mingling of the notions of CMS with the psychoanalytic approach. A systems psychodynamics approach aims to demonstrate ‘the links between three domains of experience – the rational, the political and the irrational, in order to provide’ an understanding of the processes which organize learning’ (Vince, 2008: p.95). Moreover, Vince and Martin (1993) argue that learning is an internal affair and the

‘[...] aspects of individual experience of learning [...] are filtered through emotional and psychological history, shaped by group processes and conditioned by the broader forces of power and culture’ (Vince & Martin, 1993: p.207).

Vince and Martin (1993) in their study of action learning draw upon a similar perspective, as articulated by Brown (2000), but take on a more critical angle to exhibit how learning mobilizes political and psychological processes that provoke emotions and alter identities. Action learning as a socially inclusive process breaks with the exclusiveness of traditional pedagogies that offer structure, hierarchy and dependency (Vince & Martin, 1993). It also places additional responsibility on the shoulders of learner by encouraging and empowering

them to lead the learning process through interactive means. Vince and Martin (1993) consider this as an ‘anxiety-provoking event’ in which the learner is confronted with a social situation within a shared learning space (p.208). Originally, action learning emphasizes strongly over its scientific and rational process of making sense of individuals’ experiences by learning to collectively reflect and act. However, such a learning process is bound to have political and psychological implications (ibid). A critique of action learning could possibly indicate its lack of attention towards what participants feel during the learning process (i.e. psychological implication) and how it shapes the dynamics of the group (i.e. political implication).

Vince and Martin (1993) further report that learners when provoked in learning process often seem to find ways of negotiating through a fight-flight mechanism i.e. leading towards avoidance or resistance to learning. Vince and Martin (1993) term such acts of resistance as creating ‘self-limiting’ structures to learning and change. The uncertainty of the learning situation, as Vince and Martin (1993) state, often leads to premature cognitive-appraisals of events in which embodied dispositions may restrict learning to occur. The idea of an analysis looking into the psychological as well as political processes is inclined towards what participants feel about their experiences. The political perspective can often be undermined in such an analysis, as the experience and expression of emotions in learning is both interpersonal and intrapersonal (Frijida & Mesquita, 1994).

The systems psychodynamics perspective helps identify self-limiting structures, as noted by Vince (2008), which shape the learners emotionally, politically and psychologically. Vince further notes that awareness of emotions and politics can lead to developing successful learning programmes that involve working with ‘complex internal, inter-personal and social processes and dynamics’ (ibid. p.93). Vince (2008) is concerned about emotions and feelings

that reinforce problems, tensions or issues in learning situations, which can often cause frustration, anxiety or stress amongst learners. He terms these as barriers to learning which work against the ideals of the action-oriented process in action learning, leading to ‘inaction’ (ibid. p.99). Additionally, Vince (2008) notes that emotions can result from the type of positions members occupy and the situation in which they commit themselves to learn with others. Therefore, when emotions are suppressed in the learning sets, this can change the dynamics of the group and might result in restricting learners from action and reflection i.e. ‘inaction’ (ibid.).

### **3.4. Action Learning Across Different Fields**

In this section, I try briefly describing the cross-pollination of action learning, and its variants, into other fields within sociology to suggest the scope of application and research.

#### ***Action Learning and Higher Education***

Action learning has been recognized as a powerful way to develop people in a range of professional areas including management education and organizational development (Brockbank & McGill, 1998). In the higher education sector, Pedler (1996: p.191) notes a growing focus on ‘student-centred’, ‘process-driven’, and ‘flexible’ learning approaches provide conducive grounds for using action learning in educational programmes. Action learning, in higher education, aims to bridge the gaps between theoretical and practical aspects of learning. It takes into consideration the personal and places it within the social context of learning. Moreover, McGill & Beaty (1996) suggest that action learning:

‘[...] offers a clear structure to those who see important links between education and the world within (personal development) and between learning and the world ‘out there’ (development of the material and interpersonal world)’ (McGill & Beaty, 1996: p.236)

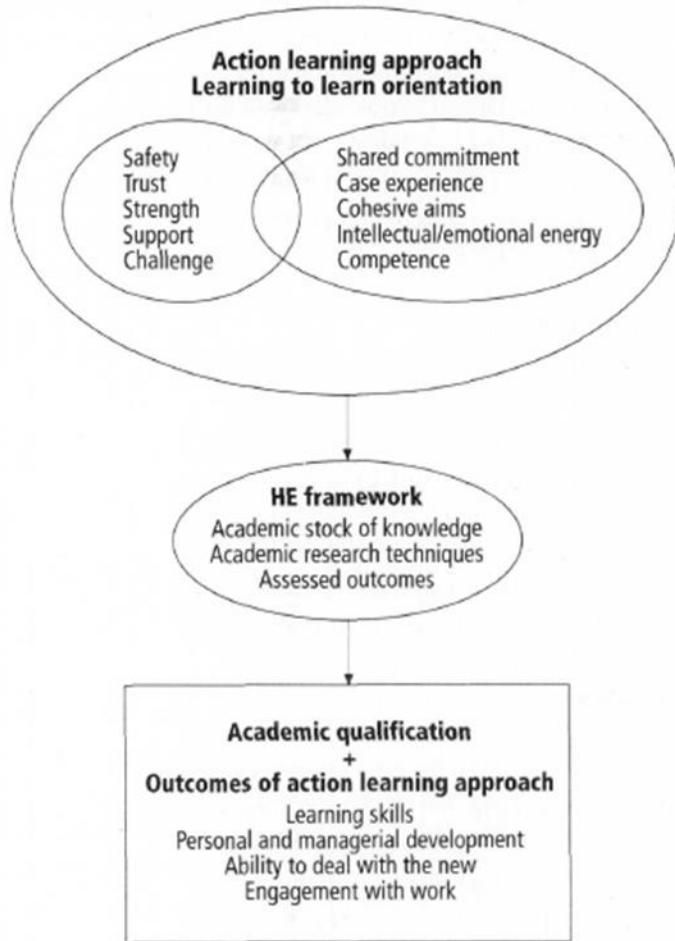
They further indicate that necessarily action learning might not be as useful to all areas of higher education, but it might be beneficial to those that focus on developing professional practice through the art of ‘reflection on action’ (McGill & Beaty, 1996: p.236). The emphasis of action learning is to learn from action through reflection, rather than from theory – as the former contributes to experience while the latter remains static. Although, Revans (1978: p.12-23) indicated that ‘action learning is not a new way of learning’, but involves analysis of existing ideas in newer ways. In other words addition of programmed knowledge (P) is not a key focus in action learning it is rather the critical evaluation (Q) of existing knowledge to achieve learning (L) (Revans, 1998). Unlike the role of tutors in certain pedagogical methods, the art of facilitating action learning sets is different from that of lecturing in classrooms (McGill & Beaty, 1996). The focus in action learning is not on the ‘teacher’, rather it is on the learner while the teacher, as a facilitator, acts in the capacity of learning coach (Pedler, 1996: p.191).

Recently, studies of using action learning in academic institutions, especially in the higher education context, have been well-documented in academic journals like *action learning: research and practice, education and training, further and higher education, management development* etc. The rise of action learning as pedagogy could be seen as a result of the debates surrounding lack of practical knowledge, absence of experience and need for student-centred learning methods (Mintzberg, 2004; Mumford, 1997; Bourner & Frost, 1996 etc.). Initially, when Revans (1975) proposed action learning as the way forward for university and academic institutions, he was faced with criticism and little encouragement. Bourner and Frost (1996) suggest that the possible reason for higher educational institutions (HEI) rejecting the notion of action learning could be due to the fact that:

- HEI's focus more on evaluation, assessment and qualifications – they are still learning the value of experiential and collective learning;
- Learners are more intent on gaining qualifications which may result in higher earning jobs, high profile career and greater life opportunities – critical reflection might pose as a challenge to such an intent;
- Action learning can be a time-consuming affair which requires set facilitation skills which are different from teaching skills;
- Running action learning parallel to modules and coursework might result in confusion and ambiguity;
- Relationships in long term qualifications may become sensitive, aggressive and hostile

In spite of the challenges, O'Hara et al., (1996) argue that it is important to understand and clarify the potential of action learning to administrators and academics in higher education. They further suggest that action learning provides plenty of opportunities to earn qualification and learning at the same time. In their studies of action learning in higher education, O'Hara et al. (1996) note that clarifying expectation with the stakeholders (e.g. academics and students) may be useful in its implementation. They state that action learning in higher education is a 'better way of developing' individuals, 'contributing to the success of business' studies and 'awarding qualifications' aimed at providing a broad-spectrum of learning (p.17). In this regard, O'Hara et al., (1996) present a framework for executing action learning in the higher education context, in which they draw upon the work of Reeve (1995). Within the framework, O'Hara et al., (1996) propose three aspects to implementing action learning in higher education, i.e. 'action learning approach – learning to learn orientation'; 'higher education framework' and 'academic qualification plus outcomes of action learning'. These key aspects are exhibited in figure 3.4 and described below:

- *Action Learning Approach:* The action learning approach promotes a learning to ‘learn’ orientation i.e. educating on how to learn through different action learning processes. The action learning sets are facilitated to provide a safe environment to learners. The sets are designed to be confidential, trustworthy and supportive in nurturing learning (Bourner & Frost, 1996). The sets are also designed to promote social interaction between learners to share their experience and challenge one another, as comrades, with the intent for problem-solving (Revans, 1982).
- *Higher Education Framework:* O’Hara et al., (1996) suggest that combining action learning with ongoing modules and courses may result in a satisfactory and positive learning experience for students. They further acknowledge the practices found within the higher education context such as imparting of programmed knowledge (P) through lecturing and teaching. The P can therefore be challenged using questioning insight (Q) by students through means of individual and collective reflection (R) on the problem (e.g. Inglis, 1994; Pedler, 1997). The outcomes of this activity may be evaluated for feedback and improvement purposes by facilitators or tutors for implementing solutions to encourage learning (O’Hara et al., 1996).
- *Academic Qualification and Outcomes of Action Learning:* The experience of using action learning alongside other courses may be performed strategically without confusing the learner about the aims and objectives of a course or module. The idea is to develop a newer understanding, knowledge and skills by the end of the module, which would allow learners to deal with newer situations. The application of learning using modes of reflection on action and experience are also helpful creating deeper learning, bringing about change and solving of problems (Mumford, 1997).



**Figure 3-4:** Action Learning Framework for Higher Education

[Source: O'Hara, S., Webber, T. & Reeve, S. (1996). 'Action Learning in Management Education', *Education and Training*, Vol. 38, No. 8]

### **Action Learning and Management Education**

The use of action learning in the MBA programme has been growing in leading business schools around the world (e.g. MIT Sloan; Lancaster, Henley, Business School Netherlands, Michigan Ross School of Business, Wittenborg UAS, INSEAD etc.). A study by Johnson and Spicer (2006) demonstrates the utility and experiences of MBA students on an action learning programme. Although it is a time-consuming affair, but the use of action learning demonstrated higher work utility by students. Also Howell's (1994) study of using action learning on IMC's MBA programme suggested that it was the process which changed

students' behaviour during the programme. Similarly, Grey's (1996) study demonstrated that promoting an action learning-reflection cycle on an MBA programme promoted social interaction within the classroom and while being away on an online forum. Action learning, therefore, is not bound within closed spaces but individual learners can benefit even by being away from their place of study using a virtual online setup.

Besides the MBA programmes, action learning has also been used in a variety of other management modules. As an example of using action learning in higher education, in particular on an MA in Change Management programme at the Liverpool John Moores University, Harrison & Edwards (2012) offer insights on their experiences of running learning-sets to provide 'a positive learning platform' to students (p.50). Their MA programme was designed to take on a 'radical' approach to learning, alongside the taught element of the degree, which is partly inspired by principles of critical management pedagogy proposed by Alvesson & Willmott (1992), Willmott (1994) and Reynolds (1997) (cf. p.47). Action learning is used in combination with the 'content' and 'radical' elements of the degree during purposeful learning spaces. It is the key driver of their dissertation phase where learners take on an active and self-moderated role for working on real life problems and providing feedback to counter those challenges (Rigg et al. 2007). The real life experiences of learners are taken as a starting point for initiating class and learning-set discussions.

The rationale behind using a combination of pedagogical methods, as stated by Harrison & Edwards (2012), is to develop 'critically reflective practitioners', a key aspect which resonates with this study, by emphasising on (p.47):

- challenging taken-for-granted knowledge/assumptions;
- learning as a social process;
- power-relations amongst set members; and

- empowering learners

Fenwick (2003) recognizes the emancipatory potential of action learning by nurturing learning-set discussions to focus more on (p.619):

- learner's value-driven problems;
- talking about practices which discriminate;
- emphasizing the difficulties of the situation;
- complexity of learning; and
- facilitating learning-sets in a consensual way

Taking into account the critical perspective driving the MA degree at John Moores, Harrison & Edwards (2012) report a successful use of action learning which enhanced learning by 'sharing work, understanding different styles and being in a supportive learning environment' (p.48). Furthermore, they indicated that learners commented on an increase in 'personal awareness' of how people act and behave (p.48). However, they were also able to unearth tension amongst certain set members who felt uncomfortable in sharing personal feelings and emotions developing confronting behaviours. Fortunately, this problem could be addressed through experienced facilitation by set advisors. In sum, apart from adjustments in the integration of taught and process driven components of the MA, they commend action learning as an 'essential ingredient' to the success of their programme (p.50).

Another study which uses the ideals of critically reflective practice (Reynolds, 1997) and critical action learning (Rigg & Trehan, 2004) at John Moores University, is presented by Lawless (2008). In her practical account of using action learning with an MA in HRD cohort she situates learning-sets within the context of a 'broader social and discursive order' (p.127). She explains how 'consensus-bound discourses' dominate to disavow the development of a

‘critical interpretive repertoire’ within students (p.127). The barriers to cultivating a critical repertoire have been extracted from the instrumentalist perspective of the ‘self’, which discounts the likely presence of the social which shape the personal (Kuchinke, 2005). Lawless (2008) critiques the instrumentalist perspective, by negating its overemphasis on the ‘individual’ as ‘self-developer’, in favour of promoting an understanding of the social context and complexity of learning (p.127).

During her study, she facilitated action learning with two cohorts on the MA programme to observe the sense-making process of learning within sets. She has presented her cohorts as the ‘MA community’, who as practitioners are also members of a ‘work community’, within this study (p.117). The idea is taken from Lave & Wenger (1991) to demonstrate the link between (critical) action learning and communities of practice. In their work, Lave & Wenger (1991) have argued that learning is inherently a socially inclusive process. The central thesis lies in the situated activity of learning whose critical element is called ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, also discussed in chapter 2 (p.34). Lawless (2008) uses the peripherality function as an analytical tool to describe ways of learners to take up discourses and its content by categorizing their talk-in-use during set interactions. She further describes the development of four distinct categories (repertoires) which emerged from the learners’ discourse (p.123-125):

- Individual Repertoire – posing as self-developers;
- Organizational Repertoire – constituting of unproblematic beliefs;
- Challenging Repertoire – questioning the taken-for-granted beliefs;
- Political Repertoire – improving personal learning and political position

The organizational category consisted of a set of normative beliefs that consider routine or strategic practice as unproblematic and thus taken-for-granted (Lawless, 2008). Critical

management educators have commented on the use of normative (or representationalist) beliefs to constrain human practice (Rigg et al. 2007). Lawless (2008) argues that when ‘normalisation occurs certain things get lost, in particular agent and agency becomes obscured’ (p.126). The identity of self (individual) and group (organizational) can become obscuring factors where learners become politically engaged within a discourse to marginalize the aspect of challenging beliefs (Kuchinke, 2005). Pedler (2005) emphasizes the utility of action learning as safe spaces for questioning the taken-for-granted beliefs. However, traditional action learning approaches might overlook the presence of a political interface within set structures which can downplay the effectiveness of questioning (Rigg & Trehan, 2004).

Thus, critical action learning (cf. Rigg & Trehan, 2004) might be useful in developing effective spaces for mobilizing emotions and talking ‘about learning as a social phenomenon situated within hierarchies of power’ (Lawless, 2008: p.127). Vince (2008) warns us of the pitfalls which a critical approach might offer to action learning. He suggests that questioning taken-for-granted beliefs in the midst of a broader political agenda might isolate the learner from the group and result in ‘learning inaction’ (p.7). Therefore, Lawless (2008) concludes the significance of a peripherality function to clarify learners’ position and role and highlights the risks of dominant discourses, which can overcome the emancipatory (critical) potential of action learning.

### ***Action Learning and Culture***

Studies on the design and application of action learning practice in different cultural contexts are scarcely found in literature. One of the early efforts to promote action learning in an international context came from Revans’ himself, during his inter-university consortium in Belgium. Boshyk and Dilworth (2010) suggest that after Revans’ organized effort, the use of

action learning remains invisible in other parts of the world. Cho and Egan (2010) identify that most of the action learning research and practice documented in an international context comes from the Anglo-Saxon world. In a review of over 50 studies on action learning, Cho and Egan (2009; 2010) were able to find a relatively small number of action learning programmes in eastern cultures (e.g. China, Singapore and South Korea). Table 3.3 highlights the 50 studies compiled by Cho and Egan (2010) to suggest the type of research and locations in which action learning has been conducted.

Similarly, Marquardt (1999) asserts that, ‘despite its growing success in western cultures [...] action learning has been infrequently implemented in the remaining 90% of the world’ (p.149). He further argues that culture is likely to play a key role if action learning were to be implemented in other cultures such as the Asian context. Marquardt (1998) draws on Geertz (1973: p.42) to define culture as ‘the fabric of meanings with which humans beings interpret their experience and guide their actions’ (p.42). Marquardt further suggests that many of the attempted definitions on ‘culture’ contain three basic elements, which are: i) ‘it is a way of life shared by almost all members of a group’, ii) ‘it is passed on from the older member to the younger member of a group’ and iii) ‘it shapes the perception and behaviour of the members’ (p.114).

Pace et al. (1991) also defines culture, as a ‘system’ providing a set of practices to its members to suggest how they should ‘think’, ‘act’ and ‘live’ in a community. Thinking relates to values and beliefs, doing consists of laws, statutes and customs etc. while living focuses on the interaction of the individual with people, machines, food etc. Marquardt (1998) takes on a traditional perspective to culture by agreeing to a Hofstedian view, which is assumed to be cognitively embedded within learners. Hofstede (1991) visualizes culture as ‘collective programming of the human mind which distinguishes the members of one

category from another'. Marquardt (1998) attempts to differentiate the *human nature* from 'individuality' inherent in an action learner and draws culture as a common thread which links all members to schemes of knowledge and practice which inform learners how to feel talk or behave, as part of cognitive programming. Culture, according to Marquardt (1998) modifies and influences the rules of social engagement – making certain practices acceptable and unacceptable in some cultures (Marquardt, 1998). While Hofstede (1991) sees 'individuality' as the way in which a person acts and is modified by cultural and personal experiences, reducing culture to pre-defined set of categories and practices.

Overview of 50 Action Learning Studies		
Type	Study (Analysis)	Location (Organization)
Balanced (20)	9 case study (1 mixed) 7 action research 2 evaluation (1 qualitative and 1 mixed) 2 exploratory (qualitative)	6 United Kingdom (4 firms and 2 public sectors) 4 United States (1 firm and 3 educations) 2 Irish firms 2 European Union firms Other: Netherlands (firm), Sweden (firm), Australia (hospital), New Zealand (hospital), Singapore (education), and China (firm)
Learning-oriented (24)	18 case study (1 mixed and 1 quantitative) 3 evaluation (2 quantitative and 1 mixed) 2 action research 1 exploratory (quantitative)	16 United Kingdom (7 educations, 5 public, 4 firms) 2 Ireland (education and public) 2 Australia (educations) Other: United Kingdom and United States (firm), United States (education), Netherlands (firm and hospital), and New Zealand (firm)
Action-oriented (3)	2 case study 1 qualitative study	2 United Kingdom (1 firm and 1 education)
NA (3)	1 case analysis 1 quantitative 1 survey study	1 France 1 United States (firms) 1 Netherlands (firms) 1 Asia-Pacific countries (business students from New Zealand, Australia, China, Singapore, and South Korea)

**Table 3-3:** Overview of 50 Action Learning Studies by Cho & Egan (2010)

[Source: Cho, Y. and Egan, T. M. (2010). The State of the Art of Action Learning Research. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 12(2) 163–180]

Moreover, Marquardt (1998) in relation to action learning suggests that ‘culture is multi-layered comprising of practices – including behaviours, symbols, rituals and artifacts which are visible to people outside the culture’ (p.114). Learning *practices* may be considered as its production with respect to the underlying ‘values and basic assumptions’ which the culture promotes (e.g. Hofstede, 1991). Therefore, understanding culture is important as it is a way of providing meaningful context to learners to interact, and if violated may result in damaged or fractured learning. Culture is, as a roadmap for its members, logical and rational while it may not be as meaningful to people outside (Marquardt, 1998). What the cultural perspective to action learning in Marquardt’s study provides a set of nine factors which shape action learning practice in a cultural context (p.115): language, economy, family, religions, politics and law, class structure, history and geography’). Therefore, in Marquardt’s (1998) view, the difference between cultures is not of the presence/absence of the stated factors, rather the consistent patterns found in relation to them, which can result in a challenging context.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

This chapter discusses key literature on action learning theory and practice. The chapter starts by providing insights into the history and background of action learning, before going on to discuss various descriptions and assumptions found in the literature. This section further discusses the variations which action learning’s simplistic notions have caused to emerge. The chapter also provides insights into its key variant, critical action learning. Research into critical action learning offers insights into how principles of CMS influence action learning practice so that it explores the power asymmetries and politics caused by learning. Perspectives such as gender, power and psychodynamics further provide an insight into how these shape the learner and learning processes to alter its outcomes. The chapter then discusses how action learning has been applied to various other fields within the broader

sociological tradition, such as higher education, management education and culture. Finally, this chapter discusses the notion of culture; and how it influences learners. Culture is further discussed in Chapter 4, which extends the review of the literature on cultural reproductions to describe social practice using Bourdieu's philosophy.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Reproductions of Culture**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of practice, as a basis for examining the role of culture and cultural reproductions in relation to Pakistani MBA students and their participation in action learning. Bourdieu's work provides an explanatory framework for understanding Pakistani MBA students' culturally oriented learning practices that have been formed during their social and cultural upbringing. Bourdieu's theoretical insights and thinking tools (such as habitus, capital and field) provide a distinct way to analyse the complex knowledge of cultural practice. His work on habitus provides an understanding of how embodied culture lays a foundation for the way individuals learn. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the habitus shapes cultural action, social practice, without any conscious recognition of what is being performed by the individual. However, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, reflective practice has the potential to develop recognition of the taken-for-granted to engender a critical sense of personal experience, i.e. a critical habitus which is reflexive in nature. Bourdieu's notion of field helps to analyse complex issues of power and politics operating within the cultural context by examining their social position in the learning space. Finally, Bourdieu's idea of capital, and cultural and social capital in particular, helps illuminate the significance of power relationships to understand the social dynamics of learners within groups. These three elements of Bourdieu's philosophy establish the interpretive framework, which I use in Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10 to analyse the data and findings of this study.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first part discusses culture and the assumptions which impinge on its embodiment within individuals, in an attempt to lay foundations for a critical theory of culture. The second part briefly outlines Bourdieu's philosophy by describing the impetus behind his version of critical theory, i.e. social reproduction, power and politics. The third part explains Bourdieu's critical elements, i.e. habitus, field and capital, to demonstrate how they work together to develop an integrated system of practice. The fourth part discusses culture in relation to Bourdieu's theory of cultural action to develop a critical understanding of cultural practice, before ending with a brief summary of the key discussion points.

## **4.2. Cultural Reproductions and the Embodied Assumptions**

Culture, according to Swidler (1995), is a dynamic, actively recreated system, which must not be considered as a system of regulation but as an internalization of deep-seated dispositions, attitudes, styles, skills and habits. Culture being exterior to an agent is internalized through social actions inherent in beliefs, historical myths, social actions and language (Zeuner, 2003). Berger & Luckman (1966) indicate that through such actions, culture is transmitted from one agent to another. It acts as a mechanism through which societies reproduce. They further suggest that every culture has its own 'distinctive configuration [...] own specialized patterns of [...] conducts and its own [...] assumptions' (Berger & Luckman, 1966: p.67). The way culture is produced, is in fact a product of an agent's own 'socio-cultural formation' and not of human nature (p.67). However, an embodied perspective to culture provides an understanding of culture as internalized by individuals from three distinct viewpoints: the relationship of the individual with its surrounding environment in the context of everyday life, the intersubjective processes through which schemes of meanings are generated, and

language as the mode of construction of shared understanding and practice. Below I discuss three key assumptions that outline the embodiment of culture within individuals' lives:

### ***Culture as Everyday Life***

Everyday life, according to Berger & Luckman (1966), comprises of knowledge schemes that guide the practice of our daily lives (p.33). The idea of attributing culture to the discourse of everyday life is to understand the intrinsic character of social reality as interpreted by agents through inter-subjective process for making sense of the world (p.33). Berger & Luckman (1966) further stress that agents in a society take for granted the everyday life in the efforts to conduct their daily routine. It is a world of practice that is instigated in their thought process over a period as citizens of a society while their actions are a representation of the knowledge acquired. An understanding of how cultural knowledge is internalized as everyday practice helps to objectify the subjective processes through culture is acquired. It is through the embodiment of the everyday life by which agents inter-subjectively make sense of the world they live in (ibid).

The discourse of everyday life is of great importance to this study as it helps to uncover the layers of experiences, acquired by agents on a daily basis. If I were to engage in an analysis of the influence of culture on everyday life, then I would have to interpret the social interactions of agents with everyday life and their inter-subjective processes by which social order is accomplished. Berger & Luckman (1966) assert that such a sociological analysis leads into the practice of taking into account the 'taken-for-granted character of everyday life', which is firmly placed under 'various layers of experience' and 'different structures of meanings' (p.34-35).

The character of everyday life can be seen from two angles. First it can be seen as the constitution of the ‘here and now’ reality in which the agents are present and experiencing life (Berger & Luckman, 1966: p.36). The here and now dimension is the consciousness of the human mind to accept what is at present. Secondly, the everyday life is experienced within certain spatial and temporal dimensions (p.40). Life is experienced within a certain historical period of time (Burr, 1995). Also, the historicity of everyday life is experienced within spatial bounds. Collectively everyday life is a product of social practice instilled within agents by societies to conduct their thought and actions. Therefore, everyday practice is vulnerable to the social thought in which it produces and reproduces culture.

### ***Culture as Intersubjectivity***

Social interactions constitute a significant dimension of reality of everyday life. Berger & Luckman (1966) suggest that social interactions are experienced as face-to-face encounters between agents. The inter-subjective processes actualized at cognitive levels are ‘mediated through agential action’ (Stone et al. 2012: p.66). The agents are faced with bundles of knowledge in their everyday life. It is in fact challenging for agents to process large amounts of information, though taken-for-granted, the intersubjective process helps to reduce the equivocality of daily life (Peverelli & Verduyn, 2012: p. 13). Karl Weick introduced the term ‘reduction of equivocality’ in 1979 as a means to suggest how agents understand the world and organize their practice within it. During the inter-subjective process, agents are involved in constructing categories to place new information they receive with relevant information they already know.

One of the ways in which social interactions between agents is perceived has been proposed by Berger & Luckman (1966). They suggest that social interactions can be analysed through ‘typificatory schemes’ (p.44). It must be acknowledged that the social interaction takes place

in the backdrop of the social space – a place actualized before the agents engage in any type of interaction. The social space is the point of reference for the agents to indulge in a series of social actions with numerous possible encounters and outcomes. It is not within the scope of this study to undertake an examination of all possible interaction of the daily life. However, the typificatory schemes help to contextualize the interactions within a certain frame of reference in this study. Berger & Luckman (1966) suggest that typificatory schemes help in apprehending the subjective expressions to make sense and deal others in the context of interaction. These typificatory schemes are similar to what Weick (1979) suggested as they help in reducing the equivocality of everyday life. Berger & Luckman (1966) indicate that these typificatory schemes (e.g. an MBA student, a Pakistani, or professor etc.) mediates and strategizes our actions (p.46).

Giddens (2006) argues that most of our social interaction occurs through verbal and non-verbal gestures. However, the verbal interaction, i.e. talk, utilizes an informal engagement with others. Goffman (1969) calls the interactions as encounters during which agents perform a dramaturgical act. He further suggests that agents divide this process of encounter in two parts. First the initiation and preparation for the encounter takes place at the back-end where the agent prepares for the encounter, while the second takes place at the front-end where the agent formally acts and interacts. The agents' actions and interactions are dependent upon its social position within the society e.g. particular social status, class, education or background etc. Giddens (2006) asserts, taking forward the dramaturgical notion of Goffman that while agents are interacting their social roles are cut out through the fabric of culture as they practice their act. He further acknowledges that culture operates within the personalized space of the agent irrespective of the act he/she is performing.

Here social life of the agent is structured by the immediacy of act and that of temporal and spatial dimensions of everyday life. It must also be stated that social interactions are counter points where agents not only make sense of the world but also attribute to the act of identity formation. Identity, according to Carvalho et al. (2008), is developed from having a sense of belonging to some social group or cult (p.2). These groups as communities provide a set of rules, regulations and values, which constitute cultural knowledge. They suggest that cultures are socially constructed which vary spatially and temporally. For Berger & Luckman (1966) culture provides the frame of reference within which the typificatory schemes are generated. Cultural values and beliefs generally guide how social interactions take place and are context dependent acts. Culture tends to influence interactions and is a product of those interactions as it is reproduced during encounters of agents with others (Swartz, 1997). I resort to a cultural view of social interactions to better understand the inter-subjective processes as ‘mutual orientation to others and a negotiated pragmatic process’ (Stone et al. 2012: p.66). Moreover, a cultural view of social interaction provides a frame of reference to analysing the inter-subjective practices of participants in areas of critical and reflective learning practice. Therefore, culture is the angle through which participant practices could be understood during learning events.

### ***Culture as Language***

Berger & Luckman (1966) view language as an important system of ‘signs’ and ‘symbols’ which agents use in a society to communicate with each other (p.51). They define language as ‘a system of vocal signs’ (p.51). Humans express their subjective feelings and emotions through a medium of language. Language, as an expressive mechanism, entails the ability to ‘objectivate’ human activity and thoughts by extending the self to others (p.49). The objectivations are indices through which we apprehend the reality of everyday life. Our social

surrounding is full of social objects, the ability to objectivate them is handed over to me by others through their subjective interpretation. The objectivation of social objects is accomplished through the sign and symbolic system – which itself is a cluster of vocal and bodily patterns available as an objective resource to agents who utter or act to express their subjective states (Berger & Luckman, 1966: p.51).

What validates the use of language by agents is the schemes of knowledge they possess to assess their position and situation in the social system. The knowledge is socially distributed amongst agents – which can become confusing and complex to people from outside the social group. Tucker and Lambert (1973) argue that knowledge is internalized within agents as ‘deep-seated beliefs’ (p.1). These beliefs as cultural artefact and knowledge affect the ‘cognitive structures’ of agents and agential action to reify how they construct reality (p.2). Jiang (2000) indicates that culture and language are inseparable elements, as language in its production ‘reflects’ and ‘influences’ culture and is also ‘shaped’ by it (p.328). In light of Berger & Luckman’s (1966) argument of language, being a sign and symbolic system, tends to represent agents with specific social, cultural and historical affiliation. Brown (1994) indicates language and culture as ‘intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture’ (p.165).

Jiang (2000) further notes that culture and language are two systems, which interpose a unique symbolic system. This symbolic system is based on the premise that whatever we say in language has a specific meaning in a certain culture, social and historical time. In literal terms, language has certain ‘designative or sociative, denotative or connotative’ meanings in different cultural settings. Moreover, language within its social and cultural fields develops ‘semantic zones of meanings’ to objectify the social objects in their everyday life (Berger & Luckman, 1966: p.55). In a way, language, based on stocks of knowledge, develops

‘classificatory schemes’ to make sense of the objects of those social objects which constitute the reality of agents (p.55). Berger & Luckman (1966) further state that the knowledge base empowers language to ‘make statements of action as against statements of being; modes of indicating degrees of social intimacy, and so on’ (p.55).

What interests me is to see how participants build on their knowledge base and use language as a source of face-to-face interaction. Haugh (2008) suggests that the utility of language as a means of culture in action can be accomplished by understanding the underlying emic and etic perspectives of language used by participants. Goddard (2006) states that emic perspectives are language patterns ‘which make sense to the people concerned, i.e., in terms of indigenous values, beliefs and attitudes, social categories, emotions, and so’. Using the emic schemes helps to elucidate the ‘participants’ orientations to meanings, interpretations and evaluation of utterances’ (Piirainen-Marsh, 2005: 214). In contrast etic perspectives capture actual culture-specific interactions that occur during emic processes (Brown & Levinson, 1987). As a cultural observer, the etic perspective helps relate indexical meanings to interactions. Therefore, emic and etic perspectives can help dig into the deeper interactional meanings of agents during their ability to use language.

### **4.3. Towards a Bourdieusian Understanding of Culture and Cultural Productions**

Pierre Bourdieu was a leading French sociologist of the twentieth century. Bourdieu’s critical acclaim of being a cultural or post-culturalist cultural theorist is largely driven by his cultural fieldwork with the Algerian Kabyle tribes, Bearn peasants and Berber house – translated in form of Outline of a Theory of Practice, Logic of Practice and the Algerians. Swartz (1997) notes Bourdieu’s work, in culture, mainly revolves around the notion of structuration of power within class-structures and social hierarchies in society. According to Grenfell (2008) Bourdieu conceptualizes culture in two distinct forms - i.e. culture as language, set of

traditions and belief-system; and also culture as aesthetics (symbolic). Bourdieu's philosophy considers culture as a dynamic, actively recreated system that must not be considered as a system of regulation but as an internalization of deep-seated dispositions, attitudes, styles, skills and habits (Swidler, 1995). In a study on Bourdieu's cultural work, Zeuner (2003) refers Bourdieu to consider culture in three dimensions i.e. culture being intuitively understood by actors, defined in disciplinary/functional terms and constructed through social beliefs and historical myths.

Furthermore, Swartz (1997) notes that, Bourdieu visualizes culture in terms of symbolic power and as a political economy of practice. In terms of political economy of practice, culture symbolizes human-actions and dispositions, which place human interests closer to culture (ibid). The idea of symbolic power refers to symbolic violence, symbolic interest and capital. Symbolic interest takes into account material production for economic benefits, capital indicates the resources in possession to indicate social position and symbolic violence exhibits the suppression of a lower class of people (ibid). In this sense culture is brought closer to human-interests, whereas, this also is a basis for legitimization of power (ibid).

Alternatively, Bourdieu's notion of culture can also be narrated in terms of capital – power i.e. cultural capital (Swartz, 1997). This notion suggests that culture as capital has specific laws of exchange, accumulation and exercise (ibid). Hence, culture can be considered as an amalgamation and agglomeration of symbolic systems of practice. These systems are either structuring structures or structured structures within society. As structuring structures, culture helps to understand and order the social world, while structured structures are chunks of tacit knowledge coded through language and beliefs, which are shared by all cultural affiliates (ibid). These codes act as communicative and integrative functions, which harbour social domination. In symbolic terms, culture is also a way of knowing or knowledge about religion,

art or practices with which the social world is understood by social actors (Lizardo, 2011). Theorization of culture by Bourdieu (1968), aims at positing culture to being ‘more than a “common code” [...] an ideological system of beliefs, ideas or values [...] or general world view’ (Swartz, 1997: p.115). Rather it encompasses all these views in form of habits – a way of acting; and culture is Bourdieu’s way of being in the social world, providing impetus to practice. Therefore, a Bourdieusian ‘analysis of the cultural system within a society’ underlines culture as not only a sense-making (meaningful) structure, but a continuous system of production and reproduction of actions by agents (Sulkunen, 1982: p. 106).

### ***Cultural Practice, Power and Politics***

Bourdieu (1984) stresses that, there ‘is no way out of the game of culture’ (p.12), especially when it remains a precondition for human practice and social formation (i.e. societies). A larger issue for Bourdieu (1984) is the domination for distinction that creates power struggles amongst humans within society. Bourdieu (1987), therefore, indicates that critically examining culture and cultural practice (such as power struggles) might lead to a ‘theory of politics’ (p.36). Moreover, Bourdieu in his theory of practice takes a step further and associates cultural action as a reflexive response towards external factors like culture, social or human interactions (Swartz, 1997). He also negates action being triggered through internal conscious responses (ibid). Rather, Bourdieu epitomizes action as a vigilant human activity that is initiated by mutual inclusion of externality and internality of social and biological factors. Bourdieu reciprocates Giddens (1984) view that agency is not human-intention rather an individual’s capacity to perform an action – which connects action with culture and power (Swartz, 1997). Furthermore, Bourdieu suggests practice to be embedded within structures that are hierarchically organized (LiPuma, 2003). Each level is seen to have its own logic, history and set of agents (ibid). Agents and their relationship to one another within these

levels are categorized by power-relations based on their class-dynamics. The internal structure of classes and their power struggles revolve around their access to various resources i.e. cultural or economic. Bourdieu asserts that structure-based view of classes and power highlights human-action and practice with that of social reproduction (ibid). Bourdieu (1983) also indicates that it also links structure with cultural order which is constituted by human-action.

What drives social practice is the notion of social reproduction. Bourdieu tries understanding how societies persist in terms of practices which lead to the social and cultural production of power to reproduce societal structures (Bourdieu, 1973). In simple words, it is to reproduce what the dominant class wants from the dominated class in the society. Reproduction, based on its terminology and essence in Bourdieu's work, is the capability of a system to extend itself and 'recursively evolve over time and space' (Hermes, 1998: p.53). Bourdieu's thesis essentially revolves around the idea of how structures and class-relations, in society, are socially reproduced. Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) urge for a science of reproduction to illustrate the social reproduction process. Bourdieu (1973) quotes that there is a need for

'a study of laws whereby structures tend to reproduce themselves by producing agents invested with the system of dispositions which is able to engender practices adapted to these structures and thus contribute to their reproduction'. (Bourdieu, 1973 cited in Swartz, 1997: p.7)

Doob (2013) acknowledges social reproduction as a process of transmitting social inequality intergenerationally. Bourdieu is critical of the reproduction process and, his theory, looks into how people rehabilitate the stratified social order and tries to exhibit it through a science of practice (Bourdieu, 1977). In particular, Bourdieu (1985) is inquisitive about the role of culture, specific to how people strategize to produce and reproduce circumstances which warrant their existence within a society, during this socially reproductive process.

Overall Bourdieu's philosophy could be seen as a way to understand the political divide between culture and history. Bourdieu in his work argues to transcend this divide of cultural naivety vs. historical acquisitiveness through a science of (generative) practice which sees social reality in a relational context rather than a substantialist one (Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu classifies this middle ground as structuralist-constructivism (Bourdieu, 1989). The structuralist-constructivism is a space which takes into account the objective social structure and generative schemes of thought and action to understand the social world (ibid). Inhabiting a space where objective social relations and perceptual structures socially exist requires an understanding of the power-relations between structures and agents in terms of resources, symbolic, cultural or economic (ibid). Here emerges a social space in which Bourdieu sees how people are related to each other via social characteristics. Bourdieu is cautious to differentiate social relation with social interaction or proximity. Rather he sees interaction to be distant and spatial, and relations to be irreducible to interaction. Therefore, the distinction lies in the positions occupied and the resources distributed amongst agents of a society (ibid). Therefore, a Bourdieusian philosophy steps beyond the micro-perspectives of culture-as-interaction to present a macro-perspective of culture-as-practice.

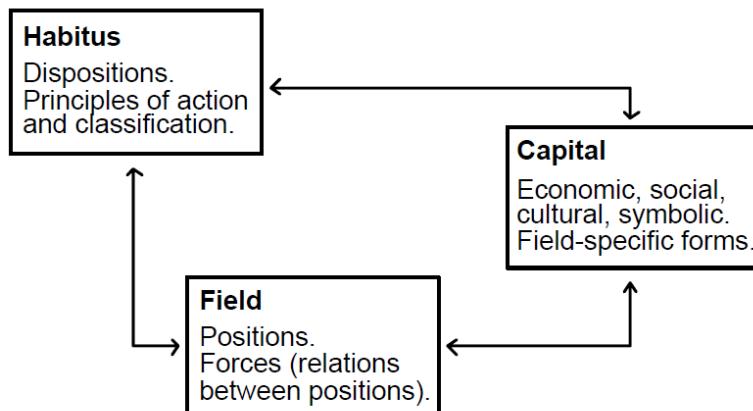
#### **4.4. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice**

Bourdieu's theory of practice formulates the interpretive framework of this study. His conceptions and insights are intended to help in making sense of cultural productions and practices generated by Pakistani MBA students. Bourdieu's theory of practice is based on three concepts i.e. habitus, capital and field. These conceptions are further used in chapters 7, 8 and 9 to interpret data and conduct an in-depth analysis of Pakistani MBAs learning practices. These three main concepts that outline his theory of practice are also known as Bourdieu's 'thinking tools'. Bourdieu (1986: p.101) suggests that the three elements habitus,

field and capital unite to form practice, which he demonstrates through the following equation:

$$[(Habitus)*(Capital)] + Field = Practice$$

Maton (2008) unpacks the equation by stating that ‘practice results from relations between one’s dispositions (habitus) and one’s position in a field’ (also with the amount of capital possessed by each agent). Moreover, Calhoun (2003) suggests reading these key concepts of Bourdieu together, instead of fragments to fully appreciate his theoretical-practical approach. Bourdieu hesitated, for people, to use his socioanalysis as a mechanical model; rather he insisted them to look at it as an interrelated system in which all the three concepts interact to explain the social behavioural phenomena of humans (Malik, 2012).



**Figure 4-1:** An Integrated System of Practice: Habitus, Capital and Field<sup>6</sup>  
 [Adapted: Stokke, K. (2005). ‘Struktureringsteori’, a presentation cached on the University of Oslo Website]

In figure 4.1, a graphical representation indicates habitus, capital and field to be an interactive system. The figure exhibits the relationship between habitus and field by stating that subjective, mental dispositions are linked with objective field structures, inseparable, which unite to provide a complete sense of human-action (Jenkins, 1992). Furthermore, field

<sup>6</sup> Source: [www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/iss/SGO4000/h05/undervisningsmateriale/.../Struktureringsteori.ppt](http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/iss/SGO4000/h05/undervisningsmateriale/.../Struktureringsteori.ppt)

provides rules of the game, while habitus provides an understanding of these rules. Likewise, capital and field are related in a way in which capital determines the social position of an agent within a field – a site of struggle for power between dominated and dominant (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Similarly, a change in capital can be the result of habitus, as dispositions within humans can trigger certain actions resulting in the change of capital volume. Therefore, habitus, capital and field are the very basis for understanding human-actions and provide a framework to study these actions within their natural setting.

These elements are briefly explained below:

### ***Habitus***

Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1977), is a ‘system of structured, structuring dispositions’ embodied by agents (ibid, p.107). Dispositions, in Bourdieu’s conceptualization of habitus, can be referred to as internalizations from ‘past experience’ that ‘predisposes individuals to act out’ in certain ways but ‘does not determine them to do so’ (Swartz, 2002: p.63S). Habitus is a way of thinking about action as an output of dispositions that have been internalized by individuals at an early stage of their social citizenship (Swartz, 1997). Habitus positions an individual’s social status/position within society – providing a ‘sense of one’s place’ (Bourdieu, 1984: p.471).

Habitus, as defined by Bourdieu (1977), is a

‘[...] system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrate past experiences, functions at every moment as matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions’ (p.82).

The habitus is linked to ‘the individual history, and that it belongs to a genetic mode of thought, as opposed to an essentialist mode of thought’ (Bourdieu, 1993: p.86). In a union of aforementioned conceptions, Bourdieu (1990) formally describes, habitus as a:

‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them’ (Bourdieu, 1990: p.53)

Fundamentally, habitus is a non-objectivistic view of social practice that considers an agent to be practically situated within the ‘real activity’ – in a way whereby the relation between the individual and the world is not only practical but also relatively situated in the very same sense that the world imposes itself onto the agent (Bourdieu, 1999, p.107). Habitus, a ‘structured-structure’, stems from an individual’s experiences of socializing within a certain social circle, a class-position (Swartz, 1997).

In a relative manner, the ontology of scientific-approach, mainly driven by realism, objectively defines relationships of others with the actor and disconnects relations from their cultural and historical context. For Bourdieu, individual and society are two products of the very same social reality in which they exist (Swartz. 1997). According to Bourdieu, ‘social reality exists both inside and outside of individuals, both in our minds and things’, therefore, the idea that ‘objective structures have subjective consequences is not compatible’ with constructionist view ‘that the social world is constructed by individual actors’ (Swartz, 1997: p.96-97). Thus Bourdieu urges to preserve reality’s dualistic property through human-action and behaviour regulated within society.

DiMaggio (1979) considers habitus as Bourdieu’s theoretical way of relating ‘objective structure with individual activity’ (p.1464). Bourdieu (1999) stresses that the objectivist approaches inadequately describe the reality of the social world. Bourdieu’s intention is not to become a subjectivist but to work through the ‘subjective expectations of objective probabilities’ (Grenfell & James, 1998: p.15). Swartz (1997) indicates habitus to internalize the socialized experiences of humans, resulting into everyday knowledge, which in turn

externalize action to produce/reproduce objective structures (p.103). Bourdieu considers this process as:

‘system of circular relations that unite structures and practices; objective structures tend to produce structured objective dispositions that produce structured actions which, in turn, tend to reproduce objective structures’ (Bourdieu cited in Swartz, 1997: p.103)

Overcoming objective-subjective challenges to describe the social world of an agent, the theory of practice transcends this dichotomy, to deliberate the relation between ‘objectified products’ and the ‘incorporated products of historical practice’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p.52). Thus habitus is a way of being and relating within a social system that helps understand how systems and structures, within society, are:

‘Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to the rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor’ (Bourdieu, 1990: p.53)

In terms of relating, Calhoun (2003) asserts that habitus as a ‘collective enterprise’ which inculcates strategies without agents’ strategic consciousness as their practice is related to each other and structures within social institutions. These strategies / actions strengthen systems of dominations within society based on their everyday interactions and taken for granted knowledge. Hence, habitus as a social process therefore implies, in Bourdieu’s philosophy, that every agent playing his/her role ultimately accepts their position within society and regularizes and normalizes it as if it were to be – taking the self for granted (Malik, 2012). Frank (2002) indicates habitus to acculturate an agent’s inability to question their place (either dominated or dominant) in society, as ‘habitus triumphs cognition’ (p.390). On the being note, says Jenkins (1992), Bourdieu extends habitus from a mental state to a being state which also takes into account the physical bodily actions of an agent to structure the structures within society.

## ***Capital***

In Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, capital symbolizes a form of power (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1987) conceptualizes capital as resource that distinguishes an agent's position within a field. Capital derives its meaning from social relations and individuals' ability to strategically accumulate or produce power structures within fields/spaces of the social world. This social world, according to Bourdieu (1987), is an expression of 'a multidimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of a given social universe, or, in other words, by discovering the powers of different forms of capital which are or can become efficient' (p.3-4). The process of production or reproduction, which is an agglomeration of actions and practice, develops value in a field that is able to buy other products (actions, practices etc.) through capital.

A non-monetary form of capital (e.g. intellectual or artistic) might take the form of a monetary form of capital (e.g. economic), but capital remains an essential unit of production in a society (e.g. cultural capital etc.). Bourdieu, inspired from Marx's capitalism and Durkheim's socialism, positions his concept of capital in the social world as a means for creating distinction amongst social classes (Calhoun, 2003). The possession of a certain form of capital indicates the edge of power of one person over other members, altering the behaviour and relationship dynamics within a society. Taking inspiration from a capitalistic concept, Bourdieu uses capital to illustrate a process of exchange within a system to understand the complex issues in a range of fields (Moore, 2008).

In Bourdieu's philosophy, capital exists in four generic forms i.e. social, symbolic, cultural and economic, however, each field of production is responsible for producing its own capital (e.g. field of education – academic capital etc.) (Bourdieu, 1986). The economic capital is the monetary form of capital, while the social capital is a 'network of lasting social relations' and

the cultural capital is the ‘product intrinsic value of a society’ which subsequently can take form of symbolic capital (such as art, craft etc.) (Grenfell et al. 1998: p.20).

### **Field**

Grenfell et al. (1998) argue that, for Bourdieu, habitus is a system for individuals to subjectively express their relation with their world, however, the effects of their expression are ‘actualized in an objectively defined’ space called ‘field’ (p.15). Bourdieu (1998) uses the concept of field to examine the struggles, conflicts and interest of agents over capital (power) within society. For Bourdieu (1998) field is a multidimensional space of positions which exhibits struggles of agents and interplay of their habitus with their class-position to acquire a better position within the system.

In their work, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define field as:

‘[...] a network of configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situations (*situ*) in the structure of the distribution of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology etc.)’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.97)

In other words, field is a system of hierarchical positions occupied by agents and the nature of their position determines their status within society. The position of each agent within a field is based on either distribution or acquisition of a form of capital. Therefore a field is a space of positions and position-taking by agents based on their capital to legitimize and exercise their (power) dominance over others – i.e. providing a framework for relationally analysing the position of agents within a field/space (Ozturk, 2011).

The social world consists of many fields. However, Bourdieu (1998) describes three types of spaces in which practice leads to the production or reproduction of society. These are social,

economic and cultural. The social field consists of classes or groups of people having similar social characteristics, either known or unknown to each other formulate the basis for newer relationships – warranting basis for social reproduction (ibid). The economic field signifies the possession of goods, products, income etc. by people distributed in different classes based on their social origins (field) (ibid). The cultural field conveys the acquisition of values, norms and beliefs through family upbringing, educational institutions, ways of living, taste, dressing etc. The cultural field produces elements of culture distributed amongst individuals, based on practices can be categorised as culturally acceptable (ibid). Bourdieu further adds that the field of power and politics remains active and overlaps all other fields in society (ibid.).

Bourdieu utilizes the concept of field as a space to examine the relations and interactions of actors with their social world (Thomson, 2008). In Bourdieuian philosophy, the field not only examines the social and cultural dynamics to locate the agent's habitus within its historical, cultural and relational context, but also examines the knowledge about traditional practices within a society (Bourdieu, 2005). Bourdieu extends the concept of field from the field of education to the field of cultural production. Each field harbours sub-fields for example, field of education may include sub-fields like higher education, management education etc. However, each field of production, in case of education (e.g. the production here is in form of capital, which can be knowledge, academic, or intellect etc.), resides within the larger field of power.

#### **4.5. Social Practice as Culture: A Bourdieusian Perspective**

Bloch (1986) notes that, Pierre Bourdieu's dominant discourse in the field of culture is driven partly by traditional sociological and anthropological views of culture (i.e. culture and cognitive debates). These debates postulate culture to be an assortment of three vernacular

views i.e. cognition precedes actions, cognitive ideology of people legitimizes inequality and ideological collectiveness of people organizes their cognition to act and legitimize power. Lizardo (2004) indicates that Piaget's revolutionary developmental psychology (as noted above) negated the view that actions tend to precede cognition and are constitutive of cognitive-schemes. Apparently, Bourdieu comments on Piaget's view of human-interaction to shape cognitive patterns, but as Vygotsky adds that culture essentially depends on an individual's learning within its environment. For Bourdieu and unlike Vygotsky, Bloch (1986) quotes that, environment (field) itself is historically and culturally organized – thus acculturation occurs through the process of 'human-interaction' (p. 31).

Bourdieu's cultural theory partly agrees with Piaget and Vygotsky's view to be being a continuous system of learning (through transmission) and acquisition of knowledge, whereas, culture is internalized through actions and experiences through a socialization and developmental process. In this regard, Lizardo (2011), terms 'Bourdieu's theory of culture' to being 'constructively genetic' in nature (p.7). By way of analysis, Bourdieu's cultural theory, calls upon a critical inquiry of: (a) culture's ability to produce knowledgeable social actors; and (b) reproduce social inequalities (Swartz, 1997; Robbins, 2000). Both the themes hold significant value within my study as they correspond to how cultural knowledge is practiced and how it becomes a means of distinction within learning sets (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu's theory of cultural relativity assumes cultural practice to being a product of class habitus and position in a social system and there is no position outside of social system which agents can occupy (Bourdieu, 1990). The theory has attracted criticism and debates over years (Brubaker, 1993), but still continues to provide impetus to cultural studies based on its firm theoretical and empirical groundings (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu's (1990) sociology of culture presumes that agents are located within social systems. It is in their interest that they

are to occupy strategic positions within these systems (social spaces or fields) which are determined according to the amount of cultural capital they possess/consume (ibid). Bourdieu (1984) suggests that agents are continuously struggling with each other to achieve capital and those who possess capital are able to exercise power over others. In Bourdieu's philosophy societies produce and reproduce during the process of struggle (to achieve capital) and attain practical mastery to ratify their position within society.

Here, central to Bourdieu's cultural thesis is *practice*. Bourdieu, in constructing his cultural theory, problematizes the notion of culture with power – traditionally being a systemized system in which execution of practice by actors is consistent with the cultural value system. Bourdieu (1973) illustrates the problem of culture and relativizes conduct to exertion of power and social practice to avoid naïve and generalized assertions about cultural conduct. This is Bourdieu's critical cultural theory where culture is problematized on how power contravenes conduct, how power junctions are legitimized and attributed to social class, and how are they construed by agents rather than conduct being a product of culture (values or beliefs) for example Hofstede's classification of culture. Thus, Bourdieu (1973) argues against the abstract conceptualization of culture by cultural theorists (like Hofstede or Trompenaars etc.) and reacts against treating culture as an objective system through its objectivist-scientific construction by scientists without being a slave to their subjectivist intentions. In the following passages, I posit the concept of culture and cultural practice that challenges subjectivist-relativistic assumptions in favour of a generative view of cultural practice. The reason behind doing so is to provide a holistic view of individuals' practice, which traditionally is split between the realist and anti-realist debate.

### **Embodying Culture as Practice**

Bourdieu (1984) creates sociology of culture based on social stratification, which he marks as ‘distinction’. In order to do so, I now refer to *Reproduction* in which Bourdieu argues that during secondary socialization of an agent (as also indicated by Berger & Luckman, 1966) the knowledge super-imposed, through for example in education, is not a common representation of culture, but it is ‘arbitrary’ insofar that it is dependent upon the agent’s position inculcating that knowledge (p.12-15). The position granted to an agent disseminating that knowledge is by virtue of his symbolic affinity with the dominant class. According to Bourdieu & Passeron (1977), this agent has ‘symbolic power’ to levy knowledge, which the dominant class deems legitimate. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) term this act of imposition as ‘symbolic violence’ (p.4-10). In this way, the power and position of the dominant class are reproduced. However, what Bourdieu overlooks is how dominated class normalizes streams of power and knowledge and accept their position in relation to the dominant class. For Bourdieu, the taste for culture of dominated class is in fact the actualization mechanism, which legitimizes the cultural standard of dominant class. It is apparently not how the dominant class portrays its cultural taste for art, life-style or education but it is how the dominated class normalize and regularize through their way of cultural practice – reproducing the acceptability of dominant class cultural taste by society.

Bourdieu (1990) further indicates that the society can be seen as a field of struggle, where the dominated class strives to achieve a dominant position within the social system. Bourdieu (1993) argues that an agent’s culture is not subjectively defined as a matter of experiencing culture rather it is objectively constituted in a ‘field of relations’ (p.30). The position of an agent within these objective fields is exhibited by their ability to strategically position themselves in the cultural field through a process of ‘position-takings’ within ‘spaces of

possibles' (p.30). The process of position-taking is the struggle that underlines the dynamic nature of a society where it continually produces (new positions and capital) and reproduces (power-hierarchies) through position-takings and capital accumulation in a social space.

The social space is a space of possibilities, as Bourdieu (1993) puts it, which genealogically is also similar to what Foucault (1998) suggests a 'field of strategic possibilities' (p.320). For Foucault (1998) the 'field of strategic possibilities' is a space where agents adapt to a set of discourses only by virtue of positioning themselves to be in powerful positions. In the strategic space, Foucault (1998) suggests that culture is unable to produce itself in the absence of a relational network of agents that produce discourse. Discourse is a dominant means of reproducing culture and cultural knowledge. Bourdieu (1993) concurs with Foucault by suggesting that culture in order to produce cultural capital (e.g. art, folk, language etc.) cannot exist in isolation and evolves within a 'space of possibles' (p.30-31). What Foucault overlooks in his strategic space is what Bourdieu (1993) exhibits i.e. struggles for position-taking in which agents strategize to restore the balance of power. Where Foucault focuses on the discursive nature of power grounded in agents' position in a field, there Bourdieu goes a step further by determining how agents restore the social and moral order of society. Thus, Bourdieu (1977; 1990) emphasizes that it is the struggle that acts as the generative principle of social practice – i.e. it structures practice and is simultaneously a product of these social structures.

Bourdieu (1984) proposes that agents from different social classes internalize different sets of social and cultural knowledge, but vaguely characterizes the cultural practice of dominant class with 'degree of freedom' and dominated with 'degree of necessity'. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that the distinction is a social one rather than a universal one: it is the 'illusion' that the dominant class creates to maintain power hierarchies. Amongst other critiques levelled

against Bourdieu's social relativity of culture, two concerns are important to highlight to exhibit how Bourdieu transcends his ideology of cultural relativity in favour of culture as a generative system of interrelated practice. First is Bourdieu's inability to explain how he avoids sociological determinism: he manages to illustrate culture and cultural knowledge (social practices) as shaped by the positions that agents take within class structures that ultimately reproduce social hierarchies. The question to ask is how has Bourdieu, himself, escaped from such deterministic concepts to expose the reproduction process without falling victim to a 'scholastic fallacy'? (Bourdieu, 2000: p.84)

The scholastic fallacy or point of view suggests how scholars naively detach culture from its practicalities and assemble a 'practical logic of action' without paying heed to the objective fields of relations in which it is conceived (Gartman, 2007: p.5). Second is that Bourdieu's cultural theory is unable to depict social change as part of cultural agenda. Collins (1981) indicates that Bourdieu limits class-culture to continuously producing class-structures in a cyclical manner. It fails to account how, for example, educational institutions super-impose their cultural agenda and pass cultural knowledge on to agents without taking into consideration their abilities as knowledgeable agents to submit themselves at the hands of superior agents (DiMaggio, 1979; Berger & Luckman, 1966). Despite these critiques, Bourdieu's cultural theory manages to outline a need for a generative mechanism rather than a naïve understanding of culture as proposed by others (e.g. Hofstede, Schein, Trompenaars etc.)

#### **4.6. Conclusion**

This chapter aims to develop a critical understanding of culture using a Bourdieusian perspective. The chapter draws on the works of Pierre Bourdieu to study culture as practice, performed by individuals in a society/community. The chapter initially informs readers about

what I mean by culture and what assumptions underlie its constitution in this study. It then introduces Bourdieu's theory of practice to suggest how culture is internalized, sustained and transferred to others in society. These aspects are reviewed in the light of the research questions as they broadly outline the complexities and challenges presented by culture in a project which aims to enhance criticality in the Pakistani MBA context. A critical perspective is then developed by comparing Bourdieu's notion of culture with those of other sociological traditions emerging from the works of Vygotsky and Piaget to understand the *situatedness* of culture within a particular context. With the discussion of culture and Bourdieu's philosophy of practice, the literature review section ends and this thesis now goes on to develop a research methodology and strategy for dealing with the practical aspects of the study.

## **Section Two**

### **Research Methodology**

In the previous section, I addressed the theoretical underpinnings of this study with an aim to explore whether the reflective practice of action learning can enhance criticality in a given cultural context. The chapters in Section 1 (i.e. the literature review) collectively helped to develop the theoretical foundations and formulate this study's sub-questions:

- What cultural dispositions underlie participants' perception of the differences between the traditional Pakistani MBA pedagogy and their practice of action learning?
- What does MBA students' experience of organizing reflection informs about action learning's practice in the Pakistani context?
- What social dynamics do Pakistani MBAs display (and reflect upon) as shaping their action learning set interactions?

These questions were developed to contribute towards answering the overarching research question with the help of a carefully designed research methodology, which acknowledges the critical and pragmatic nature of this study. Section 2, therefore, on research methodology, addresses the practical aspects of this study over the next two chapters.

Given the nature of questions this study puts forward, this section helps to put together a methodology that qualitatively investigates these questions. In so doing, this section broadly covers aspects pertaining to the philosophical assumptions, methodological considerations, field strategy and design concerns of the action learning project. I would like to alert the reader to the length of this section: as these chapters form the backbone of this study, readers might find them lengthier than usual. The research methodology intends to investigate the cultural learning norms which the MBA students practice during action learning and their

ability to shape participants' reflective practices. The research also takes into account participants' behaviour (social, political and emotional) and relationships to explain the situated nature of action learning in the Pakistani MBA.

Chapter 5, on research design and strategy, outlines the multi-paradigmatic research framework underpinning this study. It informs readers about the meta-theoretical assumptions, the theoretical perspective and methodological considerations which support the interpretive approach of this study. This chapter argues for a qualitative study that draws upon an abductive research strategy to generate empirical evidence to explore MBA students' action learning reflections, in the process revealing the challenges and complexities of Pakistani culture: i.e. the embodied cultural practices exhibited by participants during their action learning interactions and reflected afterwards in their interviews. Additionally, this chapter informs the reader about the design of the research methods used during the data collection, along with potential ethical concerns taken into account for this design-based study. Finally, this chapter illustrates the reflexive nature of this study, presenting a reflection on the reflexive self of the researcher, by discussing key assumptions and positioning during the course of the research and field process.

Chapter 6 outlines the fieldwork and analysis strategy of this study. It discusses in detail the selection of the research site and sample along with the politics of fieldwork involved in negotiating access for organizing an action learning programme for the 31 final-year MBA students in the three participating Pakistani business schools. The attention of the reader is also drawn towards the sensitivity of this project by describing the work involved in gathering trustworthy data from reliable participants. It also illustrates the design architecture of the action learning programme developed by the researcher for the Pakistani MBA students, including design considerations and the action learning framework behind the

learning programme. Lastly, this chapter presents the data organization and analysis strategy, providing a detailed account of the strategic process adopted to organize the data, which was collected from action learning set observations, post-programme interviews and field notes, for the purpose of analysis. It also serves to show the thinking that went into conceptualizing and theorizing the data for interpretation through inductive means. The chapter is critical in highlighting the significance of how the process of interpretation is grounded within the data by proposing a data-driven strategy for its analysis.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Research Design and Strategy**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter describes the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of my research design: a design that aims to provide a framework for studying the reflexive nature of action learning practice, as experienced individually and collectively by Pakistani MBA students. The methodology is designed around an action learning programme aimed at enhancing criticality in Pakistani MBA students, who are used to more traditional forms of education. The approach adopted is to examine the cultural character of MBA students' learning practices, as exhibited by them in action learning sets and narrated afterwards, through a qualitative study using an 'abductive strategy' (Blaikie, 2000; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). The first step was to collect data by observing action learning sets and conducting face-to-face interviews with MBA students, i.e. those who participated in the action learning programme<sup>7</sup>. The abductive process was thought to be helpful in generating data (Blaikie, 2000) – i.e. interpretive accounts of MBA participants which would further guide the analysis in deriving interpretations (making sense) of their practices as action learners within Pakistani culture.

I have therefore divided this chapter into five parts. The first part provides a prelude to the qualitative nature of this study, in which I discuss the motivation for following a qualitative route. The second part is the backbone of this study, and focuses on discussing the research framework (its philosophical and methodological underpinnings), and how it informs the

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<sup>7</sup> The design considerations underpinning the action learning programme are explained in detail in Chapter 6 under 'programme design considerations'.

field strategy. As a note to the reader, the field strategy is described in detail in Chapter 6 while the third part of this chapter touches upon the research methods. The fourth part deals with the ethical concerns taken into account in conducting this study. Lastly, I describe the reflexive self of the academic researcher conducting this study in part five. In this, I provide a description of how I understood reflexivity and practiced it during the course of my research work.

## **5.2. A Qualitative Study**

The rationale for choosing a qualitative approach was broadly based on my theoretical choice to examine the complex character of Pakistani MBA's social, cultural and political context and students' ability to adapt to action learning for enhancing criticality. The application of action learning in the Pakistani context has led to a better understanding of its cultural sensitivity towards critical and reflective modes of learning. To better understand the cultural landscape in which action learning was situated, I resorted to obtaining in-depth data from MBA students i.e. through observation and interviews (Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The role of MBA student accounts is particularly of great essence to this study as it allows describing of the situated character of participants' learning practices as instances of culture-in-action. Furthermore, this increases the need for adapting to a qualitative approach as it allows the opportunity to give voice to their feelings as well as their ability to make sense of their experiences (Eisner, 1991). In my study, I partake on an intellectual journey within the lives of MBA students for almost 16-weeks to understand their complex and dynamic learning environment to grasp the challenges to action learning practice (e.g. Malik, 2012; Clendinin & Connnelly, 2000). Being associated with these MBA students, for this duration, enabled me to understand the constructive sense-making process of participants (Merriam, 1998). Brookfield (1990) stresses that the qualitative perspective allows the researcher to

interpret the sense making process through which participants associate ‘meanings to their actions’ (p.2). The interpretive component of qualitative approach provided me with the advantage to view MBA students’ accounts from their standpoint and to acknowledge their ‘feelings and thoughts’ to be embedded within wider socio-cultural context of their academic lives (Vince, 2008: p.97).

Also as described in the introductory chapter, the research question in this study encourages a social inquiry into the beliefs and practices governing MBA students’ academic lives and the context in which their education takes place. Taking into account such complex dimensions of this study, I wanted to provide a holistic account of MBA students’ reflective practice in action learning in an effort to break away from the functionalist, technicistic and hierarchical views of management education in Pakistan. Given the longitudinal nature of this study, involving running an action learning programme with Pakistani MBA students, it was well-suited to provide an account of the complexities of social life and the contextual description of the culture in which the MBAs learn. Also the decision to engage with the MBA students, through the action learning sets and post-set interviews to inquire about their experience of working with critical modes of learning, was situated in the philosophical assumption of understanding their inter-subjectively communicated lived-experience. Therefore, breaking down the purpose of this study led me to think that the *qualitative approach* might be helpful in better understanding MBA students’ accounts of action learning in relation to their experiences of culturally-conditioned pedagogies.

Although qualitative research has been critiqued for its broadly defined vague approach which is grounded too deeply within the context of the study, but perhaps its critique is its strength. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to investigate the social world with a greater degree of flexibility while addressing to the details of the ‘context’. Fielding and

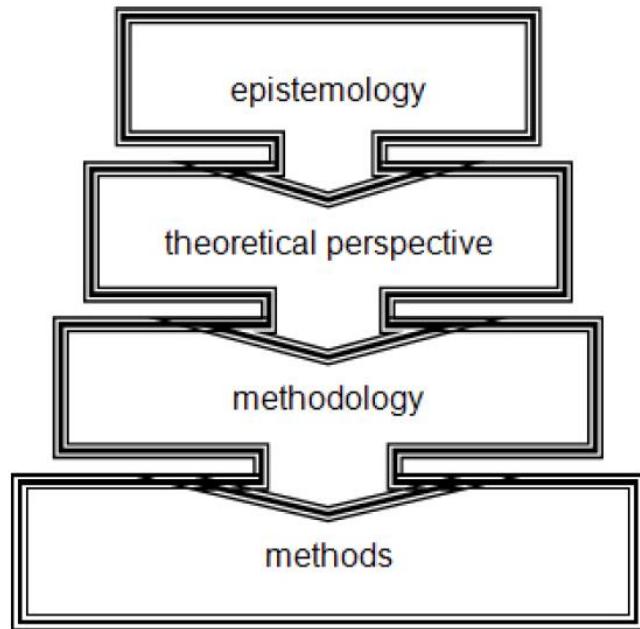
Fielding (1986: p.21) argue that ‘researchers who generalize from a sample survey to a larger population ignore the possible disparity between the discourse of actors about some topical issue and the way they respond to questions in a formal context’. Furthermore, Kirk and Miller (1986: p.15) note that it might be less useful to use a positivistic approach to research the ‘social world’, and it can be misleading if the researcher does not acknowledges the ‘social’, and ‘cultural’ aspects which influence people. This research not only acknowledges the ‘attitudes and behaviour’ of people which are based on ‘assumptions’ perceived and developed over a period of time by living in a society, but also exemplifies the subjective values of student-participants. The idea is to go beyond quantifying the daily-life experiences and to identify thematic patterns that aid in the pedagogical re-design of the MBA degree, from a critical and reflexive viewpoint.

### **5.3. The Methodological Framework**

Research methodology, according to Sekaran (2003), is a broad term that encompasses a ‘framework for the collection and evaluation of existent knowledge for the purpose of arriving at, and validating, new knowledge’ (p.2). A framework is like a ‘scaffold’, as suggested by Crotty (1998), which provides support to the research design and allows the researcher to make sense of how the philosophical and methodological considerations impinge upon one another. Prior to discussing the research framework, I would like to acknowledge that Mason’s (2002) and Crotty’s (2003) ideas offered groundwork to develop the design and process of this study.

During the preliminary stages, Mason’s (2002) intellectual questions provided a starting point to focus on what this study was about – i.e. giving perspective to the process of research,

whereas Crotty (2003) drew my attention towards philosophical paradigms<sup>8</sup> – i.e. shaping my understanding of the research design. The scaffolding offered by Crotty (2003), in addition to Mason's (2002) questions, described key terminologies in a tabulated format which include a description of epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods – see figure 5.1.



**Figure 5-1:** Crotty's (1984) Four Elements of Social Research

[Source: Crotty, M., (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage]

These terms, as mentioned in figure 5.1 above, outline the design and process of this inquiry, and are posed as questions by Crotty (2003) asking the researcher to answer these before embarking upon their journey. He further encourages the researcher to start thinking about their study by considering the methods, then methodology and so on, in a bottom-up

<sup>8</sup> The discussion on paradigms was also informed by key literature on research philosophy, amongst which the notable readings were Bourdieu (1977), Burrell & Morgan (1979), Guba & Lincoln (1989), Ritchie & Lewis (2003), Creswell (2003) and Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) etc.

approach. Whilst Crotty's (2003) scaffolding highlights four interrelated levels of designing research, as tabulated in table 5.1 below, they can also be seen in Mason's (2002) views as ranging from the broader assumptions to more practical concerns of the study. Therefore, in this framework I discuss these terms in relation to my study in a more traditional top-down approach starting with the philosophical assumptions (e.g. knowledge claims) (e.g. Creswell, 2003). It also makes sense to discuss the philosophical foundations of this study, as they have shaped my understanding for developing a multi-paradigmatic framework (e.g. Gioia & Pitre, 1990) that informs the methodology, methods and analysis employed in this thesis.

Epistemology	Theoretical perspective	Methodology	Methods
Objectivism	Positivism (and post-positivism)	Experimental research	Sampling
Constructionism	Interpretivism	Survey research	Measurement and scaling
Subjectivism (and their variants)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symbolic interactionism</li> <li>• Phenomenology</li> <li>• Hermeneutics</li> <li>Critical inquiry</li> <li>Feminism</li> <li>Postmodernism</li> <li>etc.</li> </ul>	Ethnography Phenomenological research Grounded theory Heuristic inquiry Action research Discourse analysis Feminist standpoint research etc.	Questionnaire Observation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• participant</li> <li>• non-participant</li> </ul> Interview Focus group Case study Life history Narrative Visual ethnographic methods Statistical analysis Data reduction Theme identification Comparative analysis Cognitive mapping Interpretative methods Document analysis Content analysis Conversation analysis etc.

**Table 5-1:** Crotty's (1998) Four Elements of Social Research

[Source: Crotty, M., (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage]

### ***Meta-Theoretical Assumptions***

#### *Ontological Assumptions*

Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggest that sociologists initiate their research with either ‘implicit or explicit assumptions about the nature of the social world and the way in which it may be investigated’ (p.1). They further suggest that the investigator is first faced by the ontological question – ‘what are the assumptions that concern the very essence of the phenomena’ (p.1). Crotty’s (2003) characterisation of ontology as a theoretical perspective covers what other scholars like Creswell (2003) terms as ‘worldview’ or Burrell & Morgan (1979) as ‘paradigms’. Mason (2002) views the ontological perspective by questioning the (researcher’s) self on the basis of how they see ‘the very nature and essence of things in the social world’ (p.14). In trying to develop an ontological understanding of my study, I had encountered three challenging intellectual apprehensions. The first was how I might document the complexities and challenges of culture in which the Pakistani MBAs are situated. Their culture was assumed to be embedded within MBA students’ inter-subjective experiences of practicing learning, thus formulating the ‘core data’ for this study. The second apprehension was how I might interpret these cultural intersubjectivities without compromising the contextual meanings of those actions. The idea was to preserve the social essence of their experience which partakes in a learning set, an activity grounded in a social, cultural and historical context. The third was related to reflexively positioning the ‘self’ within the study: it was to question the underlying presuppositions and meta-ontological assumptions inherent in my position as an ‘insider-outsider’ (Bourdieu, 1977: p.2). This apprehension underscores my ability to: (a) make sense of the data in a way where I am able to account for my practices as a researcher; and (b) place myself within the context of this research to document culture-in-action by observing and engaging with the MBA students.

The learning practices, therefore, acted as precursors to cultural knowledge providing a unifying dimension which embodies and acculturates the practices of learning in its social context (Jarvis, 2001).

Berger and Luckman (1966) add that understanding social phenomena from a structural perspective employs an objectivist view of society. The objectivist view, according to Crotty (2003), considers 'reality as concrete structure' which is out there to be investigated (p.5). With regards to Mason's (2002) five question I have demonstrated my shift away from objectivist towards a more subjective view that expresses the social and cultural selves of MBAs (Burrell & Morgan, 1977). The objective view of society is unable to consider the intuitive, cognitive and experiential nature of how social agents are constituted – I believe that scientific objectivity will be unable to provide a holistic view of MBAs intersubjective actions. The objectivist strand of worldview takes into account the hard external facts of objective reality where the focus is upon 'an analysis of the relationships and regularities between various elements which it comprises' (p.3). The corresponding ontic properties of culture would exceedingly focus upon the structural components of society which are external to an agent which realists claim (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

In contrast to the objectivist view, the subjectivist perspective conjures up an image of the world through values, beliefs and norms which act as the basic guideline for normality and morality of their society (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). These values are in general cultural and social manifestations which provide means for a social and moral order rather than an institutional one. Berger and Luckman (1966) assert that every culture has its own 'configurations' designed according to the assumptions made by agents and institutions about their world - which itself are socially and historically situated (p.67). Therefore, in light of the above discussion, I view construction of reality as a social 'ongoing dialectical process'

(Burr, 1995): i.e. the agents and society are continuously and simultaneously constructing one another, where they are externalizing their physical or symbolic presence, as social objects, and internalizing each other as objective reality i.e. generative (Bourdieu, 1977).

### *Epistemological Assumptions*

Moving towards the epistemological claims, it was important to have a clear distinction between the terms ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’. Berger and Luckman (1966) provide an illuminating explanation about how knowledge structures reality by ascertaining that ‘phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics’ (p.13). The relevance, Berger and Luckman (1966) emphasize, that knowledge has to defining reality is inherent in the quality of how agents perceive knowledge and its ability to constitute the world. Epistemologically, I see my research practice as *opus operatum* (a means of deconstructing objectivity for its reconstruction through the subjective self) as opposed to *modus operandi* (means of achieving an end) (Bourdieu, 1977). In other words, my study takes on a ***social constructionist*** philosophy to acquiring knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al. 2012).

From a constructionist viewpoint, Burr (1995) suggests that the way in which we perceive the world *to be* does not necessarily refer to reality but it is subjective to our ‘interpretation’ and ‘perception’ *of it*. Moreover, Gergen (1985) cited by Burr (1995: p.4) puts forward the significant question that if our belief, perception and understanding of the world is not a product of the nature of the ‘real world’ – then ‘where does it come from? The social constructionist answer is that people construct it between them’. There can be numerous constructions for a social phenomenon, but for each construction the underlying human action may be different and dependent upon the *beliefs* and *perceptions* developed by the society. These beliefs and perceptions culminate into assumptions (taken-for-granted knowledge) of the world. Burr (1995) insists that our belief about the world is not necessarily

any better as our understanding about beliefs is grounded in specific cultures and historical events in a given context and time. However, siding with Gergen's (1985) thinking, constructionism does not restrict to any one belief but provides a more holistic approach to *explicitly exploit* as many beliefs that construct *reality*.

While situating constructionism on the opposite pole of the ontological continuum as opposed to realism, the *critical stance* provides impetus to our observation to see *what's beyond* the unbiased knowledge of the world. However, much of our knowledge is 'historically and culturally' dependent upon the time and place and restricted to where it was sustained (Burr, 1995: p.16). It should be borne in mind that the nature of the world does not teach us *reality* rather it is constructed by people, and spread through practicing communities. Although much of the knowledge is dependent on the human actions, which accompany a specific belief, but the constructions sustain some form of *social action* practiced in a certain culture and at various points of time (Gergen, 1985). This does not necessarily mean that the belief adopted by one community is *correct*, social constructionism goes *beyond* this notion of restriction, to accepting *all* beliefs to avoid *essentialism, functionalism or reductionism* in its ideology (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Gergen, 1999).

### ***Theoretical Perspective***

Crotty (2003) considers a theoretical perspective as the 'philosophical stance that lies behind our chosen methodology' (p.7). It informs 'our view of the human world' and helps us make sense of the 'social life within it' (ibid.). Crotty further places a number of theoretical perspectives which range from the positivist to anti-positivist traditions e.g. positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, critical theory etc. (ibid.). Despite the various theoretical perspectives, the strategy underpinning this study was derived from an abductive approach to 'generate social scientific accounts from social actor's accounts' (Blaikie, 2000: p.114). The

idea was to understand culture in shaping MBA students' learning practices. My use of the abductive strategy is to construct a theoretical understanding of MBA students' learning patterns, as embodied cultural practices and embedded within their accounts. The abductive strategy, according to Blaikie (2000) is broadly placed under the interpretive tradition of social enquiry, providing a distinctive way of interpreting individuals' lives and what might direct their behaviour. The use of an abductive strategy in my study opened up the possibility for a broadly *interpretivist* approach to studying social phenomena (Bilton et al. 1981).

The abductive strategy is conceptualized within the interpretivist paradigm, which unlike positivist traditions can be subsumed under the broad title of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Creswell (2003) suggests that constructionist assumptions guide interpretive research, but (Bilton et al. 1981) add that interpretive and constructionist paradigms part ways in terms of methodological considerations. However, both paradigms do fall within the anti-positivist tradition and the abductive approach was particularly helpful in the analysis of data (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2003). The positivist tradition is more concerned with a functional approach to social research in which they tend to establish 'fundamental patterns or relationships in social life' or use 'patterns to form explanatory arguments' (Blaikie, 2000: p.115). They often draw upon quantitative methods like surveys and statistical analysis to develop correlations with/amongst social phenomena (ibid.). Proponents of positivist traditions suggest that social behaviour is in fact a reaction to external variables and this behaviour can be explained by drawing correlations between behaviour and the variable causing the effect (Easterby-Smith et al. 2012). They also hold the view that truths are merely facts and can only be directly studied or measured as tangible while intangible or unobservable phenomena like meanings or interpretations are difficult to study. As a matter of fact, this study rejects such positivist assumptions by suggesting that the Pakistani MBA students, as subjects of this research, are socially constructed beings who can sense, feel,

think and continuously construct shared meanings which transform into social action (and ultimately as practice) (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977).

### ***Methodological Considerations***

The methodological considerations within this study are informed by principles of a ***design-based research***: a methodology which aims to empirically explore learning (design and practice) as it occurs in complex educational settings (Cobb et al. 2003). The literature on design-based research provided insight on designing and delivering an action learning programme in the Pakistani MBA context. What follows below is a brief discussion of the methodological considerations I took into account while attending to the design and process of this study.

Shavelson et al. (2003) describe design-based research as a tradition that is:

‘[...] based strongly on prior research and theory and carried out in educational settings, [seeking] to trace the evolution of learning in complex, messy [environments] [...] and build theories of teaching and learning, and produce [designs] that survive the challenges of everyday practice’ (Shavelson et al. 2003: p. 25)

The emphasis of design-based research (DBR) as a methodology revolves around ‘research, design and pedagogical practice’ (Collins et al., 2004: p.235). As a methodology, Barab and Squire (2004) assert, DBR is more than just an approach’ to studying learning. Rather, it is ‘a series of approaches’ having intentions of ‘producing new theories, artifacts, and practices that account for and potentially impact learning [...] in naturalistic settings’ (ibid. p.2). Barab (2014) adds that DBR’s focus on generating theories is influenced by the Glaser and Straussian version of grounded theory: i.e. DBR aims to develop ‘theory by building multiple grounded accounts’ of learning (p.163). Central to its concept, DBR ‘focuses on understanding the messiness of real-world practice, with context being a core part of the story

and not an extraneous variable to be trivialized' (Barab & Squire, 2004: p.3). Historically, DBR was conceived as a movement in contrast to the earlier studies in educational design which were more functionalist (experimental and positivistic) in nature i.e. excluding the context of learning from their investigation (Brown, 1992). Also, the earlier forms of DBR consisted of experimentation in the naturalistic context by systematically adjusting learning designs to test knowledge and generate theories (ibid.). However, the existing version of DBR is more inclined towards characterizing 'the complexity, fragility, messiness and eventual solidity of the design' by adopting a more flexible approach to studying learning process and practices within their social context (Barab & Squire, 2004: p.4).

DBR from a meta-theoretical perspective situates itself as an interdisciplinary methodology which draws on 'multiple theoretical perspectives and research paradigms' such as interpretivism, constructivism etc. (Barab & Squire, 2004: p.1). It positions itself away from sociological paradigms which isolate learning from its social context in controlled settings. Moreover, it also rejects approaches which reduce the relationship between the learner, learning and context to hypothetical variables (Barab & Squire, 2004). The study of context is important to DBR as it aims to highlight the role of social, political and cultural context in which learning occurs (ibid.). Paradigms which promote experimental designs are usually less effective in this regard as the rich contextual narratives, descriptive accounts and cases generated by DBR provide clarity in how theory connects to real-world practice (Barab, 2014). It can be argued that 'context', in DBR, is 'not simply a container within which the disembodied "regularities" under study occur, but is an integral part of the complex [process] that give[s] rise to the phenomenon under study' (Barab 2014 citing Maxwell, 2004: p.153).

Given DBR's interventionist and transformative capacity to design and deliver learning programmes which can change and challenge dominant discourses in society, e.g. confronting

pre-existing hegemonic beliefs, it is predisposed to a pragmatic standpoint (Barab & Squire, 2004: p.6). Creswell (2003) suggests that pragmatic knowledge claims are action-oriented which emphasize on ‘what works’ in a situation (p.11). Furthermore, pragmatic research takes due consideration of the ‘social, historical and political context’ and is flexible in adopting range of methods which help explore the phenomena within its bounds (ibid.). In this regard, DBR draws less on positivistic approaches to inquiry as its action-orientation pushes it towards applied research (Barab & Squire, 2004; Creswell, 2003).

Furthermore, Collins et al. (2004) notes that design-based research initiates with an educational design placed into a ‘real-world context’ (p.236). However like other research approaches, it also begins with a broad set of research questions which can range from evaluative to ethnographic studies (ibid.). Also, DBR is inspired by the gaps in literature which researchers identify, given the fact the learning sites are bristling with research possibilities especially when their underpinning design interacts with culture (ibid.). Moreover, Cole (2001) suggests that each learning site consists of a set of micro-cultures operating within their bounds, which is again a product of participating individuals’ socio-historical backgrounds. He adds that DBR is socially-driven, which treats design sites as ‘complexly constructed social systems’ (p.8). Cole (2001) points that these:

‘systems are emergent products not only of factors identified as internal to the system, but factors that involve the necessary openness of such systems to the social systems in which they are embedded’ (Cole, 2001: p.8)

Also a critical perspective to DBR which aims for emancipatory action is likely to be faced by political challenges of developing and delivering programmes in a particular cultural context. More complex aspects of a design-based research are shaped by ***critical design studies*** (e.g. critical design ethnography; action research traditions) in educational settings (Carspecken, 1996; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Reason, 2004; Barab et al. 2004). Bell

(2004) suggests that researchers pursuing studies within DBR and ethnographies usually redefine their role ‘to understand the nature of the introduced [design] and their consequences from the perspective of the participants’ (p.249). Within the tradition of critical design ethnography (CDE), Barab et al (2004) write that the position of the design-based researchers transform in which they start considering their own ‘social position, history and political stance’ to influence the study (p.256). They further write that if the critical design ethnography involves emancipatory action then cultural challenges might hinder the study. I have noted similar challenges in my study, which by taking on a critical perspective focuses on encouraging participants to critically reflect upon their position (i.e. the taken for granteds) (e.g. Lather, 1992). Having said this, my study does not qualify as ethnography, but given its longitudinal nature and prospect for working besides participants within their action learning sets, may be taken as a prospective element of an ethnographic approach.

Aware of literature on ethnography, I take into account Barab et al.’s (2004) suggestion that a critical design ethnographer takes into account three aspects for studying social phenomena in a design-based research i.e. people – an inquiry focusing on people; power – encourages political awareness and empowers; and praxis – strives to connect theory with practice. Although these elements may be found in my study in one way or the other, but I tend to explore both action learning practice and the cultural context without divorcing one from the other. This approach is rather different to what Reason (2004) notes, to being participatory and broadly falling with the action research tradition. He further suggests that critical design ethnography is akin to action research, which consists of a participatory, emancipatory and democratic process having a visible change strategy (*ibid.* p.269). However, this study does not have a well-pronounced change strategy but it does encourage participatory action for Pakistani MBAs to adapt to critical forms of learning (e.g. Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Lather, 1996).

Moreover, the interventionist nature of DBR and the contributions made by CDE and action research, objectivity / reflexivity is a growing concern that limits its usefulness. Barab and Squire (2004) indicate that 'if a researcher is intimately involved in the conceptualization, design, development, implementation, and re-searching of a pedagogical approach', especially which involves an emancipatory / participatory approach, 'then ensuring that researchers can make credible and trustworthy assertions is a challenge' (p.10). This challenge is counteracted by DBR literature through developing of a strong interpretive framework, which demands that the research makes clear their assumptions and works with them in order to arrive at interpretations about social phenomena (Cobb et al. 2012). The DBR provides a logical pathway to work with the design and process of action learning programme that I develop in my study. At this point, I would also like to conclude that my study takes inspiration from the aforesaid methodological considerations discussed in relation to design-based research, as a great deal of my programme design and fieldwork remains action-oriented and contextualized within the Pakistani MBA culture.

#### **5.4. Research Methods**

According to Crotty (1998), methods formulate the penultimate, but the most practical aspect of a research framework. In this section, I aim to discuss the rationale behind selecting certain methods over others, which have mainly been influenced by my theoretical position, as discussed above. Using action learning as the study site to examine the student-learning practices meant that I acknowledged the lively, continuous and ever-changing, nature of the study. Taking a practice-based approach to studying the application of action learning design in Pakistani MBA, I was oriented towards theorizing learning practices and characterizing their '*cultural-contextuality*' based on participant 'action' (Gherardi, 2000). Fox (2009) reciprocates a similar approach by stating that learning schemes can benefit by taking into

account the practical action underlying that learning theory. As suggested by Brown and Duguid (1991), a pragmatic approach to studying experiential, critical or process-driven pedagogies helps foster a better understanding of the underlying ‘action’ integral to those learning schemes. Reynolds and Vince (2004b) further propose to study ‘action-based learning’ in a way that takes into account ‘structures and [...] practices’ of a social enterprise (p.442). Furthermore, it was challenging to design and select methods that documented the collective nature of reflective practice in action (e.g. Rigg & Trehan, 2004; Willmott, 1997c; Fenwick, 2003 etc.). Being aware of the critical nature of the study I also had to choose methods which could capture emotions, feelings, politics and power relationships mobilized as a result of the action learning design (Rigg & Trehan, 2004, Lawless, 2008).

Fox (2009) states that such a pragmatic approach to collecting data can:

‘[...] draw our attention to the realm of the unconsciousness, but it could also ‘draw our attention to the unformulated, unspoken, and unsaid, yet orderly, witnessable and accountable production of practical action’ (Fox, 2009: p.6)

Keeping in mind what is to be gathered as evidence, I had to select methods which reliable and durable in collecting data that suited the qualitative character of the study (Arksey & Knight, 1999). The level of contextual specificity required by the methods was considered on the basis of research setting and the role of the researcher during data collection (Bulmer, 1977). At this point of time I felt that my study would be firm by using a blend of various data collection points. Hence leading me to use a range of data collection tools to develop descriptions of Pakistani MBAs embodied culture as exhibited in their accounts of action learning practice. The major data source in my study were the post action learning programme interviews with the participants, while action learning set observations and field notes played a significant role in referring to the unfolding of events during the action learning process. The innate strength of using a multi-method approach was to yield rich data

suitable to unearthing the durability of embodied culture that is embedded in the learning process. It also provided a way to triangulate on the cultural norms and values which formulate part of participants learning practices – thus increasing the ‘reliability and validity’ of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: p.177).

Therefore, keeping in view the complexities, the multiplicity of roles that I had assumed throughout the data collection period (as a doctoral researcher, designer, facilitator, observer and interviewer) allowed me to breakdown my field work into two concurrent parts. The two parts included: first working as an action learning set facilitator and an observer; and second in my capacity as an interviewer and doctoral student. I matched my data collection activities with the three business schools’ academic calendar. Although I discuss the context of the participating business schools in chapter 6, but just to highlight my observation schedule, I provide a quick overview of the plan here. In East-city Business School and West-city Business School I had arranged the action learning programme during morning slots (approx. 9AM – 12noon), while in the Mid-city Business School the programme ran in evening slots (approx.. 6PM- 9PM) due to MBA executive students. The concurrent observations ran during the full course of the action learning programme during the months of (mid)-February to (mid)-April 2014. The post programme interviews were arranged at participants’ convenient times normally between 9AM to 6PM during (mid)-April to May 2014 within the premises of the school.

### ***Open-Ended Observations***

Observations were a significant part of the data collection process as they were arranged in parallel with the action learning programme. Although these observations were ‘open-ended’ in nature, I had prepared some guidelines in advance for making them meaningful for my

data collection (Henning et al. 2004) – these guidelines or things-to-remember are presented in figure 5.2 for further information of the readers.

## ACTION LEARNING SET OBSERVATION GUIDE

### Things to Remember/To-do

- Thank the MBA participants for taking time out and participating in these action learning set meetings.
- Remind participants of the confidentiality agreement and request their help in keeping the set meeting interaction confidential as well.
- Seek participants' permission to audio-record the data.
- Provide an introduction to the set meeting.
- Open up the day's agenda.
- Allow other participants to contribute.
- Keep to time

### Looking Out for

- The setting of the action learning sets like (e.g. seating arrangements, logistics, venue, attendance etc.)?
- The action learning set environment like at the start, middle and end of session (e.g. are set members welcoming, getting along, tense, avoiding, trusting etc.)?
- Organizing of tasks, group process, methods of engagement etc.?
- Group roles and ground rules are being followed? Is there active participation? Who is taking lead or being silent? What is the method of approaching problematic situations etc.?
- What is happening in sets (e.g. events, actions, activities)?
- How are they experiencing with action learning design and process (e.g. emotional states, signs of feelings coming out, using knowledge or social status)?

**Figure 5-2:** Observation Guideline

My choice of observations was focused on two aspects: to understand a). my role as a facilitator in the learning sets; and b). MBA students' learning practices as action learners. My observations took place during the action learning sets that were set-up at the business school premises. During the observations, I encountered a challenging task of shifting between the two roles of facilitation and observation. One of the difficulties I faced, as recounted by Robinson (1994), was the difficulty in transiting between actively participating

and passively facilitating along with taking-notes of the activities and events during the learning sets. In managing this situation in every set meeting, I was aware of Marshall and Rossman's (1989) emphasis about observations as powerful tools in developing 'descriptions of events, behaviour and artefacts in the social setting' for a given study (p.79). Nevertheless, an audio-recording of the set meetings assisted me with some level of assurance of recalling different events and activities. After every observation, I always tried reviewing my field notes and editing them while the memory was fresh usually immediately after the session had ended at the venue. The field notes were subsequently compared with the audio recording either the same evening or the next day for keeping tabs of the sequences, process and events as they unfolded in sets.

### *Immersing into the Observational Setting*

During my observations I immersed myself within action learning sets to understand the routines of participants (e.g. act of greeting, interaction, discussion, engagement in reflective dialogues, disengagement etc.). Moreover, taking consideration of Schensul et al.'s (1999) suggestions about positioning the 'self' within the observations (p.91), I took special notice of the following activities:

- Building relationships and setting-up boundaries of MBA students in learning sets;
- Ways of organizing and prioritizing actions and interactions;
- Identifying political patterns, dialogue initiation, power-relationships, social hierarchies and group norms and values significant to members;

I must also clarify earlier on that my observation of MBA students was solely based on action learning set activities inside the set and not on the life outside, an equivalent of a design-based ethnography as articulated by Barab et al. (2004). Also, these observations were open-

ended and unstructured focusing on the learning activity itself. Therefore, the limited time period to observe students was not enough for the study to entirely qualify for a pure ethnography; however, I am fully aware of how the ethnographic methods are applied in field work (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, Denzin & Lincoln, 2005 etc.).

### *Guiding my Observations*

My observations were open to recording of participants' practices within the sets by extending to their individualistic and collectivist learning practices. Much of this was obtained through spoken cultural norms embedded in social inter-actions, relational attribution and MBA students' resistance within the set. From the time to engaging in social action to disengaging from the set, MBA students' language provided me with the content to dig deeper and understand the logic of their practice (Bourdieu, 1990). Within these interactions, I consistently tried looking into the normative structure of how members socially engage, exclude or disengage with one another by trying to uncover the cultural character embodied by students. This involved looking into patterns of spoken words, behaviour, observable emotional states and trends that provided a context of the social process.

Observations were scribbled as field notes to make sense of the audio-recordings, but to confess that some of the times I lost track or was unable to make sense of the micro-details of interactions between members. In the end, I was able to record almost 20+ hours of observations (in audio and field notes) out of the total estimated programme time of 56 hours of action learning sets. There were a few problems with the audio recordings like I ran out of batteries while thinking I had put in a new pair, the recorder was sometimes placed at a distance which distorted some recordings when participants spoke simultaneously. Recordings at times intervened with cell phone signals and phone vibrations of participants. I also had encountered an accidental deletion of one session's recording. However, the audio

recording device as compared to a video recording device was less intrusive as participants after the first session ignored its presence. Finally I managed with 20+ hours of observation which managed to yield information pertinent to the following:

- Organization of the sets
- Social process of learning
- Action learning design elements e.g. reflection, action, questioning etc
- Facilitation of action learning sets
- Ability to critical think and reflect;
- Involvement of MBA students in learning set interactions, activities or events
- How participants managed situations and made sense of it
- Their relationships with one another and the facilitator
- Their ability to direct the learning set proceedings and achieve their intended goals;
- Maintaining social order and self-discipline

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

The interviews were collected at the end of the action learning programme from the participating Pakistani MBA students. The interviews were arranged with the set participants to gather their reflective accounts of working in an action learning environment. The participants, as experiencers of action learning, acted as key informants about the action learning group i.e. community of Pakistani MBA action learners. The interviews took place at the end of the action learning programme to elicit participant responses towards how they perceived the action learning programme, and their feelings, emotions and actions around the action learning process (Brookfield, 1990). The interviews documented participants' biographical details, developing an understanding of participants' experience, actions and

thoughts to making sense of their learning practices, and identifying elements that hindered or fostered learning by examining the logic of shared group practice. The interview further probed at the distinction created by action learning with that of MBA's education, by conversing about action learning's design elements and process. The foremost contribution of the interviews was towards how MBA students saw themselves in the action learning sets and how action learning influenced them or their abilities to accomplishing their research project (goals).

### *The Active-Reflective Approach*

The interviewing technique which I use in this study aims to provide 'a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997: p.113). The subsequent empirical data is a set of socially constituted meanings which participants, as 'active subjects', refer to while making sense of their actions and interaction. This view of interview stresses the increasingly social and dynamic nature of interviews as sites of strategic interactions. The interviewer uses a protocol to strategically implicate participants towards the research agenda which results in the process of mobilizing social resources (language or symbols) to create knowledge (Silverman, 1993). The role of both parties is thus active whereas meanings are not just the responses to questions, but reflections over experiences. The experiences are recalled by informants via 'actively and communicatively' assembling symbols and languages, making interview vibrant places for extensive and in-depth data production (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997: p114). I also acknowledge the fact that my participants are not vessels of knowledge but they are constructors and moderators having the power to articulate their voice. The power is exercised from both sides i.e. the interviewer and interviewee. This requires working with the participants in a collaborative relationship that allows active participation of the participant

and reflective execution of questions by the interviewer. Having abundant knowledge about participants' position in the action learning programme, the observations create social circumstances for the participants to exchange their views with the interviewer (Briggs, 1986).

### *Interview and Protocol Design*

The plan of the interviews was to sequence and prioritize participants at the end of the action learning programme and seek their consent for participating in the post-programme interview sessions. Once agreed, the participants were asked to provide a suitable time and date which were then mutually decided. Since the participants had weekly classes on campus, so deciding upon a place to meet was easy. However, on the other hand, with the busy schedules they had it was difficult to decide on mutual times and dates. The interviews were held in quiet, pre-booked, rooms at the business school premises.

The semi-structured interview approach provided control as well as flexibility in directing the interview towards completion (Bryman, 2004). Robson (2002) suggests that a list of questions seem handy for the interviewer to keep track of how the interview session is progressing and whether important points have been covered or not. I considered various pointers and prescriptions in literature that suggested ways to design and conduct interviews such as Holstein & Gubrium (1997), Mason (2002), Silverman (2013), and Bryman (2004) etc. One of the important pointers was taken from Bryman (2004) who suggests a checklist to cover key points in an interview session. The pointers suggest that interviewers cover the following:

- Background details of the participants
- Structure of the interview and interview questions

- Opening up the interview and closing it at the end
- Creating a rapport with participants
- Managing expectations of participants
- Engaging in a conversation over key points
- Contingency planning e.g. risks aversion etc.

Furthermore, the interviews were designed to last for up to 90 minutes each. These interviews were about 30 minutes extra as to the ones I collected during the pilot study. Elliot (2005) suggests that interviews lasting for two hours are optimal for collecting in-depth data, however in my case the interview content restricted to the action learning programme proved sufficient to last for 1 ½ hour. In studies on action learning involving the use of interviews suggest interview time lengths to last between 45 – 90 minutes (Kuhn & Marsick, 2005; Van Schuyver; 2004), as the content surrounds the learning design and process. I experienced that stretching interviews beyond the 80-90 minute mark made participants irritated, bored and anxious, since this was their first time being interviewed for a doctoral study. Having thought about this, I rejected the idea for arranging multiple interviews with the same participants as later interviews could have transformed into counselling sessions for completing their research projects (Gatrell, 2006). Rather I decided that once the doctoral study was over I would send out a briefing paper to my participants indicating about the key findings from the study and thanking them for their valuable contribution.

The detailed interview schedule is presented at figure 5.3 (below) for further information.

### **DISCUSSION TOPICS & QUESTIONS**

#### **Student Dispositions towards Collaborative Learning**

- Let's start by talking about the MBA classroom, especially your learning experiences and interactions with its entire environment so far. What values do you think are being imparted?
- Keeping this in view, can we now talk about your recent experience of action learning? What was the experience like?
- Having participated in action learning, how do you look back at the MBA classroom?

#### **The Socio-political Context of Action Learning**

- Describe your role and presence within action learning sets?
- How difficult was it to work with the group?
- How difficult was it like challenging other and being challenged by others?
- Did you manage to reflect over the learning activities? How was this accomplished?

#### **Upbringing and Action Learning Practice**

- Why MBA? What life-events motivated you to pursue this degree?
- How important is it for MBA to touch upon real life issues?
- How is the MBA teaching and learning currently structured? So, is action learning different?
- How real was the focus of the action learning set discussions i.e. 'Managing Dissertations: Organizing the Research Process'
- What was happening in the action learning sets? Can you describe a few memorable events or incidents?
- Can you describe your action-planning, action-taking and action-reporting experiences?

#### **Learning Relationships and Social Boundaries in the Action Learning Space**

- How do you normally interact with others around you and does this change in your MBA student-life?
- What relationships do you consider significant in the group learning process?
- Were there any tensions in relationships between members of the opposite gender?

**Figure 5-3:** Interview Schedule

### **5.5. Ethical Considerations**

A study examining learners' practices in an educational design can be considered as one project that carries a certain amount of ethical responsibilities. Creswell (1998) indicates that researchers, especially those pursuing qualitative research, should demarcate ethical

boundaries and avoid overstepping them. Participants in a qualitative study are more vulnerable, as compared to quantitative study, to being at risk due to their engagement with the research process. Their vulnerability, as considered by Guba and Lincoln (1994), is of prime ethical concern and should be taken care of during and after the fieldwork. Their involvement in this study in form of learners in an action learning programme, subjects of observation and as interviewees meant production of first-hand primary data mostly in their own words and actions. My focus during these data collection activities was not only limited to the processes involved in generating data but also extending critical thought to risks and outcomes of participation in such a study. In addition to designing the whole fieldwork I have also taken pain in considering and managing participant experience of action learning throughout the length of the programme (and fieldwork) (Pole & Morrison, 2003). The first-hand primary data generated by participants is based on their lived-experiences of action learning in relation to the programme design, process and others.

As a rule of thumb, I strictly adhered to the ethical protocol stated by Lancaster University and in the consent form (see appendix-A) and participant information sheet (see appendix-B). Additionally I also avoided passing action learning set information to any person outside the group. This however does not mean that I did not respect the business school officials or its culture, but I was sincere to the participants and avoided any physical, emotional or intellectual harm to their being. At the start of the action learning programme, especially at the point of start-up workshops there was a bit of business school surveillance about how the programme would go about. On the first day, school officials who took me to the venues greeted me. I also got to know through the participants that the business schools had informally taken feedback from the MBA students about the programme. When students were recruited for the introductory workshops, I took the opportunity to inform the whole group about the study, the programme and the fieldwork. More copies of the aforesaid

documents were provided to students if they weren't able to collect them from the MBA office. Talking to students personally and verbally allowed conveying a clear sense to the participants about the study and its commitments. Instead of writing the university regulations to ethical practice in the information sheet, I verbally tried explaining a few of its significant elements. The participants were provided with some ground rules, which specifically addressed group confidentiality and an implicit binding over others to adhere to the secrecy and privacy of the set.

Another ethical consideration was brought to light about a research process which involved a learning design coupled with observations. Researchers within the domain of critical management education (CME) seek a democratic and socially-just learning environment that unearths the inequality of power-relations and challenges the taken for granted. Much of these issues were observed by the facilitator (researcher) and brought to life in a way that revealed complexities of the learning process in action learning sets. To investigate the underlying cultural practices that either foster or hinder the implementation of action learning in Pakistani MBA, the learning programme had to be extended to the students in some form of a learning design with appropriate facilitation and someone who understood the local culture and was part of the same social system. Therefore, it was challenging for the researcher, as facilitator, to adapt to both the roles without overlooking the other.

## **5.6. Reflexivity: On the Reflexive Self of the Researcher**

Above, in section 5.3, I have discussed my research framework that supports the design and process of this study. Throughout my discussion on the framework, I provide a reflexive commentary on the philosophical and methodological assumptions that tries demonstrating an informed understanding of the choices I made along the way. In a way I try conducting a 'meta-theoretical examination of the presuppositions' that shape the theoretical and practical

parameters of this study (Johnson & Duberley, 2000: p.179). Moreover, it exemplifies the decision-making process, feelings and emotions, and the practical doings to highlight the reflexive nature of such a multi-paradigmatic (radical) approach (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Also the idea to discuss reflexivity, at this point, prior to describing the execution strategy is deliberate, as qualitative studies which hinge on an interpretive framework have been widely contested for their objectivity. Having said this, a great degree of care was taken into planning the research strategy to ensure a reflexive act throughout the many iterative phases of fieldwork and analysis.

Buckner (2005) states that the ‘researcher’s influence on data generation and interpretation is a much-debated issue’ in qualitative studies (p.59). Qualitative studies, as suggested by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000), initiate from ‘the perspective and actions of the subjects studied’ – i.e. making them contextual and dependent on interpretations of the researcher entering the field (p.7). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) claim that:

‘Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations [...] and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: p.3)

This representation of the qualitative approach suggests that ‘knowledge cannot be separated from the knower’ (Steedman, 1991 cited by Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000: p.1). As to say ‘nothing speaks for itself’, adds Denzin (1994), but what is left are ‘interpretations’ of the researcher (p.500). Maintaining objectivity is difficult in qualitative studies and therefore reflexivity aims to support this endeavour by encouraging researchers to work with, challenge and make clear the assumptions they make during the interpretive process. My aim in this section is to discuss the reflexive themes, which have emerged from my research design and

influenced my fieldwork and analysis strategy. I accomplish this by describing my understanding of a reflexive act i.e. approach to research practice; and then discussing reflexivity which I have accounted for in my study along with a brief description of the underlying approach.

### ***The Reflexive Act: Developing a Reflexive Understanding of the Study***

Initially Calas and Smircich (1992), who describe a reflexive act of research, informed my understanding of reflexivity to ‘constantly assess the relationship between knowledge and the ways of doing knowledge’ (p.240). Arber (2006) drawing upon Seale (1998) defines reflexivity as:

‘[...] the capacity to reflect upon one’s actions and values during the research, when producing data and writing accounts and to view the beliefs we hold in the same way that we view the beliefs of others’ (Arber, 2006: p.1)

In a way, reflexivity increases self-consciousness about the possible roles and responsibilities of the researcher and their relationship with what is being researched: e.g. participants, processes, design, context etc. (Cassell & Symon, 1994). Practicing reflexivity in my study referred to a wide-range of roles which I assumed during the different stages of research, for example as programme designer, data collector, co-constructer of data, facilitator, learner, interpreter and analyst (e.g. Riach, 2007). Along the way I began to realize reflexivity as the ‘reciprocal influence of the researcher’ on the study (Kahn, 1993). As a guideline, Abbott and Sapsford (1998) reminded me that as a reflexive researcher:

‘[...] right from the initial introductions, you must be thinking about how the participants are making sense of you and your presence, what you are taking for granted or learning new about them, and how what you are doing may be shaping particular pieces of data or the whole relationship between you and participants’ (Abbott & Sapsford, 1998: p.150)

Reflexivity at this point was more about understanding the choices I was making in the various roles I had adopted during the study. It involved ‘careful interpretation and reflection’ towards the assumptions, I made about the various constituents of my research project (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000: p.9). This demanded that I moved beyond from merely being an observer towards making an ‘interpretation of interpretation’ (ibid.). The central tenant of reflexive practice encourages researchers to think:

‘[...] critically about what [they] are doing and why, confronting and often challenging [their] own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which [their] thoughts, actions and decisions shape how [they] research and what [they] see’ (Mason, 2002: p.5)

During my fieldwork, my reflexive character helped me to try making explicit the implicit relation ‘between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000: p.8). Going into the analysis, it enabled me to consider not only the apparent relationship between the ‘researcher-subject-object’ but also to identify the contextual influence, for example, on the participants (e.g. Riach, 2007: p.162). As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) propose, metaphorically, I saw myself as a ‘bricoleur’: i.e. like a person who is a ‘quilt-maker’, assembling the fine-threads of the quilt into an assortment of patterns on the final product i.e. the ‘quilt’ or in my case this thesis (p.4).

### ***Researcher Reflexivity***

A reflexive approach aided in taking a holistic perspective towards better understanding Pakistani MBAs learning practices. The act of reflexivity provided consistency and validity to my thoughts in presenting a near-to-reality account of the study as it unfolded. It is my understanding that reflexivity was not something that I had to do at some point in my study; rather it was a parallel theme, which ran across the entire duration of my doctoral thesis. Whilst practicing reflexivity, my research design and strategy were influenced by Bourdieu’s ***reflexive sociology*** (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu’s (2003) version of reflexivity

places the **researcher** into the **field** of sociology, with the intent that both structure one another. The researcher placed within a network of relationships, is conditioned by the socio-historical context, power-dynamics and political objectives to yield a specific scientific habitus – a set of dispositions, that embody his scientific practice (Bourdieu, 1977). In this study, I viewed the action learning sets and the post-set interviews to follow certain ‘logic of practice’, in which participants and the researcher were thought to be predisposed to the rules of the field and the way in which each individual’s habitus was conditioned (i.e. culture).

Bourdieu’s philosophy of reflexivity encompasses three key aspects to achieving objectivity in sociological studies: **researcher’s identity**, **the development of scientific thought**, and **to think relationally** (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.218-260). The boundaries between these tenets are not distinct, but I will try to explain each of these with respect to my study to demonstrate my reflexive approach.

The first aspect to Bourdieu’s reflexivity focuses on the conscious ‘self’ of the researchers, i.e. how their identity influences the design and process of their study. This aspect challenges the researcher to:

‘[...] understand that research is an interactive process shaped by [their] personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: p.6)

Compelled to think about my identity, I became sensitive to working with the Pakistani MBA students, which comprised of both male and female participants. As a male researcher, I was conscious of interacting with female MBA participants in ways which were acceptable to the local context. The Pakistani culture is highly traditional in terms of men engaging with women openly on sensitive issues like reflecting over male teacher’s authority or seeking their view on socially interacting with men. Also as an academic I was aware of the asymmetrical power-relations which might influence the MBA participants to attend sessions

or interviews based on my status as a set-adviser, which many viewed as ‘teacher’. Another element of identity was my age and experience as an academic, which in Pakistani context was young. This further impacted my study in two ways. First, I was older to most of the participants, which again would have implied issues of obedience and compliance on part of the young participants. Second, it triggered doubts into the minds of the MBA participants about whether I was able to pioneer an action learning philosophy given my inexperienced stint as a facilitator.

I was aware of my position as a data collector / facilitator and then analyst / interpreter, which had a profound effect on part of how the MBA participants viewed me – or whether it confused their understanding of why they were part of the learning set (i.e. for learning or research). Thankfully, I kept recording all the observations during the fieldwork in a notebook (like a research journal – see appendix C for examples). These were memos that I had collected in addition to the audio recording to help me in the analysis process (i.e. coding and categorizing data). My thoughts, which became part of the journal, could be viewed as social constructions of my journey as a researcher. Most of the times, after data collection activities, I recorded my emotions and feelings about the proceedings of the activity. I captured my thinking as reflection on the activity and fieldwork in this personalized activity. Bourdieu (1999) notes that this is a difficult phase in the reflexive process to ‘self-analyse’, as it could reveal the deepest feelings one has about our subjects and objects of study (p.53). At this point of time, I realized that it was impossible to set aside my personal being (identity) as a researcher to allow for a completely objective process to take over. Thus, the field notes comprised an important element of my study accompanied by my previous experience of being educated as an MBA and going on to teach MBAs. This allowed not only to understand the insider accounts but also to resist any preconceived notions I had about the Pakistani MBAs.

The second aspect, which Bourdieu highlights, is the development of scientific thought, or doxa, by the researcher that can influence research work. Bourdieu here refers to the ‘doxa of the naïve scholar’ as unconsciously embodied thoughts that shape practice, which regulates the knowledge of research (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.236). Although, my view of research and education in the Pakistani context was challenged by my postgraduate education at Lancaster University, UK, but it was not the case with my participants. During the time I was pursuing an MA in HRD and Consulting at Lancaster, my research practices were changing from a functionalistic to a more critical perspective. My earlier training as an academic in Pakistan is similar to what Malik (2012) suggests that most of the research is quantitative and relies on numerical evaluation of social life. He further terms Pakistani educational research to have embraced the ‘number-crunching’ way of life to record sociological phenomena (p.76). Since research in Pakistan is inflicted with quantitative approaches that disguise the regularities of daily-life into statistically measurable variables that are isolated from its actual cultural environment (Smith, 1997: p.248), the appropriate language of researching social life is bounded by the positivist philosophies imported from the American traditions of scientific sociology (Malik, 2012). However, the quantitative approaches had also been inculcated into the MBA participants of my study, who were bewildered when I explained how a learning programme will become a site of research, rather than using of preference based questionnaires to capture their thoughts for the introduction of a critical programme like action learning. The effect of doxa or scientific thought was not limited to the researcher but also applied to the MBA participants who were predisposed to positivistic ways of research. In this way I was positioned as an outsider with regards to my study, by the participants (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993). The insider-outsider notion influenced my thought on how to position myself as a foreign PhD scholar with a critical

interpretivistic, yet pragmatic, approach to researching social phenomena, where the researcher became part of the research process.

Becoming a part of the research process and co-producing data alongside participants brings me to the third aspect of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology i.e. thinking relationally. Here Bourdieu emphasizes on the construction of the object of research and breaking away from the pre-constructed objectivist notions (Bourdieu, 2003). Bourdieu's relational perspective places the researcher in a dialectical relation to what is being researched. In the case of my study, I acted not only as the observer, collecting the data but also a part of the action learning sets producing the data. My position as a set facilitator places me in relation to my participants which then regulates their behaviour, making me a subject of analysis alongside the participants. The events within the learning sets provided points for conversation in the post-set interviews, where again my position could be viewed as a co-producer of text (Saunders et al. 2003). The joint production of data in this study has been informed by a multi-paradigmatic approach that underlines reality as socially constructed by individuals and is a continuous process, while the interpretivist perspective encouraged me to view the inside world of the participants and understand their learning practices with the words and meanings they assigned (e.g. Gray, 1999). Therefore, this element in Bourdieu's philosophy also signifies the positioning of the researcher and the researcher in a field of power-relations which condition how the data is produced during the data collection and reproduced after analysis.

## **5.7. Conclusion**

This chapter aims to describe my research strategy, which is designed to explore the socially constructed character of learning amongst Pakistani MBA students, using action learning as a catalyst to introduce critical pedagogy in a traditionalist culture. In other words, as described

at the beginning of this thesis and emphasised during the literature review, the goal of this study is to learn about the challenges which this traditionalistic culture poses for the design and dynamics of (critical) action learning practice in the Pakistani MBA. I approach this thesis with the intention of exploring learning practices which are grounded in culture and embodied in students' practice, by conducting a qualitative study of Pakistani MBA students using an 'abductive strategy' (Blaikie, 2000; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). In this I draw upon Crotty's (1998; 2003) framework to discuss the complex and iterative processes involved in designing a critical, interpretive and pragmatic study which draws upon a constructionist epistemology.

As explained earlier, my study draws for a supporting framework on advances in the field of design-based research (DBR) and its critical aspect, i.e. critical design ethnography. As a methodology, DBR helps to avoid being characterized as experimental, and requires this study to generate in-depth interpretive accounts of Pakistani MBA students' learning practices, as exhibited in the action learning sets. DBR was also found to be helpful in accounting for real-world learning: its context, complexity, ability to emerge, change and to understand complex social interactions (p.157). The methodological rigour of DBR, according to Confrey (2006), comes from three distinct practices or features:

- adequate methods employed to investigate and analyse the learning design, process and practice;
- knowledge claims relative to the theory and data generated during the process, and open to alternative interpretations;
- theoretical claims in relation to learning (design, process and practices) grounded within its context.

Finally, the reflexive approach adopted in this study is based on Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, which focuses on understanding a researcher's scientific habitus that either enables or imposes a worldview that can counteract objective interpretations in an empirical investigation, and especially in fieldwork (Bourdieu, 2003). This implies that the researcher is seen to play a critical role in driving the research through his interpretations.

## CHAPTER 6

### Fieldwork and Analysis Strategy

#### 6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the challenges, choices and considerations taken into account during fieldwork, in designing the action learning programme and in the analysis strategy for this study. As described in Chapter 5, the study uses a qualitative approach to designing a field strategy for generating data through *observing learning practices in action learning sets* and *conducting post-programme interviews with participants*. The observation and interview accounts aim to provide the content necessary to explore how MBA students make sense of action learning practice (e.g. reflection, questioning, insights, etc.), and what meanings they allocate in describing their experience (e.g. working together, learning outcomes, etc.). The analytical focus of this study is on the ‘experiencing subjects’ and their reflections on learning practices in an action learning context (e.g. Schutz, 1975: p.114). These reflections, gathered as interpretive accounts during interviews, are viewed as socially constructed pieces of shared understanding developed by the participants and the researcher in a collaborative effort to reconcile the experiences of the action learning programme with the Pakistani context. The content of these interviews can be seen as an embodied perspective that presents a psychological, physiological and emotional aspect of the character of the participants expressed as result of an experienced phenomenon (ibid.). The action learning experience, in this study, is treated as cognitive as well as situated. Therefore, the unfolding of experience brings to light the cultural practices inherent in their social practice and which they reproduce as members of a cultural system (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Furthermore, this chapter also informs the reader about the design considerations and the action learning framework behind the learning programme, as part of my fieldwork strategy. The reader is given a programme overview along with the content, structure and execution strategy of this project. The execution plan is presented with timelines and dates to enable a better understanding of the different phases over which the programme was implemented in the participating business schools. The chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the design underlying the structure of this doctoral study, by drawing upon key literature (covered in the previous section) and the methodological framework.

This chapter also covers the data organization and analysis strategy, which was mainly informed by a data-driven approach in which I was receptive to new ideas or themes as they emerged from the texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Initially, a data-driven strategy was drawn using inductive means of analysis that refrains from using predefined codification frameworks, as also articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1991) in their grounded approach, to allow the data to speak for itself and guide the analytical process. However, it was later noted that a drawback of the inductive approach was its imaginative capacity that posed difficulty in reducing the data, pushing the researcher to wander off in uncertain directions, which particularly led towards a more abductive analysis using Bourdieu's notion of habitus, field and capital as data theory. The idea of being open to new possibilities was to organize the data rather than create unwanted expansion, thus making further complication. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that in order to prevent the researcher from drifting too much into the data, the list of patterns identified previously should be consulted in the readings of the texts. Therefore, this chapter acts as a blueprint which helps navigate through the fieldwork, programme design and data organization.

## 6.2. Research Sample: Which MBA Students to Study?

The population I wished to study was the MBA group of students who formulate the core of the business students' enrolment ratio in Pakistani business schools. However, the nature of this study demanded extensive fieldwork to understand the contextual character of learning practices of Pakistani MBA students. The idea to observe students during action learning sets and interview them after the programme seemed to be a challenging task. I could have resorted to survey methods to collect data from a larger population, but since action learning as pedagogy is yet to be introduced in Pakistani MBA, this was eventually not possible. Also, a general approach to studying action learning in higher education has been a more qualitative one which incorporates interviews and observations to seek in-depth data from participants, as also exhibited in studies of Raelin (1997), Johnson and Spicer (2006), Rigg & Trehan (2004), Lawless (2008) etc.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, selecting a sample for my study was also a challenge in itself. Drawing out a relevant sample suitable for an action learning study from Pakistani business schools required comparing and contrasting with a plethora of sampling literature (e.g. Yin, 2011; Creswell, 2003; Mason, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994 etc.). However, taking inspiration from Mason (2002), my focus was to make a selection 'strategically and meaningfully' for an in-depth study rather than focusing on a larger quantity of MBA students and thus losing focus (p.136). Since the nature of the study was exploratory but with a specific aim of examining learning practices of MBA students, as action learners, I had to think creatively in selling and establishing an action learning programme in Pakistani business schools. However, an underlying challenge to the execution of the research strategy was of the use of qualitative methods to collecting data i.e. observations and interviewing – an approach which is less favourable in Pakistan.

According to Becker (1993), researcher's chosen methods for collecting data play a significant role in how the sample is shaped and constructed in the field. Recognizing the time-consuming nature of conducting in-depth qualitative interviews, observations (Silverman, 2013) and running action learning sets (McGill & Beaty, 1996), such elements become a key driving force in thinking about the type of sample and size to be employed within the study. Coyne (1997) further indicates the power exercised by a researcher in order to 'select' i.e. to choose some and discriminate others is also of critical essence to the outcome of the study (p.624). Such power needs to be exercised with extreme caution, as the researcher must define the 'basis' i.e. purpose or aim to selecting that particular set of people (p.624). However the purpose, according to Coyne (1997), must draw its firm standing from the type of 'theoretical approach the researcher is using to design the study' i.e. interpretive (p.624). Thus in my review purposive sampling, i.e. selective and purposeful sampling, has been a common qualitative technique to recruit participants for studies, which also reiterated by Schatzman and Strauss (1973), as:

'shaped by the time the researcher has available to him, by his framework, by his starting and developing interests, and by any restrictions placed upon his observations by his hosts' (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973: p. 39).

In selecting an appropriate sample, Schatzman and Strauss' (1973) suggestion of five elements to define the sample and size was really useful i.e. time, location, events, purpose, and design dimensions of the study (p.39). These elements combined with non-random sampling techniques i.e. selective and convenience called for a purposive MBA sample which I could use for a longer period of time, unlike a one-off mode of data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994: p.28). The purposive sample was one way to seek the best participants which suit the situation and are able to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Creswell, 2003).

In my sample I wanted to employ a mix of gender, age, work experience and social background of MBA students, however, this was unlikely to be in my control due to the focus of study i.e. participating in action learning groups upon the freewill of MBAs. I had already been trying to work out the ‘limiting’ factors such as availability, space, people, and politics (Glaser, 1978: p.38) involved in setting up action learning sets in Pakistani business schools. Here I had to think out-of-the-box to gather a sample of MBA students interested in participating in the study. By the start of the fieldwork, the participating business schools helped recruit possible MBA students, voluntarily, for the study prior to my arrival upon their own discretion.

### **6.3. Negotiating Access**

Negotiating access for a design-based study aiming to establish a learning programme, informed by critical theory, was a difficult thing to accomplish in a traditionalist setting. Also my data collection methods were influenced by a constructionist viewpoint that made it more challenging to negotiate access – i.e. to apprehend knowledge as co-constructed while sharing the ‘control over its representation’ (Kalir. 2006). In this regard I wrote to potential business schools for participating in this study, under a call for invitation to the deans and directors (see appendix – D). The epistemological grounds for apprehending cultural knowledge especially from indexical accounts of social interactions persisted on minimizing the ‘distance’ and ‘separateness’ between the researcher and the researched (Karnieli-Miller, 2009: p.279). For example as in the case researchers aiming to raise voice of the oppressed or the marginalized, they actively adapt to roles which seek to remove power hierarchies between themselves and their subjects (Brayton, 1997). Finch (1997) suggests that such researchers often align themselves with the underprivileged to challenge the privileged. This raises questions about the power of the researcher and its ability to mobilize social resources

to obscure the true depiction of ground realities. Furthermore, the literature (e.g. Karnieli-Miller, 2009) also suggested democratizing power-relations and addressing issues of control during various stages of the research process. During my study I acknowledged the political aspects of the fieldwork like informal conversations, rapport and relationship building at the beginning of the fieldwork to set the context of the activities that were to follow, especially issues related to power, control, and ownership. This further led to understanding the ‘incongruity between the micro-ethics of equality in the research relationship and the macro-setting of dominance and authority’ (Karnieli-Miller, 2009: p.280).

My plans to establish the action learning programme were shaken at first when I engaged with the institutional gatekeepers i.e. the business schools to gain access to the MBA students. My access to participants was protected by the elitist structures whose hierarchical pedagogies reflected the wider social discourse of submission to the cultural values prevailing in Pakistani society. It was a reaffirmation of their belief in reproducing a socially-exclusive narrative of management learning as divorced from its social context, thus subjecting MBA students with their inherited values (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Working through such powerful institutions seemed challenging, as I was left wandering for literature that illustrated negotiation with the privileged rather than the unprivileged ones. The political side of this study opened a new chapter on working with institutions whose power by virtue of their status in society is deemed prestigious. Khurana (2007) notes that business schools have long been powerful but invisible in regulating the knowledge of managing other social institutions. Today, university-based business schools act as social institutions that grant ‘legitimacy’ and ‘authority’ to management as a respectable profession in society (*ibid.* p. 4). However, I was resourceful in establishing contacts and gaining entry with the business schools I wanted to work with (a sample confirmation letter from one of the business schools is presented at appendix – E).

Marshall and Batten (2004) emphasize the need for considering power issues in researching across different cultures. As cultural insiders, we are predominantly ignorant towards the taken-for-granted beliefs, while as outsider we are too biased to apprise and understand the situation (*ibid*). As acknowledged above, I have recognized power to be a critical component shaping the outcome of this study as it involves cultural transition of action learning from the western fronts to eastern borders of Pakistan. I tried contemplating on my role as either an interloper, cultural insider or an expert of action learning. Hudson and Taylor-Henley (2001) propose researchers ought to respect the internal cultural and belief system of the research setting. Another issues raised by Brandt-Castellano (1986) was the issue of the research design – qualitative in my case. I was aware of Pakistani social and management research was inclined towards the quantitative side, so I had to think about how to position myself within the whole process. Therefore, I had considered several perspectives to inform and prepare me for the fieldwork in Pakistan.

#### **6.4. Research Site: The Participating Business Schools**

I believe it is important for me to set the context in which the action learning programmes were delivered. The context of business schools in which the action learning sets were established act as empirical sites for investigating ‘real life’ phenomena (Yin, 1998: p.23). The challenge for me here, as indicated by Yin (1998), was the malleability of the social phenomena and the context in which it co-existed with the participants. It was difficult to pinpoint (*habitus*) or to accurately describe the unfolding of cultural practices of MBA students in an isolated learning environment. Avoiding the fallacy of isolating the phenomena from its macro setting, I use multiple methods to collect data within the business school context. However, I treat action learning sets not only as social spaces (Bourdieu, 1985), but also as cases-in-description of cultural-in-action. I intend to provide an in-depth, ‘intensive

and holistic description' of the learning environment (i.e. the set, as a subsequent part of the social system) situated within the wider cultural context. Creswell (1998) suggests that these cases-in-discussion are 'bounded systems' (p.61). Time, money, place, participants, purpose, logistics and context bound the action learning sets, in this study. The broader context involves setting up the scene for the readers to understand the type of university-business schools I had visited to conduct the study. A brief context of the three participating business schools is presented below:

### ***East-city Business School (EBS)***

The East-city business school (EBS) was established in 2001 and is part of a public-university setup which is operational in the area of Islamabad/ Rawalpindi. EBS is part of a university which offers a range of study and research programmes and can be considered as a 'general university'. The EBS imparts high quality business education to over 4000 business and management students enrolled in its six campuses across Pakistan. The Islamabad/Rawalpindi campus has almost 900+ students with specialized faculty strength of 60+ academics. The Higher Education Commission and the National Business Education and Accreditation Council have ranked EBS as one of the top 10 public-sector university business schools in Pakistan. The EBS currently offers 4 undergraduate programmes: BS in Business Studies, BS in Business Administration, BS in Economics and BS in Accounting and Finance. In addition to its undergraduate programmes, the school also offers postgraduate degrees including: a variety of MBAs, MS in Management Sciences, MS in Energy Management, MS in Project Management and a PhD programme. EBS is also planning to offer professional degrees (as executive programmes) under the titles of: Masters in Entrepreneurship and Innovation and Masters in Islamic Banking and Finance. EBS has a variety of MBA programmes, which include MBA 1.5 years, MBA 2.5 years and Executive

MBA, catering to a range of student needs. All MBA programmes have incorporated the newer business curriculum and have at least 6 credit hours' worth research project.

### ***West-city Business School (WBS)***

The West-city Business School (WBS) was established in 2000 and is part of a private-university setup which is operational in the twin cities of Islamabad/Rawalpindi. WBS is part of a first multi-campus private university of Pakistan that specializes in technical computing and engineering. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan ranks the university in the top ten categories of private universities in computers/IT. WBS offers business education at 04 different campuses across Pakistan with its flagship MBA programme in Islamabad/Rawalpindi. The WBS offers two types of MBA programmes: MBA 1½ years and MBA 2 year's degree. WBS in Islamabad/Rawalpindi has about 500+ business students with a full-time faculty of 21 academics – apart from the visiting faculty that comes in from the industry.

### ***Mid-city Business School (MBS)***

The Mid-city business school was established in 2001 and forms a part of a growing private sector university in Pakistan. The university rose to fame due to its focus on fashion designing, however, it also diversified itself to attend to the growing needs of other disciplines such as business education, computer sciences, social sciences, developmental studies and engineering. MBS aims at providing business education to three different campuses across Pakistan.

MBS in Islamabad/Rawalpindi currently has an enrolment of more than 400 students in their business education programmes. There are about 38 full-time while 10+ visiting faculty members are involved in teaching on a range of different business programmes including

BBA, MBA, MS in Management and PhD. The MBA programme is divided into 3 streams i.e. A, B & C. The A stream consists of a 36 credit i.e. 10 courses of 3 credits each plus one research project worth 6 credits. The B stream has 72 credits while the C stream demands 90+ credit hours of study. Each stream of study consists of a mandatory 6 credit hour of research project at the end of the degree programme. The MBA further specializes into HR, Marketing, MIS, OB etc.

### **6.5. Research Participants: The Pakistani MBA Students**

The selected participants were MBA students in their final semesters who had taken up their final research project to partially fulfil the requirements for achieving an MBA degree. The sample consists of 09 female students out of the 31 participants making about 30% across the sample. The sample also contains 27 full-time and 04 part-time MBA students. The full time students pursuing an occupation work is in their part-time capacity after their university time, while the part-time students work full-time in their respective jobs. However, the part-time students had also willingly participated in the action learning sets to gain benefit from its critical and reflective processes to solve dilemmas in their MBA research project. The list of participants tabulated below at table 6.1 presents an overview of the participants by their pseudonym, occupation, status, and gender.

In table 6.2, I exhibit how the MBA students recruited from the three participating business schools were distributed into four action learning sets (groups). The distribution of MBA students within groups has been random and based on first-come-first-serve basis. The advertisement, publicity and word of mouth of the action learning project encouraged students to participate. I have been able to identify and cover the aspects of recruitment and data sampling in the previous sections of this chapter. One significant finding here is the smaller ratio of female MBA students who came forward and became part of this project. The sample indicates the range of female students who participated within the action learning project are employed and having some experience of working as job-incumbents. A very

small percentage of females participated who were only full-time students by occupation. Indicating how only a smaller percentage of women participate in extra-curricular academic support, especially in a group setting which attracts social interaction and opposite gender (males) in close proximity.

	Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Occupation
1.	Haris	Male	Stock Broker
2.	Ibrahim	Male	Student
3.	Sarah	Female	Student
4.	Haron	Male	Intern at a Bank
5.	Mohammad	Male	Freelance Third-party Broker
6.	Ali	Male	Student
7.	Khan	Male	Student
8.	Zee	Male	Rap Singer and Musician
9.	Sam	Male	Student
10.	Ahmed	Male	Radio Jockey
11.	Anya	Female	Student
12.	Uzair	Male	Media Reporter
13.	Dawood	Male	Student
14.	Kamran	Male	Student
15.	Amber	Female	Student
16.	Maria	Female	Research Associate
17.	Elena	Female	Student
18.	Anita	Female	Manager
19.	Farrukh	Male	Assistant Producer
20.	Hasan	Male	Student
21.	Tariq	Male	Student
22.	Natasha	Female	Teacher
23.	Javid	Male	Student
24.	Basim	Male	Student
25.	Haseeb	Male	Insurance Agent
26.	Rozie	Female	Student
27.	Rameez	Male	Student
28.	Leena	Female	Trainee Lawyer
29.	Hosain	Male	Student
30.	Qadeer	Male	Entrepreneur, Family Business
31.	Zayn	Male	Student

**Table 6-1:** Participant Pseudonyms, MBA Status and Occupation

EBS East-city Business School		MBS Mid-city Business School		WBS West-city Business School			
Action Learning Group I		Action Learning Group II		Action Learning Group III		Action Learning Group IV	
1. Haris	9. Sam	16. Maria	23. Javid				
2. Abraham	10. Ahmed	17. Elena	24. Basim				
3. Sarah	11. Anya	18. Anita	25. Haseeb				
4. Haron	12. Uzair	19. Farrukh	26. Rozie				
5. Mohammad	13. Dawood	20. Hasan	27. Rameez				
6. Ali	14. Kamran	21. Tariq	28. Leena				
7. Khan	15. Amber	22. Natasha	29. Hosain				
8. Zee			30. Qadeer				
			31. Zayn				

**Table 6-2:** Distribution of the Sample in Learning Sets - Business School wise

Also, table 6.3 (next page) presents the geographical affiliation of participating MBA students to provide an image of the diverse (cultural) participation of students (i.e. Pakistani nationals) belonging from different provinces of the country (i.e. Sindh, Punjab, KPK and Balochistan). The sample highlighted participating MBA students to belong from 14 different cities and all the four provinces of Pakistan (excluding FATA/FANA areas). The higher percentage of students from Punjab indicates the locale in which the business schools were situated i.e. Islamabad /Rawalpindi. The table also illustrates the distribution of participants based on learning set observations and interviews conducted.

Pakistani regional representation in action learning sets	Participants observed	Participants interviewed
Punjab Province  <b>Islamabad (Capital), Lahore, Wah, Rawalpindi, Jehlum, Multan, Bahawalpur, Muzaffarabad</b>	23 (16 Males, 7 Females)	23 (16 Males, 7 Females)
KPK Province  <b>Peshawar, Bannu, Kohat</b>	05 (4 Males, 1 Female)	05 (4 Males, 1 Female)
Sindh Province  <b>Karachi, Hyderabad</b>	02 (1 Male, 1 Female)	02 (1 Male, 1 Female)
Balochistan Province  <b>Quetta</b>	01 (1 Male)	01 (1 Male)
Total  <b>(Representing 14 Cities)</b>	<b>31 (Observed)</b>	<b>31 (Interviewed)</b>

**Table 6-3:** Geographical Affiliation of MBA Students

## 6.6. Trustworthiness of the Study

Ensuring rigour and trustworthiness of a qualitative approach to research is a challenging task. A qualitative approach aims to generate data that is ‘composed of social constructs’ and which further goes on to ‘reflect [the] presuppositions and socio-historical circumstances’ inherent in its production (Khan, 2006: p.166). Shenton (2004) raises a concern that data yielded as part of qualitative approach is subject to questioning for trustworthiness by traditional positivist researchers due to their notions of ‘reliability and validity’ (p.63). He further argues that in qualitative research, validity and reliability cannot be addressed in the same way as positivists do (*ibid.*). Several notable authors (e.g. Guba, 1981; or Silverman

2001) provide ways for ensuring qualitative rigour and trustworthiness while conducting fieldwork and post-fieldwork analysis.

According to Merriam (1998), *credibility* raises questions about whether the findings are congruent to what was actually intended by the research (p.201). The credibility (or internal validity) stretches the pliant fabric of findings in assessing its ability to capture reality as proposed initially by the researcher (ibid.). Shenton (2004) furthers Guba and Lincoln's (1985) credibility construct to increase the 'truth value' (Guba, 1981: p.79) by asking researchers to take into account the durability of their research methods. Certainly in this study I have ensured this by adopting a well-established multi-method approach (or triangulation) to counter any subsequent doubts. Starting with the selection of sample for the study, appropriate contextual information was taking into consideration and a slice of the population was chosen to be studied. The types of data sources (data points) organized to gather information through learning set observations, facilitation notes, post-programme interviews and field notes ensured triangulation was in place.

Moreover, *transferability* according to Merriam (1998), represents the degree to which findings from a study can be applied to other contexts. Guba & Lincoln (1985) indicate that the level of generalizing a study is in fact a measure of the 'enduring value[s] that are context-free' (p.110). However, they further suggest that such transferability is likely to be different in qualitative studies as compared to the traditionalist positivist paradigms. Without subjecting my study to deterministic or reductionist prosecutions of positivist traditions, I expand on 'idiographic beliefs' that render social reality as meaningful (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: p.27). It would have been a pointless agenda to generalize the study (Prasad & Prasad, 2002) or either to predict or control its findings (Khan, 2006), rather I asked participants to

speak for themselves and express their accounts of social interactions that took place during action learning.

Another aspect to ensuring trustworthiness is *dependability*, as indicated by Shenton (2004). It corresponds to the degree of reliability of the study, when undertaken in similar context and under said conditions. Dependability raises the question that would the study yield the same results in other similar studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize the significance of dependability in qualitative research, especially the consistency of its findings. I believe the MBA participants recruited for the study were reliable informants about the MBA learning culture. Their programme orientation and development also ensures that they act as reliable data sources for informing me about their experiences on the action learning programme. I do understand the asymmetrical power-relations, which Rigg and Trehan (2004) refer in an education setting, between participants and me but since the study was not linked to any formal academic evaluation the MBA participation was purely voluntary. I was also aware of the fact that the participants might forget or provide answers that are event appropriate (positive) and painting colourful pictures. However having done observations and crosschecking observational notes and recordings with interview accounts I was able to consider the depth and value of interview data.

Lastly, Patton (1990) indicates that achieving total objectivity is difficult let alone achieving this in qualitative research. However, he urges that qualitative researchers should take notes of events and happenings to ensure *conformability* in naturalistic inquiries. Here, Guba (1981) argues that the qualitative researchers need to inform that the findings presented in a study are based on informant accounts rather than their beliefs or interests. In order to present findings right from the horse's mouth I reiterate the importance of using a multi-method

approach. The multi-method approach ensures that the data is triangulated and rich contextual information is presented to support the data collection process.

Additionally, I can confirm that the 31 informants I have studied in 04 action learning groups set-up at 03 participating business schools have generated data which has been interpreted by giving it a ‘deep and highly informed reading’ in a particular cultural context. I have immersed myself with the data and have given it multiple readings from different angles to recreate a thorough image of the cultural persistence in participants’ practice. The recreation of the social system operating in the action learning group is brought forward through a thorough textual analysis, using participants’ original quotes, that involves giving an internal reading. The internal reading of participants’ accounts directs attention to the tensions and sensitivities that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. Theoretical questioning, contextual reasoning and the self-reflexive commentary in the journal notes of the researcher are used to examine the paradoxical cultural anomalies, which prove inconsistent to action learning’s critical framework. The anomalies are in fact internal difficulties of learners, which may be silent in observations and only pronounced when questioned during interviews. The participants’ internal frame of reference, already oriented to the prevailing culture, identifies this as a cultural gap, which may or may not sound inappropriate in participants’ text. Nevertheless, I have tried to ensure that participant’s internal logic to construct their accounts remains nearby while assessing their narrative accounts to increase conformability.

## **6.7. The Action Learning Programme: Design Considerations**

As part of my fieldwork, I had to design an action learning programme around which the study would take place. However designing a programme suitable to the study was indeed a challenging task. In particular, the design demanded creative thinking about the circulation of knowledge, member-facilitator relationship, and the subsequent social processes that shaped

students' learning experience (Reynolds, 1994). I designed the action learning programme keeping in view three distinct aspects: a). programme content i.e. managing MBA research projects; b). values and beliefs articulated through the design i.e. participant empowerment; and c). the learning process i.e. the learning framework. The groundwork for this learning design was established around the concepts of learning, as discussed in chapters 2 and 3, covering for example combining Revans system gamma with critical reflection. I was reluctant to create a superficial learning environment that transmitted decontextualized knowledge about managing and organizing research projects. I was keen on attaining a socially inclusive design that enabled participants' to recognize the social processes inherent in group learning practice through social interaction (ibid.). In light of Lave and Wenger's (1991) work, I took note of knowledge as a product of a co-constructed process, in which the 'activity of learning' is seen as emergent, shared and embedded within its social context. In designing socially interactive systems, to interpret the indexical character of cultural practices, in an action learning process, the design was moulded to stimulate 'engagement, imagination and alignment' within MBA students (Wenger, 2000: p.227-228). Next, I present an overview of the programme to illustrate its genesis and how I came about developing an action learning programme that revolves around working on MBA research projects. This is further coupled with a brief about the values and assumptions underpinning the action learning framework in use with an insight on the process of learning.

### ***Scope of the Action Learning Programme***

Under the aegis of the three participating Pakistani business schools, I devised an action learning programme which focused on providing a practical sense of the research process whose theories have often been discussed in the MBA classroom. The programme designed was finalized after interacting with MBA students, faculty and business school

administrators, during the pilot study conducted in August-September 2013. During the pilot study, students emphasized the impact of the drastic changes occurring within the MBA sphere in Pakistan, especially with the introduction of a mandatory research thesis by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.

The objectives of the action learning programme on managing and organizing research (thesis) were laid out in advance to track the progress of the set:

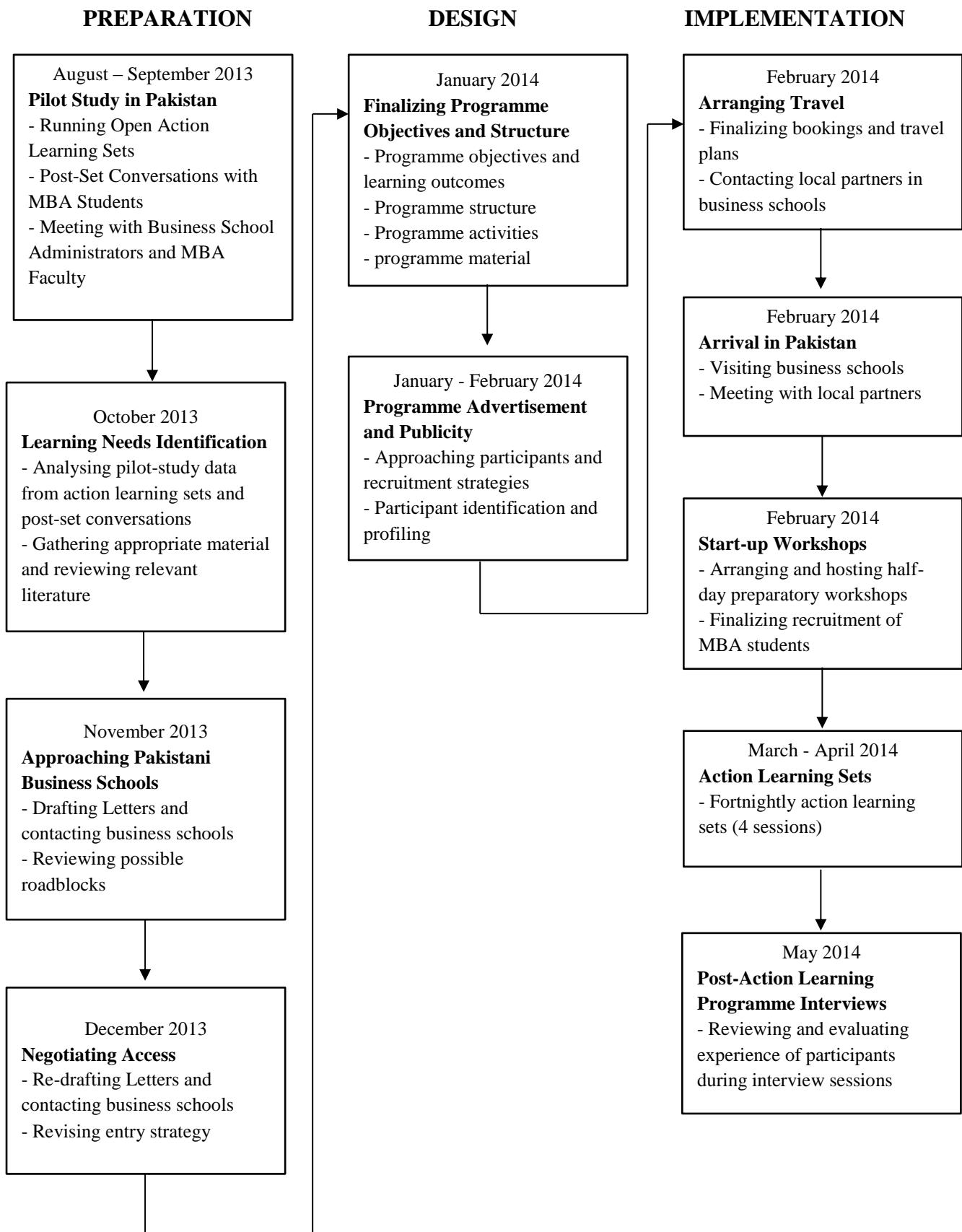
- To help support the integration of thoughts into the actual research process – thus developing a business research acumen;
- To develop a community of MBA researchers which cultivates a common language in challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions in the research process;
- To encourage critical thinking and critical inquiry about research practices relevant to member's research project – moving towards a critically reflective practice;
- To bring forward sensitive issues underpinning the research project – the set acts as a nurturing environment;
- To encourage research action-planning and deliberation on those actions for deeper learning – the set acts as a safe haven for testing knowledge;

Once the programme objectives and contents were put together, the following decisions were then finalized:

- The programme was now retitled as ‘Managers of your own research?: An action learning approach to managing and organizing the MBA research’.

- The programme was aimed at MBA students registered or looking to register for their final degree project.
- The duration of the programme was 6-8 weeks, depending upon the frequency of group meeting.
- The programme was structured as 01 introductory workshop (or start-up session) followed by 4 fortnightly set meetings [1+4 Action Learning Programme]. The introductory workshop was almost half-a-day activity while all the 4 set meetings were between 2½ to 3 hours each.
- Each set was led by a facilitator, the researcher himself, with 6-9 set members in each action learning group set up in different business schools.
- The programmes were established and run on-campuses (within business schools) in a comfortable environment allowing members to participate with ease alongside their busy MBA schedule.
- The programmes were designed as additional academic support for MBA students and were not part of any direct academic evaluation/examination. The set participation was purely voluntary – but one which required long-term commitment.

Figure 6.1 illustrates programme formulation phases, by indicating activities accomplished during different points of fieldwork: preparatory, design and implementation phases of the action learning programme. The three phases highlight the start of field and programme activities from August 2013 till their completion in May 2014.



**Figure 6-1:** Overview of Design and Field Activities

### **Action Learning Framework**

The action learning programme framework being used in this design was developed on action learning principles, as noted by Pedler (2008: p.4), which revolved around four key elements, which are:

- Person: Voluntary participation of MBA students in the action learning programme;
- Problem: Each MBA students is already assigned with a personal task that they own;
- Set: Group of MBA students from the same business school, with a similar task, agree to meet regularly for a certain period of time with the help of a facilitator;
- Action-Reflection-Learning: MBA students willing to take action, collectively reflecting and learning from those actions, reflections and experiences;

What lies beneath these elements were challenges to Pakistani MBA education that influence students to interact with one another. The first and far most was ‘learning with others’ (Weinstein, 1999: p.33) or as Revans calls them ‘comrades in adversity’ (Revans, 1984). The challenge for Pakistani MBA students was to work together as a group to think creatively and imaginatively. The students were encouraged through facilitation to reveal their concerns, doubts or emotions about the state of the task and the group itself (Pedler et al. 2013). Another challenge for action learning with Pakistani MBA students was ‘learning without expert instruction’ (Weinstein, 1999: p.34). Based on the premise that we can learn without expert intervention, as coined in by the classical Revans approach, action learning usually avoids expert instruction. However, in this design there is a slight element of a developmental approach to action learning, as proposed by Raelin and Raelin (2006), that incorporates guidance and active mode of facilitation. Since detaching expert instruction from an environment, which is reliant on expert mode of learning, might have put the set off in

unwanted directions, so the process of transiting from an active to a passive role took time and effort. The learning framework, nevertheless, insisted on the fact that

‘[...] in true action learning it is not what a man already knows and tells that sharpens the countenance of his friend, but what he does not know and what his friend does not know either. It is recognised ignorance not programmed knowledge that is the key to action learning’ (Revans, 1984).

The third challenge to the learning design was to allow the accumulated experiences and knowledge to be the guiding force. Experience as the source of social interaction, is the essence of the programme. It is also considered as the container of knowledge, perceptions, and emotions about how we interpret the social world.

The action learning framework has been developed in light of the research focus in which reflective practice, as also suggested by Lawrence (1997), acts as the best teacher if we are to learn how to reflect and question the underlying assumptions that result in the formulation of our experience. When collectively coupled with the power of the learning set, the impact of learning deepens and creates much greater force for durable learning. The reflective element is the key to making sense of our experiences and actions that formulate them. The reflective process in turn legitimizes the critical inquiry process and allows us to create a dialogue with set members. Learning is thus an emergent process that stems through the interplay of action and reflection.

### ***Programme Structure and Execution***

The action learning programme was designed to facilitate MBA students registered for their final research projects/dissertations. The registered students had already been allocated a supervisor based on their interests and specialization by the business schools prior to the action learning sets. The supervisors and student were intimated by the MBA offices about student participation in the sets. The action learning programme was designed to run parallel

to the term-time studies (classes) of MBA students and had to be fitted in with business schools particular semester schedule. I had already planned in advance, as also a product of the system, I knew that most of the universities in Pakistan running on a bi-semester plan aim to launch their spring term starting February to May each year. In business schools who work on a trimester system, their summer terms are usually short. This is due to the hot climate of Pakistan (temperatures average 40 degree Celsius) and absence of energy resources (resulting into power outages and load-shedding) reduces the productivity of students. The summer term normally runs from June to mid-August each year. The fall term usually starts mid-September and runs through till mid-January. Having studied the term plans of each business school, I figured it might be best to work in a cooler climate during the months of February through May 2014. The first action learning programme was set up at the East-city Business School, followed by Mid-city and West-city Business Schools. Moreover the action learning programme ran almost parallel in all the three business schools with at most a week's difference (see table 6.4 for a detailed timeline below).

The MBA students, recruited for the programmes, were invited for an introductory workshop (start-up session) in February 2014. The lists of participants were collected from the business schools upon my arrival and I was assigned programme coordinators/ secretaries that were in-charge of working out the logistics of the action learning programme. The programme coordinators were kind enough to send out emails and cell phone texts, as reminders, to students after working out their schedule (using business schools' information systems). These coordinators booked the rooms and all of the stakeholders were informed. The introductory session aimed to set out and manage student expectations and anxieties, while the set meetings aimed at working through student-led problems. Each of the action learning set was designed to have a broader theme of the day so that participants move forward, as the lives of sets were time bound.

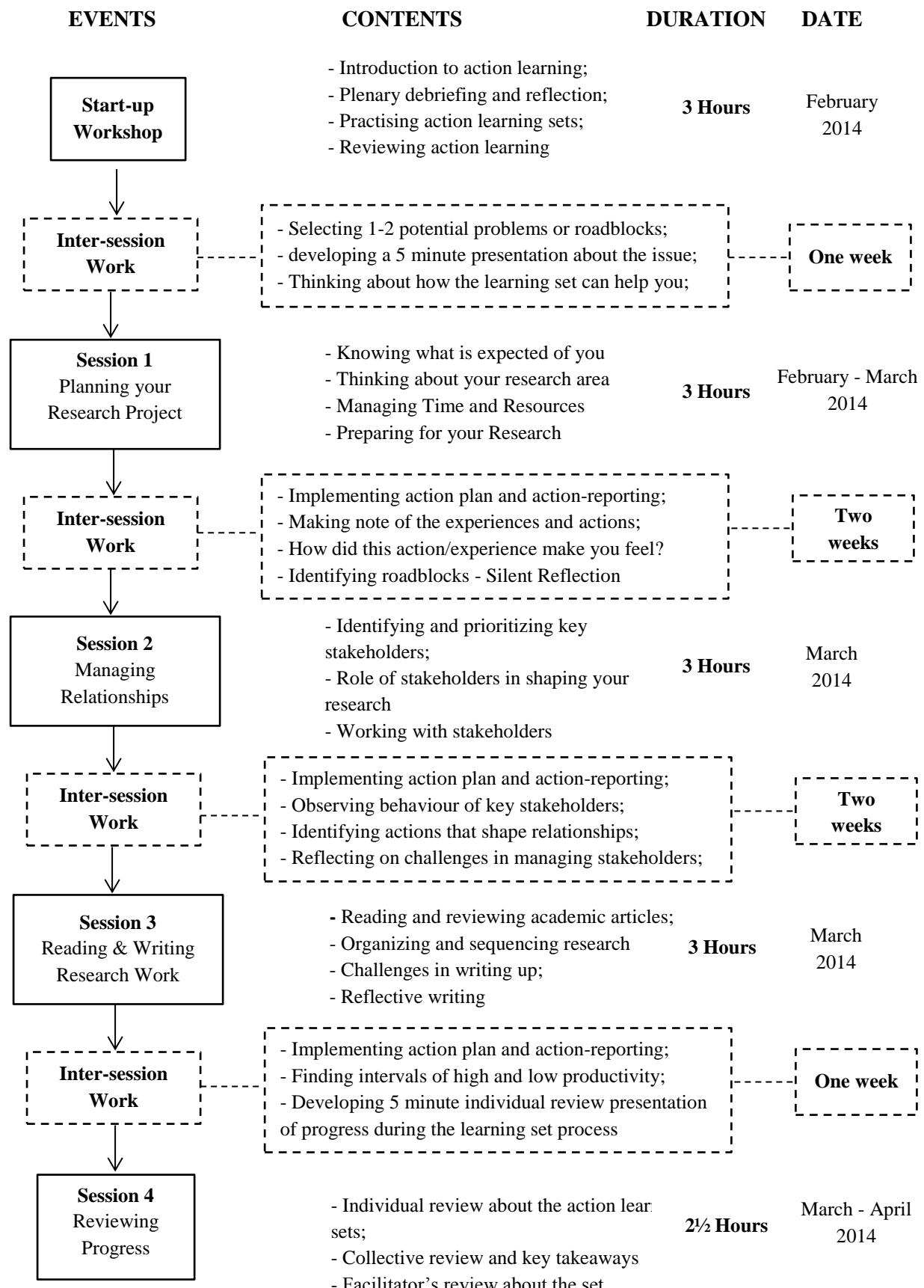
Business School	Start-up Workshop	ALS Session I	ALS Session II	ALS Session III	ALS Session IV
<b>EBS (1)</b>	21 Feb 2014	27 Feb 2014	13 Mar 2014	27 Mar 2014	04 Apr 2014
<b>EBS (2)</b>	22 Feb 2014	28 Feb 2014	15 Mar 2014	1 Apr 2014	07 Apr 2014
<b>MBS</b>	25 Feb 2014	07 Mar 2014	20 Mar 2014	03 Apr 2014	15 Apr 2014
<b>WBS</b>	26 Feb 2014	05 Mar 2014	21 Mar 2014	05 Apr 2014	11 Apr 2014

**Table 6-4:** Timeline of the Action Learning Programme

Figure 6.2 (below) provides an outline to the programme activities and content covered during its full duration. Each action learning session had a break of at least one or two weeks – called the intersession workspace. The intersession workspace was a chance for students to engage in action and self-reflection to develop plans of actions. Although action-plans were included as each session’s ending activity and action-reporting as the starting activity, but the intersession space provided an opportunity to apply ideas and bring the experience back to the set. In addition, each themed session was based on prior readings (see Table 6.5 below), which were handed out to students in advance (at the start-up sessions). The students were asked to read and relate and develop very short 5-10 minute presentations on their actions and experiences.

Session Theme	Sample Programme Readings
<b>Introductory Session:</b> <b>Start-up Workshop</b>	McGill, I. & Brockbank, A. (2004). Chapter 1: Introducing action learning, in <i>The Action Learning Handbook</i> , Routledge-Falmer: London
<b>Session 1:</b> <b>Planning your Research</b>	Bryman, A. (2012). Chapter 3: Planning a Research Project, in <i>Social Research Methods</i> , 4 <sup>th</sup> Edition, Oxford University Press; Oxford
<b>Session 2:</b> <b>Managing Relationships</b>	Sharp, J. A, Peters, J. & Howard, K. (2002). Chapter 7: Executing the Research, in <i>The Management of a Student Research Project</i> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> Edition, Gower: Aldershot
<b>Session 3:</b> <b>Reading and Writing</b> <b>Research Work</b>	Brown, R. B (2006). Chapter 7: What they said about your research topic: the literature search and review; and Chapter 9: Writing matters, in <i>Doing your Dissertation in Business and Management: The Reality of Researching and Writing</i> , Sage: London

**Table 6- 5:** Action Learning Programme Readings



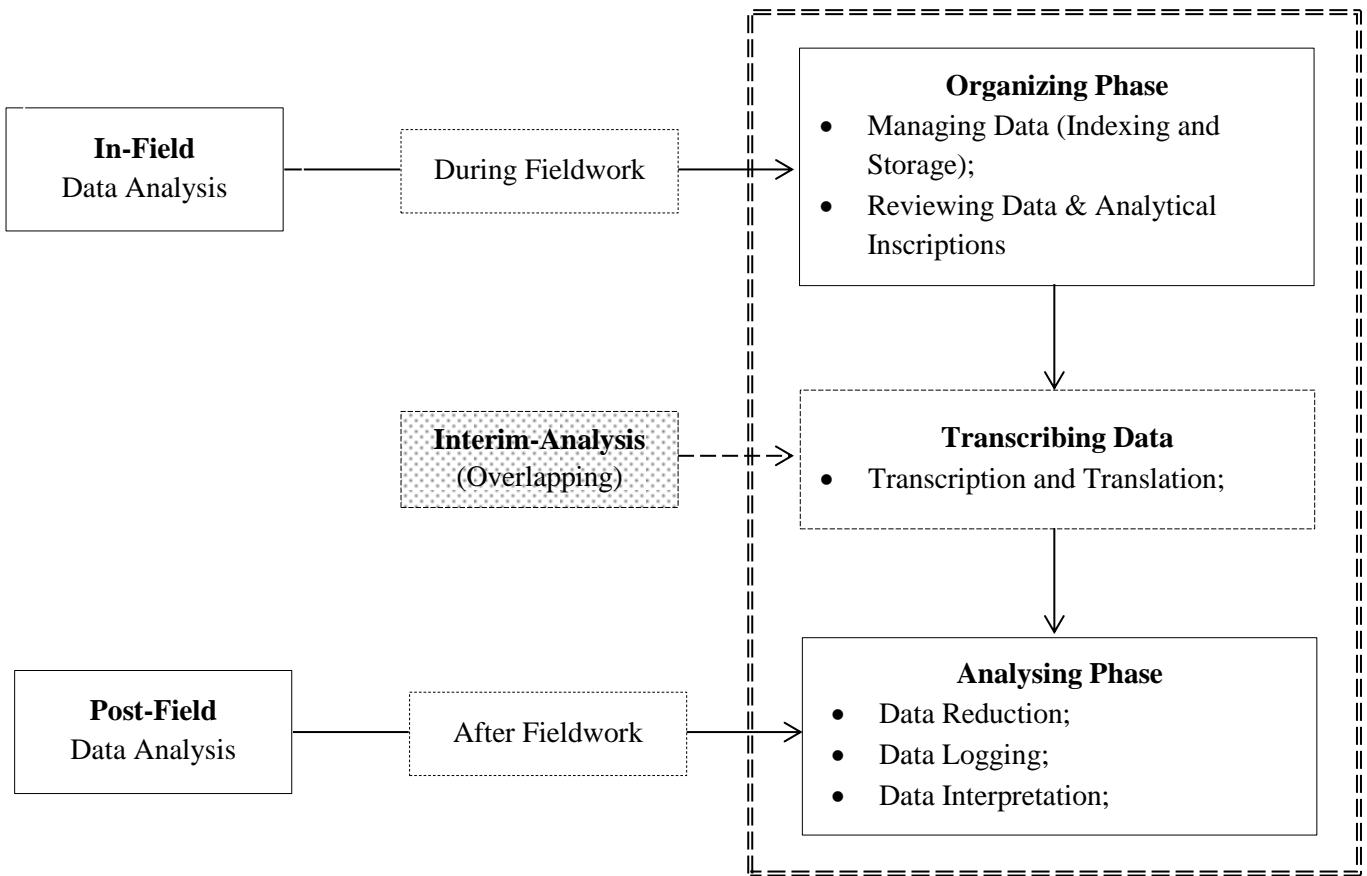
**Figure 6-2: Outline of the Action Learning Programme**

## 6.8. Analysis Strategy

In collecting and working with qualitative data, mainly acquired during my interaction with participants, I realized that the data was an expression of their experiences, emotions and beliefs (Berger & Luckman, 1966) towards action learning and the Pakistani MBA. The resultant structure of the data was textual and wordy: the data was collected using a multi-method approach (i.e. interviews and observations) and captured through audio-recording and field notes. Furthermore, the analytical techniques which were applied to produce a multidimensional view of participants' accounts, as key descriptors of their experiences drew upon a data-driven thematic approach (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1991 etc.). This section aims to illustrate how codes were allocated and patterns were conceptualized in relation to the action learning programme and Pakistani MBA context. The resultant themes, explained in chapters 7, 8 and 9, were further interpreted using Bourdieu's theoretical framework, i.e. habitus, field and capital, as discussed in chapter 4 on page 111, along with my reflective commentary to help shape the findings.

The analysis strategy draws upon a thematic analysis, which uses abductive reasoning and is supported by actual data extracts of Pakistani MBA students' interview accounts and learning-set events. Furthermore, this section attempts to make clear how the data was organized for analysis and what were the subsequent findings because of the data organization process. The analytical process describes the reasons for including and excluding certain strategies, in developing the analytical content for this study. Altogether, this section brings to life the process of analytical-planning, thematic structuring of data and the significance of empirical evidence collected during fieldwork. Moreover, to analyse the data I adopted a step-by-step approach in handling the analysis process. The analysis process was divided into two phases (i.e. in field and post-field), with an overlapping transcription

phase. A graphical illustration and a detailed explanation of the analytical process is described below:



**Figure 6-3:** The Two-Phased Analysis Process

### ***In-Field Analysis***

During this phase the analysis process materialized through fieldwork activities when I was acquainted with the data itself. The experience of interacting with primary data was fruitful and frightful at the same time. The fruitful aspect allowed me to understand the procedure of data collection, structure of the data acquired and the direction in which it progressed. The frightening aspect was my interaction with a number of stakeholders in the data collection process, depth and enormity of the data collected, and the politics of fieldwork. However, the

main goal of the organization phase was to manage these large data-sets which were gathering quickly. Managing data-sets for a design-based study which involved multiple data sets (e.g. observations, interviews and field notes) was a difficult job. Management and organization of data-sets had a lot to do with housekeeping and tidying up as I progressed through the data collection activity (e.g. LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

This phase directed my attention to the challenges of qualitative analysis i.e. large data sets. In this regard, I reviewed the data earlier on during my fieldwork to start making sense of the relatively large amount of text I was collecting. During the in-field stage I developed a set of procedures to help me go through the data to have a feel of what was headed my way. Earlier, I was introduced to the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) who provide guidance in conducting thematic analysis of qualitative data in psychology. Building on their work, I adapted my in-field procedures and tried developing a set of practices to work with the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that it is always best to ‘familiarize yourself with the data’ as it helps in generating ideas before you set-off doing a detailed analysis (p.87). As a practice, I revisited daily data collection activities by listening to the recordings I had made during the fieldwork. This usually included listening and re-listening to observations and adding analytical inscriptions to underline key areas of emphasis (Geertz, 1973). I found this activity, long, but useful as it prepared me for the next data collection event (e.g. action learning set or post-programme interview) in which I either modified or tweaked the content prior to my interaction with participants. As a learning experience I found this useful as a researcher to avoid certain words which might sound ambiguous to participants or actions which might seem inappropriate (e.g. emphasizing on certain points, progressing further, firing questions, avoiding delays or eliciting response etc.).

### ***The Transcription Phase***

The transcription emerged as an overlapping phase at the junction of in-field and post-field process, in which I started transcribing and reviewing the data. As indicated earlier, within the works of Braun and Clarke (2006), familiarization with the data can be achieved by reviewing the data on daily basis and progressing further towards immersing into the structural complexities of data (p.87). Another aspect of familiarizing with the data is transcription, which helped access the complexities of data and delve into participants' accounts (Wolcott, 2010) of experiencing action learning. During this phase, I made several attempts at transcribing the data. Riessman (1993) suggests that transcription of verbal data is a great way to familiarize the self with data. Although time-consuming and laborious as it sounds, Bird (2005) notes that transcription is 'a key phase of data analyses within the interpretivist tradition of research (p.227). Braun and Clarke (2006) quote Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) to emphasize that transcription is an act of interpretation in which 'meanings are created' which lead to the emergence of themes (p.88). It is not merely an 'act of putting spoken words on paper' (p.88).

The data collected as audio-recordings during action learning sets and post-programme interviews were conducted in local language i.e. Urdu. Although spoken Urdu uses a great deal of words adopted by English language but the actual sense of talk could be achieved by having knowledge of Urdu. The challenge for developing transcripts in English language for analysis in my doctoral thesis was followed by their inability to be verbatim of all verbal utterances. The issue I suppose was the degree to which the politics of Urdu and English language changed the actual meaning of utterances (word). At this point of time I was considering developing shorter transcripts as time-points indicators and use original audio-recordings for data analysis instead of longer version of verbal transcripts.

Initially, I attempted to transcribe the data during the fieldwork using InPage © Urdu editor, but due to my limited experience in typing Urdu on computers (using English key boards) I resorted to Roman-Urdu script in Microsoft Word 2010 ®. I transcribed four interviews using this script, but soon realized that it would be best to have the data translated in English language. I then translated two interview transcripts in English language using my own knowledge of Urdu and English. However, the amount of time it took to transcribe and translate was enormous. I sought additional help by hiring a professional third-party transcriber and translator based in Karachi, Pakistan (using my personal contacts). We set a protocol before translating the interviews in which I had a discussion with the transcriber/translator. I felt that the discussion was necessary to set the context of the interviews and the study. We talked about the interview schedule and the type of conventions (e.g. action learning sets, social interaction, relationships, pedagogy, MBA education) to allow the transcriber to get a basic understanding of the task. In addition, the discussion touched upon issues of length of interviews, starting and ending points for interviews, nature of questions and the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee.

In order to develop interview transcripts for a thematic analysis, I was aware of the transcription conventions usually employed for developing verbal transcripts. For example, Braun and Clarke (2006) talk about transcripts prepared for a range of analysis including conversation analysis and narrative or discourse analysis which employ certain conventions that construct a verbatim account (p.88). I asked the transcriber to translate the scripts in English developing at minimum an orthographic transcript of actual events and utterance to the closest possible meaning in English. Edwards (1993) indicates that the transcript must contain the information to its original nature without altering its meaning. We also discussed issues of privacy and confidentiality, along with payment procedures. I started emailing one interview recording at a time, after which the interview transcript would be emailed back to

me within 4-5 days. I usually read the script and made payment through a local contact for each script individually.

During this early stage of analysis, a challenge, which I felt, that emerged was with my decision of having the transcripts translated in English language. As I started reading transcripts and matching it with audio-recordings, I found that, there was a divide in meanings when converted from Urdu to English. While reviewing the scripts I found that the transcriber/translator translated words in direct English, which at times made no sense. In having to reduce the work I had to perform on developing transcripts, it suddenly expanded, as I had to reconstruct many transcripts by listening to the original recordings. I spent hours managing this task so that the transcripts would more accurately reflect the interviewees' expressions and meanings. For example, I had to read carefully what the translator had sent, which more often were direct phrase translations. Recalling what one participant had originally said about reflective practice that 'it was really difficult to get my head around it', was actually translated as 'very difficult to revolve my head around it', or at times there were missing connectors or words which completed the sentence (see sample at appendix – G).

In conclusion, to this phase, I believe that transcribing data was a critical step in filling out the missing links between learning and practice. The process of transcription and translation of audio-data (interviews and observations) began in April 2014 with audio-data of interviews, running almost parallel to reviewing, reconstructing and coding of transcripts, and ended in December 2014. By the end I managed to acquire 31 transcribed, translated and reconstructed interview transcripts amounting to 46.5 hours of recordings and approximately 830 pages of scripts. The transcription of action learning set observations and field notes ran parallel to the interview transcription. In total I managed to transcribe 32 events from the sets

worth almost 320 pages of data (including field notes). By now, I had entered into the post-field analysis phase, in which the interim analysis extended itself.

### ***Post-Field Analysis***

Once the data was organized into manageable bits using a data-driven (inductive) approach (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), I progressed towards coding and categorizing the text to identify themes emerging. Coding, or data reduction, was a significant activity in the analysis process. This step involved a number of iterative steps in which I had to move back and forth to reduce the data into manageable bits. Data reduction consisted mainly of coding and recoding the data by assigning codes (code names) to raw data and modifying codes to reflect distinct features of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: p.88). The codes are a way for analysts to mark something interesting in the data by assigning an indicative name to the chunk/s of raw data. Boyatzis (1998) proposes that codes represent self-contained descriptions of what the data is trying to indicate. He further notes that codes are ‘basic elements’ which researchers produce for ‘meaningful assessment’ of the data (p. 63). Codes are ‘researcher generated constructs that symbolizes individual datum’ (Saldana, 2013: p.3). Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that when researchers try coding qualitative data they are entering into the process of analysis by organizing them into meaningful ways. The process of coding is an important step in the data reduction stage as it starts breaking the textual data into smaller bits for deeper-levels of analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The result of the coding activity is to yield a string of ‘patterns’ for analytical purposes (Saldana, 2013: p.4). The coding cycle was completed in three iterations, which are explained below:

The first round of data reduction broadly yielded analytical inscriptions that outlined reflections of Pakistani MBA students in the action learning programme. The inscriptions revealed the ways in which Pakistani MBA students differentiated between the action

learning and their traditional MBA classroom learning experiences. Following is an example from a compilation of analytical notes I made to write about the ways in which some of the participants described their experience of action learning. It is interesting to see how these inscriptions grasp their frame of reference to evaluate their learning experience:

***Illustration of an Analytical Inscription:***

The participants reveal several aspects related to their learning practices during their action learning endeavour with emphasis on their acquired knowledge of social upbringing, schooling and business education they had been exposed to during their academic lives. They were able to make frequent comparison of how action learning was different to their pre-existing knowledge of socially and culturally accepted learning behaviour, in particular for their role as students in an institutional context. The early patterns in data indicated their subservient nature living pedagogical lives in which they were exposed to set of norms, as forms of dominations, within their familial circles and nearby communities. Their earlier form of understanding learning was greatly influenced by their social environment with which they have had close contact with and this has been disciplined by institutions such as home, community and institutions (like religious sanctuaries, schools, colleges and universities).

The second round of data reduction began once I had the opportunity to listen to all the audio-recordings and jot down analytical memos to identify areas of interest for analysis. This round of data reduction was a lengthy and a painstaking process in which interview transcripts were reconstructed and further analytical insight was gained during its course. When I started receiving the interview transcripts from the transcriber, I invested time in reconstructing and making sense of the interview. I also spent time going back to the action learning set recordings to feel for the interviewee's context during the learning process. With each interview transcript I made additional notes in the margins to help identify key areas of analysis - making bold inscriptions onto the physical interview transcripts, thus marking the beginning of the coding process. I read each transcript at least twice, once as a whole account of the participants' experience and second by keeping in view the interview questions. Taylor (1976) suggests that a hermeneutic reading allows a researcher to interpret the connotational as well as the contextual meaning of text 'by making sense of the object of study' (p.153).

The idea was to ‘bring to light an underlying coherence’ of participants’ cultural learning practices during the space of social (inter)actions performed in events of action learning. I was also conscious about my own interpretations of text and knowledge about the study context during the analytical process.

Once the transcripts were read and marked for key concepts, they were uploaded onto computer-based software called Atlast.ti ®. The transcripts uploaded onto the software were coded line-by-line and word-by-word to assign codes keeping in view the research questions and the theoretical framework discussed on p.110 (i.e. habitus, capital and field), as read for the third time. I used an itemized analysis technique to code the data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), an approach similar to Glaser and Straus (1967), which treats each datum as an item in text to be assigned a code. The item-level analysis as a result of a hermeneutic reading had a distinct drawback: it went so deep that the text ended up in isolation to the entire data-set and the context of data. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) indicate that data items need to be coded in relation to the research questions to avoid isolating the text from its context and losing its meaning.

The challenge, which came forward at this point, was the issue of what to code in the data. Having familiarized with the data patterns, I took Riessman’s (1993) advice on coding the basic content of the interviews and hearing the stories in which the content was embedded by taking a holistic approach to coding. This further involved paying attention to the words, phrases and expressions as accounted by interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In order to identify what constituted as a coded element, I stepped further down into what Altheide (1996) recommended as organizing properties of a code i.e. ‘format, frame, action and discourse’. Keeping in view such a microscopic view of data, I felt that I was being distanced from the main purpose of my study. I then started coding manually on the remaining scripts

with a colour-coded system. This helped me in gaining control over the large volume of data and assisted in reduction, as opposed to its expansion in the case of the computer software.

Then, I started open coding by assigning a code name to the textual data of my own choice to describe its parameters (e.g. fear of being challenged, role of facilitator, role confusion etc.), or at other times I opted for in vivo codes (e.g. histories don't play right, being a female, voices in my head etc.) (Saldana, 2013). Also, in some data extracts there could be more than one code representing the data but in other the one code (word or a phrase) was enough. The interview transcripts were dissected in consultation with the audio-recordings from the learning sets to determine contextual meaning of some data which the interviewees mentioned – as events or actions. The codes were generated in accordance to the issues which arose during the interview conversations, broadly outlining the interview and research questions.

The illustration (in Table 6.6 below) demonstrates the actual coding process showing an extract of data from the previous interview illustration, the code value assigned and a little description about the code within the context. These points were discussed during the interview conversations, but emerged as textual segments connecting to different sets of ideas. The ideas were then taken as text segments with surrounding bits of data to preserve the context of the talk – as interview extracts. A number of text segments were cross-referenced with the learning set data to ensure consistency in coding. A sample of interview excerpts is also presented at appendix – F.

The coding cycles were a cyclical and an iterative process. At the end of the coding cycle there were newer codes emerging up till about 19 interview transcripts, after which less and less of new codes appeared. In total I was able to generate almost 1100+ codes in the entire interview data set. During this manual process of coding I felt comfortable with the minute

details of the analytical process, I was able to gain a greater feel for the data, I was able to write down my own descriptions and feelings about codes ensuring that I experience and understand the data in its purity. Once the coding finished, I started logging data, as an extension to the data reduction process where codes assigned to the textual data were compiled and transferred to a Microsoft Word file. I created a separate file having the interviewee's name and transferred my codes from the script to the computer by using copy-paste function to copy original chunks of data from the interview transcript and paste them alongside the code.

Data Extract	Coded For	Code Description
<p>I cannot describe it in two or three words. Like if you look at the group [learning set], it was focused on broader goals and we weren't talking randomly. It was also different from MBA in the sense that it felt talking about real issues. Just like real life things you cannot pin them down.....</p>	'Real Life Learning'	<p><b>Real-life Learning:</b> The participant is trying to describe the nature of problems being discussed in the action learning set, how important they were for his development in terms of his research project.</p>
<p>In my MBA experience we don't take practical things into consideration. We don't bring our problems in the classroom. We don't talk about our experiences. Here, we brought our own research problems. I was learning about how I was seeing myself in the midst of a learning activity.....</p>	'Ownership of Problems'	<p><b>Ownership of Problems:</b> In owning a problem which is personal, the participant feels passionate and motivated towards learning as it seems to address some real-life issue he is facing.</p>
<p>I could see where I was taking the discussion or who was doing what and what type of consequences their actions carried for the set. Again I am not sure how to describe it, but it felt natural.</p>	'Feeling Empowered'	<p><b>Feeling Empowered:</b> The participant feels that bringing a personal real life problem allowed him to track down the different changes he has experienced and how others contributed towards his problem – allowed him to take control of the learning process.</p>

(Haris, Interview Script 1, EBS)

**Table 6-6:** Example of Coding

The codes were inscribed on the left side of the margins, while the right side consisted of the actual data chunk. This led to another cycle of coding, as indicated by Saldana (2013), where

I re-read the code list and had to recode and adjust codes to ensure consistency in my coding approach. Similar codes were relisted and consistency was achieved by using the same code name to describe the phenomena. Saldana (2013) points to this activity as the ‘reconfiguration of codes’ (p.3). An example of how codes were reconfigured is presented in Table 6.7 (below) – this is an extension to the previously illustrated codes in the previous table (above) to continue with the same example. For example, the codes ‘Ownership of Problem’ and ‘Feeling Empowered’ were merged into one unifying code concept i.e. sense of determination, as:

Data Extract	Original Code	Code Properties	Recoded as
In my <b>MBA</b> experience we don't take practical things into consideration. We don't bring our problems in the classroom. We don't talk about our experiences. Here, we brought our own research problems. I was learning about how I was seeing myself in the midst of a learning activity.....	‘Ownership of Problems’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experience</li> <li>- Practical Learning</li> <li>- Suppressing Real Problems</li> <li>- Frustration</li> <li>- Sense of achievement</li> <li>- Ownership of learning</li> <li>- Relating to the Problem</li> <li>- Motivation</li> <li>- Ability to reflect on action</li> <li>- Observing self</li> <li>- Empowered</li> <li>- Self-directed learning</li> <li>- Ambiguous feelings</li> </ul>	‘Sense of Determination’
I could see where I was taking the discussion or who was doing what and what type of consequences their actions carried for the set. Again I am not sure how to describe it, but it felt natural.	‘Feeling Empowered’		( <i>Haris, Interview Script 1, EBS</i> )

**Table 6-7:** Reconfiguration of Codes

## 6.9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter deals with the fieldwork design and strategy. The chapter outlines the fieldwork strategy by expanding upon the decision to choose a qualitative approach – which encounters problems in the Pakistani context. It further goes on to illustrate the decisions taken to select certain business schools and MBA students by explaining the

context of this study. This then provides a basis for discussing issues of access in setting up action learning programmes in Pakistani business schools. It briefly attempts to highlight the power-dynamics and political issues involved in the way the business school administration sought to exercise its control over the research process. The chapter also provides a full description of the participating business schools and the context in which these schools operate.

Finally, the chapter highlights the data organization process, through which I was able to generate codes and categories for further analysis and interpretation. In total over 1,100 codes were generated and collapsed into 57 categories (a sample of codes and categories is presented in Appendix H). The categories were further grouped into nine broad themes by taking into account the sub-questions investigated by this study. Next, in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, I present findings and analysis of the emergent themes – an overview of which is presented on page 206.

### **Section Three**

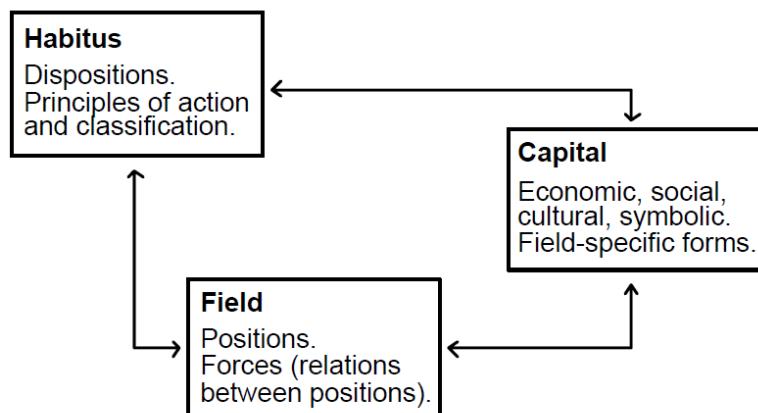
## **Analysis and Findings**

The analysis and findings section is spread over three chapters. This section presents findings and their interpretation, accompanied by actual data quotes (text) from the interviews and set meetings' accounts in an attempt to answer the research sub-questions. The analysis of findings draws upon Bourdieu's theoretical framework of practice, i.e. habitus, capital and field, as discussed in Chapter 4 (page 111), to make sense of Pakistani MBAs' practices. Each Bourdieusian element is used to analyse a particular set of findings in these three chapters. For example, Chapter 7 uses the notion of **habitus** to analyse the embodied practices of Pakistani MBA students, Chapter 8 analyses the **field** of Pakistani MBA students and Chapter 9 presents an analysis of their social and cultural **capital**. These sets of findings, interpreted using this framework, were grouped under a meta-theme (or a grand theme). The meta-themes have been organized around my research sub-questions, that collectively contribute towards the central research question i.e. **can the reflective practice of action learning enhance criticality in Pakistani MBAs?** The analysis thus tries to address these sub-questions over the next three chapters:

- What cultural dispositions underlie participants' perception of the differences between the traditional Pakistani MBA pedagogy and their practice of action learning?
- What does MBA students' experience of organizing reflection informs about action learning's practice in the Pakistani context?
- What social dynamics do Pakistani MBAs display (and reflect upon) as shaping their action learning set interactions?

During the analysis, Bourdieu's framework provided insights into the complexities and challenges of the cultural practices which Pakistani MBA participants have embodied as dispositions. The Bourdieusian framework encapsulates practice from a generative perspective, providing a holistic understanding of the being and becoming of Pakistani MBA students. This helps to develop an understanding of the plausibility of enhancing criticality through reflective practice in action learning. The framework presented in Chapter 4 (earlier on page 111), is re-illustrated in the following supplementary figure, i.e. Figure C:

### Bourdieu's Theoretical Framework



**Figure C:** An Integrated System of Practice: Habitus, Capital and Field 9  
[Adapted: Stokke, K. (2005). 'Struktureringsteori', a presentation cached on the University of Oslo Website]

Chapter 7 attempts to uncover the deep-seated dispositions embedded in the MBA participants' narratives by drawing upon Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*. This reveals Pakistani MBA students' dispositions, providing a glimpse of the normative structure of their habitus, acquired as lived experience. The findings in this chapter, spread over three themes, reaffirm that embodied dispositions shape habitus, which in turn has disciplined these participants' learning behaviour. Bourdieu (1977) accords *dispositions* a significant influence in

<sup>9</sup> Source: [www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/iss/SGO4000/h05/undervisningsmateriale/.../Struktureringsteori.ppt](http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/iss/SGO4000/h05/undervisningsmateriale/.../Struktureringsteori.ppt)

developing the habitus, as they ‘organize action’ and designate a ‘way of being, a habitual state’ (p.214). Therefore dispositions are central to my analysis, as they help explain MBA students’ culturally oriented learning practices and theorize the ways in which embodied dispositions to learning filter their experiences of action learning practice (Vince and Martin, 1993). Attaining an understanding of how these dispositions are embodied provides key insights into the culture of Pakistani MBA students, particularly helpful in the design and process of new action learning programmes. The findings are also indicative of the challenges which a critical design can pose with its reflexive, participatory and empowering processes, especially in the traditionalist context of the Pakistani MBA. For example, in this chapter, I will highlight how culture imposes its authority and arbitrariness on participants through various modes of pedagogic agency. Such an understanding also provides insights into the submissive character of MBA participants who seek refuge in the hierarchical form of familial and learning spaces.

Chapter 8 draws on Bourdieu’s notion of *field* to interpret data. In this chapter, the MBA participants’ experience in terms of their reflective practice of action learning is examined. This examination focuses on the friction action learning creates between what has been embodied and its reflexive character. This is further analysed by making explicit the *doxa* that provides habitus the cultural experience to align itself with its cultural field, as identified in the previous chapter. The accounts of participants presented in this chapter exhibit rather a culture of orthodoxy prevailing within the MBA, which restricts the limits of critical thought or *heterodoxy*, i.e. ‘the awakening of political consciousness’ (Bourdieu, 1977: p.170). Heterodoxy, akin to action learning’s questioning insight, ‘draws attention to the ways in which domination is structured through social institutions, cultural norms and taken-for-granted practices of daily life’ (Fram, 2004: p.556). The critical thinking emerging from heterodoxy, according to Wacquant (2005), has the ability to break with doxa, given that the arbitrariness of orthodoxy is exposed. Thus, the action learning design used in this study was

based on the premise of a socially inclusive pedagogy, which fosters critical engagement amongst its members to question the taken-for-granted aspects of MBA research projects (Mumford, 1992). Therefore, as Willmott (1997a) writes, the intent of criticality in this chapter is to address the problem of orthodoxy in Pakistani MBA students' practice.

Chapter 9 draws upon Bourdieu's (1985) notion of *capital* to interpret data, which places the participants in a force field, i.e. power-relationships (p.40). The relationships within the Pakistani MBA field, as stated by Bourdieu (1996), are seen to be 'structurally determined by the state of the relations of power', or different forms of capital possessed by the participants (p. 264). The use of capital in this chapter is symbolic rather than general, as Bourdieu notes, due to its emblematic nature in which it exposes differences amongst individuals who possess it and those who are willing to possess it (Moore, 2008). The notion of symbolic space is also critical in realizing the effects of power in the field: to outline the way in which symbolic systems operate to reproduce 'social inequality' (Swartz, 1997: p.82). The interrelationship between Bourdieu's triad of concepts, a significant aspect of the findings and analysis in this chapter, provides insights into how the MBA participants mutually share the action learning space with one another, and what underscores movements or mobility in a relational space (field). The positional configurations in a field thus depict the social inequalities of an action learning group which in learning processes mediated participants' relations with others. The social organization of relationships (roles and positions) sheds light on what took place in action learning sets, i.e. how power-relations were actualized in the learning space. Bourdieu's (1989) understanding of how social spaces are in fact symbolic spaces informs my understanding of how relationships amongst participants were either dominant or dominated.

Below, I provide a supplementary table that illustrates the three meta-themes emerging from this analysis and the corresponding themes and sub-themes which are further discussed in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 (see Table-A below):

## SUPPLEMENTARY TABLE: ROADMAP OF THEMES

CHAPTER	LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	META-THEME	THEMES	SUB-THEMES
<i>Chapter 7</i> <i>A Socially Nurtured Habitus: Action Learning versus Embodied Dispositions</i>	<b>Habitus</b>	<b>An Embodied Sense of Place</b>	<p>A Culture of Reverence</p> <p>Embodying Gender: Predisposing a Gendered Habitus</p> <p>Socialization Matters: A Tale of Two Probable Habitus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>'Roohani Baap': The Paradox of Surrogate Fathers</i></li> <li>• <i>Khan: A Fish Out of Water</i></li> <li>• <i>Pedagogising Gender: Leena's 'Family Spirit'</i></li> <li>• <i>Horizon-Expanding Dispositions</i></li> <li>• <i>Downward-Levelling Dispositions</i></li> </ul>
<i>Chapter 8</i> <i>The Field of the Uncritical: Repercussions of Organizing Reflective Practice</i>	<b>Field</b>	<b>The Universe of the Uncritical</b>	<p>Critical Reflection: A Mixed Bag of Feelings</p> <p>Question with Caution: Fragile Relationships</p> <p>A Risky Affair: On the Cultural Incongruence of Critical Reflection</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Fear of Reflection</i></li> <li>• <i>Dissonance and Deflection</i></li> <li>• <i>Avoiding Uncertainty</i></li> <li>• <i>Sensitivity - 'Words Carry Weights'</i></li> <li>• <i>Pedagogic Ambivalence</i></li> </ul>
<i>Chapter 9</i> <i>Gender, Power and Social Capital: The Symbolic Forces Shaping Action Learning</i>	<b>Capital</b>	<b>The Symbolic Forces of Culture</b>	<p>Taken for Gender: The Embodied but Disproportionate Relations</p> <p>Negotiating (dis)-Empowerment: Discomforts of Giving and Taking Responsibility</p> <p>Learning at the Periphery: The Social Ethics of Sharing Space in the Set</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Normalizing Powerlessness: Sarah's Silent Talk</i></li> <li>• <i>One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Gender Displacement</i></li> <li>• <i>Alpha-Culture: A Rift in Masculine-Masculine Relations</i></li> <li>• <i>A Disempowering Culture</i></li> <li>• <i>Enabling Boundaries: A Need for Trusting Relations</i></li> <li>• <i>On a Two-Way Street: Reciprocal Relations</i></li> </ul>

**Table A:** Graphical Representation of Meta-Themes, Themes and Sub-Themes

## CHAPTER 7

### A Socially Nurtured Habitus: Action Learning versus Embodied Dispositions

#### 7.1. Introduction

This chapter draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus to present findings around the meta-theme *an embodied sense of place*, which describes the proclivity of MBA participants' learning practices towards their upbringing, which in practise emerges to regulate their learning experiences and behaviour. The analysis in this chapter addresses the sub-question: 'what cultural dispositions underlie participants' perception of the differences between the traditional Pakistani MBA pedagogy and their practice of action learning?' The findings in this section help answer this question by explaining the durability, perseverance and cultural groundedness of participants' learning dispositions. In particular, this chapter discusses how dispositions are embodied through power-relations between MBA participants and the cultural arbitrariness (via pedagogic agency) and the variety of dispositions (tendencies) embodied at an early age. Overall, this meta-theme is made up of three themes and five sub-themes which cover a range of dispositions embodied by Pakistani MBA students (see supplementary table, i.e. Table A on page 206, for a roadmap of themes). For example, the *genderization* of the habitus through the inculcation of gendered dispositions emerges as a significant finding in the analysis of participants' accounts. Overall, this chapter illuminates MBA participants' *predisposed dispositions* (dispositions embodied as result of upbringing), as embodied schemes of perception, giving the reader a sense of participants' place, i.e. their cultural context, through the three themes and their sub-themes discussed below:

## 7.2. Theme I - A Culture of Reverence

“For me, I respect my elders, as elders are the ones who have experience and seen the world [...] and I see it from their eyes” (*Ibrahim, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

In this theme, I discuss families as sites for transferring culture, through *collective* and *constructive principles*, and familial practice to authorize cultural arbitraries to facilitate the embodiment of dispositions (Bourdieu, 1989). Although, Bourdieu was unable to pinpoint what a cultural arbitrary was, but provided sufficient explanation of its role in the embodiment process (Sullivan, 2002). A cultural arbitrary, according to Bourdieu, is bestowed with ‘pedagogic authority’ to make possible the perpetuation of culture, through its agency, within the lives of individuals in a society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990: p.54).

‘In any given social formation the legitimate pedagogic action, i.e. the pedagogic action endowed with the dominant legitimacy, is nothing other than the arbitrary imposition of the dominant cultural arbitrary insofar as it is misrecognized in its objective truth as the dominant pedagogic action and the imposition of the dominant culture.’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: p. 22)

Given the excerpt above, Bourdieu positions a cultural arbitrary as a pedagogic expedient, similar to Bernstein’s (1996) *pedagogic device*, to transmit culture. Bourdieu further argues that the pedagogic action is in fact an agency of power given to denizens of social positions in society which regulate cultural transmission (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Thus the relationship between an MBA participant and a cultural arbitrary is one of power and dominance, in which the participant is receptive to the dominant. This relationship, as noted by Bourdieu, can be perceived through a:

‘[...] theory of pedagogic action [which] distinguishes between the arbitrariness of the imposition and the arbitrariness of the content imposed, only so as to bring out the sociological implications of the relationship between two logical fictions, namely a pure power relationship’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: p.9)

The position of an arbitrary within society is based on its goodwill, status and knowledge of culture (Jenkins, 1992: p.93). An arbitrary is also a product of the same culture, which they are imparting, and are socialized through cultural sources which take ‘different forms depending on the degree of familiarity with legitimate culture, that is, on social origin and the associated mode of cultural acquisition’ (Bourdieu 1984: p.245). It means that in the case of Pakistani MBA students, their cultural arbitrariness are in fact the product of the same culture in which they live. The findings further suggest that the dispositions inculcated by these arbitrariness tend to assimilate differences, based on power-position. Their authority is then taken for granted as a matter of ‘respect’ for their goodwill in society (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984). As Jenkins (1992) suggest, within MBA participants, ‘this cultural goodwill manifests itself as a ‘cultural docility’, a sense of ‘unworthiness’, [and] a ‘reverence’ for Culture’ (p.93).

The MBA participants depicted various dispositions that exhibited the role of cultural arbitrariness in amplifying their cultural habituation. However, I present here Ahmed’s brief account who indicates how cultural arbitrariness shaped his habitus during his formative years. My choice of Ahmed’s account here is to provide a holistic picture of at least one MBA participant to demonstrate their formative upbringing. Also, Ahmed was forthcoming about his early-age influences and as a matter of fact was trying to prove how he was able to deviate from his earlier influences to pursue a totally different academic path. His responses detailed below are collected from a conversation between Ahmed and me on his *formative influences prior to joining the MBA and what brought him to undertake an MBA?* During his recollection, he expressed how his father, a local artist, madrassah, and school acted as cultural arbitrariness in endowing him with certain dispositions towards learning. Ahmed recalls being reared by his father and lived in the outskirts of Islamabad. Although he

considered his father to be less educated, but felt strongly for aesthetics in art and poetry, which he tried adopting later on.

“I remember developing interest in art and poetry. And this was just by watching my father work. He wasn’t all that educated. Although he had a BA [degree] but as compared to others in the village he was better educated. He invested more time in doing art work and poetry and I think this also inspired me to do so.” (Ahmed, EBS, Group II, Interview)

Ahmed describes how his father developed his love for art, as he talks about learning from his guidance. He further talks about how he started schooling at a local private school in his village. He considered this type of education to providing a better base to learn further, but his father than took him out of the school based on a village mind-set and registered him in a *madrassah*, an Islamic seminary. Ahmed did mention this transition being difficult, as it was his father’s will that he become a *Hafiz-e-Quran*<sup>10</sup>. He further describes his experience as:

“I think it was a life-changing experience for me, as coming in from somewhere totally different and going to an entirely different place had a huge impact on me. The environment was completely different. The things which you normally don’t see or associate with the madrassah life, I saw, lived and felt them [...] many of the students there weren’t really educated other than possessing Islamic knowledge [...] I think I was the only one coming in from an English medium background. I was a foreigner to them. They looked down upon me with a bad eye. I had my own opinion which did not fit with that surrounding. [...] I spent almost one and half years at the madrassah. But due to the wrong match of my previous history and all those surroundings I wasn’t able to become a Hafiz-e-Quran. My father was really upset with me. During this time, as I wasn’t a border at the madrassah and my task was only to go in the morning and learn Quran and comeback home, I started spending time with a relative, a local artist. He was a calligrapher. I started learning this skill of Arabic calligraphy [*khushkhati*]. I developed a good knowledge about colours, design and the stroke of my brush became really prominent, I was getting better at that. This wasn’t surprising for me as I was already attracted to arts, by my father’s side of aesthetics which I have inherited, I guess. (Ahmed, EBS, Group II, Interview)

The other two arbitrariness, which have influenced the way Ahmed looks at the world, madrassah and the artist provide us with the understanding of the circumstances in which his habitus was being structured. He also mentioned that despite the difficulties, he was able to move forward with his education. He did mention his failures at the college level, which

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<sup>10</sup> One who memorizes the Holy Quran by heart: a practice encouraged by many in Pakistan

again brought sorrow to his father who was very strict about his education. He further talks about how his father was the primary person to make most of the decisions for him in his life.

“Then I wanted to become an engineer [...] I started my college education late, so wasn’t able to grasp the basics of engineering. The college I went [XX] focused more on self-study, which I wasn’t used to at all. I grew up relying on teachers to tell me everything and I can’t do things on my own [...] I wasn’t able to get good grades to go to a reputed university. [...] again I upset my father. One day I remember driving with him towards town, he turned the car to [YY] university. Growing up I used to fancy studying for an engineering degree there. However, when I asked my father, are you really going to send me here? He scolded me by saying, look at your face and then at this university, kids like you don’t get to go to this university. I was really sad. His words took a lot of toll on me. But then I moved on to do my B.Com degree from [ZZ] Commerce College [...] And finally, I made it to the MBA programme of that very university where my father took me earlier on. Although I wasn’t able to do an engineering degree there, but still managed to get into their MBA programme” (Ahmed, EBS, Group II, Interview)

Ahmed’s conversation with me was not an isolated account of a participant describing his formative influences and the circumstances leading to pursuing an MBA. It is evident his father as a cultural arbitrary possessed the authority of shaping Ahmed’s habitus. The formative influences, mostly fathers or mothers, were accounted in most of the interviews, which demonstrate a tightly knit Pakistani society. Many participants found refuge in some humanly figure like parents, even grandparents or elders (e.g. teachers etc.) to learn from their knowledge and experience.

### ***‘Roohani Baap’: The Paradox of Surrogate Fathers***

This sub-theme throws light on the dispositions transferred by the family through its arbiters, usually in form of *linguistic* and *cultural competence* (Bourdieu, 1973). The ‘family spirit’ endows its members with dispositions, to acquire competence necessary in embodying culture, as inculcated by its arbitrariness (Bourdieu, 1989). Bourdieu (1973) writes that:

“By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with

culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture" (Bourdieu, 1973: p.80)

Bourdieu (1977) suggests that individuals with higher cultural competence are likely to develop a good relationship with teachers at school and do well in their educational endeavours. However, as noted above, the acts of familial nurturing which inculcate values of deference and reverence to possessors of cultural arbiters like teachers, shape student perceptions and attitudes towards learning. This type of culture hinges on rearing obedient individuals who are distanced from independent forms of thinking during their upbringing. These individuals are reared in actual to respect positional authority invested into the arbitrariness. For example, the authority of the family head i.e. father, which is further transmitted to the schoolteacher, is in fact power through which teachers as cultural arbitrariness further discipline individuals. This theme also resonates with what Kumar (2014) writes about *politics of education*. He neatly ties up how rearing self-disciplining individuals is considered significant in the eastern culture through a description of 'school punishment' as negative reinforcement of cultural practice. He writes:

"The practice of giving corporeal punishment to students was an established aspect of teaching. It was securely embedded in the role of the teacher as a father-figure. This association had to do as much with the differentiation of gender roles in the family as with the prevailing concept of learning [...] it had a pervasive meaning that covered all aspects of change expected in a pupil on account of being taught [...]. In this sense, learning [...] included the benefit [pupil] would obtain by being verbally chastised and physically punished by the teacher as a matter of routine. Indeed, learning to be scared of the teacher was a highly valued part of learning, a social ethic that depended on oral knowledge and its transmission from generation to generation. One held the teacher in awe not just because of his knowledge, but on account of more mundane reason of his authority and power ...the concept of learning and the fear of the teacher, acceptance of his role as a father outside one's home was an important part of learning [...]" (Kumar, 2014: p.91)

Kumar (2014) further describes the role of father as an objective authority and mother as affectionate being while the teacher being a proxy for fatherly role outside the school, during the colonial period (pre-1947). Personally speaking, however, in the present day Pakistan, not

a lot has changed in relation to child rearing. As a result, this theme emerged during the analysis of upbringing and agency of arbitrariness in inculcating dispositions, as discussed previously. Within their interviews, the MBA participants, making them key arbiters after parents, as also suggested by Kumar (2014), discussed the conversation around teachers and their role in learning in depth. Many participants acknowledged their role as '*roohani baap*' – spiritual or surrogate fathers. When asked about the *importance of a teacher in the MBA classroom as compared to the role of a facilitator in the action learning sets*, Sarah from group-I and Javid from group-IV replied with the following:

"I think the MBA classroom is different to the action learning set. The focus is more on the teacher there, as they possess more knowledge. We listen to them and try learning from their knowledge. [...] Personally speaking, I take inspiration from my [...] teachers, as their value is also equivalent to our parents" (*Sarah, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

"When it comes to my MBA class rooms, it is somewhat similar to what I have experienced before. Because in MBA class room my main aim is to read what the teacher is teaching. I go home and read it but the thing that is valuable in class is when teachers share their own experiences. Because those experiences help clarify our [...] vision, and how you look at things" (*Javid, WBS, Group IV, Interview*).

Their response seems to be oriented with the preconceived notions about how teachers are so knowledgeable. Moreover, they describe dispositions that have been inculcated at an earlier age, in which they do not find it uncomfortable to rely on the expert's knowledge in the classroom. For example, Ibrahim from group-I went on describe how he respected his MBA teachers who have played a role in educating him throughout his life. He calls them as *roohani baap*, as outside his family they have ensured disciplining him so that he did not astray in his academic life. Elena from group III also expressed her reliance upon teachers as possessors of knowledge and wisdom. Further, she said that, "I am always attuned to whatever the teacher teaches". She goes on:

"If they [teachers] would share their experience, I'll surely learn. I prefer their experience or anything that would be related to the real-world, or especially the management world. We already know what our obvious state is. We don't know much about the world. [...] we also

need to be attentive and ready to what they are sharing if we like it or not. We can't say no to the teacher. We have to accept even if we like it or not. So whatever they are giving then it is up to us how we do it with it". (*Elena, MBS, Group III, Interview*)

Although Elena describes how important the role of a teacher is for her, but she also indicates the authoritative position of the teacher by suggesting that 'we can't say no to the teacher'. A teacher's authority is described more explicitly by Jasmine a member of the same group, who suggested that:

"[The MBA] classroom is different sort of an environment in which things like that relate to your subject are usually talked about by the teacher, like how you are to go about doing things [...] your teacher tells you that [...] Although that is not bad at all, but there is a pressure of teacher in class, many people can't talk of what they are feeling or thinking, as it might be perceived wrongly and teacher might insult them, and that too at the MBA level" (*Jasmine, MBS, Group III, Interview*)

The authoritarian perspective to teachers in classroom, as having the power delegated by virtue of their families and society, is critical in orienting MBA participants' ways of learning. These have been reflected during the action learning sets, where participants were keen on the facilitator in describing, explaining and working out student problems, leading to awkward silences, frustration by participants and mixed feelings about the action learning sets. Jasmine's words are really strong where she describes that the teacher can insult students, even at the MBA level. This also demonstrates what Kumar (2014) has written in his account of teacher's as fatherly-figures outside home.

Spencer-Oatey (1997) describes, in a study on teacher-student relationships in high and low power cultures, about how students in the south-east Asian countries have high dependency and a greater power differential. The teachers in students' account, as noted by Spencer-Oatey (1997), were described as demanding, authoritative, knowledgeable and 'fatherly-figures' by the students (p.295). Therefore, from the MBA participants' accounts and how Kumar (2014) describes the teacher-student relation in the sub-continent, also exhibits characteristics of high dependency and power-differential. Also, the term *roohani baap* i.e.

surrogate or spiritual father has gender connotations attached to it. As Kumar (2014) notes father to being an objective authority, creates gender differentiation, the term surrogate **fathers** is in itself a gendered distinction about which sex (i.e. masculinity) is of significance and authority within the learning space – further elaborated throughout the analysis. On another note, this was also evident in my role as a facilitator-cum-researcher working with the MBA students. Participants' openness to talk about their self with a male researcher could mostly be attributed with the status, of a surrogate father, I possessed – a socially acceptable relationship. Many MBA participants considered my status as a **teacher** like facilitator who supported their learning in the action learning sets as there is no concept of a coach within the Pakistani MBA.

### 7.3. Theme II - Embodying Gender: Predisposing a Gendered Habitus

“[T]he gendered nature of habitus is a consequence of the different possibilities that women and men perceive are available to them” (Mickelson, 2003: p.354)

In this theme I explain how gender is socially constructed by Pakistani MBAs, and the basis of their social and cultural perceptions about gender. Gatrell (2008) describes gender as socially constructed phenomena in which individuals' bodies are constructed around social and cultural perceptions. She further indicates that these perceptions do not surface from a body's biological state, but from the 'set of expectations about the body, which are [...] deeply socialized' (ibid. p.27). The positioning of gendered bodies in a social space within their entirety (i.e. social conditions, historicity and relations) produces an explicit cultural habitus (Laberge, 1995). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that the habitus is structured by the twofold nature of 'historicity' i.e. accumulation of history through socialization processes; and intergeneration historicity embodied within cognitive structures (p.139). Gender, according to Bourdieu (1984), is confined within binary symbolic forms of social constructions (e.g. male/female; strong/weak etc.). Gatrell (2008) adds that the entitlement of

a gendered prefix over the body is ‘culturally determined’ (p.27). For example, notions about ‘what women’s bodies and women work *ought* to be and do’ are inherent in the bodily expectations that a society constructs (p.27). The expectations arising out of the binary symbolic classification of gender shapes ‘social agents’ practical knowledge of the social world’ (Laberge, 1995: p. 134). For example, classifications can also be constructed at the behavioural level i.e. Gatrell and Swan (2008) indicate that gender can be perceived on division of labour and work involving predetermined social expectations about men being ‘physically and emotionally’ stronger than women (p.62). This distinction between males and females is also apparent in Bourdieu’s work, in which he states that:

‘all agents in a given social formation share a set of basic perceptual schemes, which receive the beginnings of objectification in the pairs of antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons or objects in their most varied areas of practice’ (Bourdieu, 1984: p.468).

Bourdieu is aware of the ‘symbolic oppositions’ constructed by different cultures and power-differentials to restrict gender within ‘hegemonic relationships of difference’ and also by stereotyping gender into ‘classificatory schemes’ (Laberge, 1995: p.134). Bourdieu (1985) further stresses that these hegemonic relationships give rise to different forms of symbolic power which positions individuals (males and females) into gendered hierarchies. He further visualizes the social world as a symbolic space constituting of objective positions that are constructed on the ‘basis of principles of differentiation’ i.e. distinction (ibid. p.723). The distinction between the powerful and the powerless made through gendered dispositions, are often misrecognized by both males and females (Skeggs, 2005; 1997). The resultant gendered dispositions, in Skeggs (2005) view, are ‘hidden behind the nominal construction of social categories’ and expectations that enable ‘misrecognition of gender’ (p.5). Bourdieu (1985) explains that the acquisition of gendered dispositions occurs through appropriate cultural

pedagogies which deliberately inculcate values that oversee gendered inequalities, by posing it as a given.

As described by Reay (1995), a 'gendered habitus is the incorporation of the existing division of labour between the sexes, a division of labour which, for the most part, is accepted unquestioningly by the majority of men and women' (p.361). Similarly, within findings, there were emerging cases which exhibited instances of engendering a gendered habitus. The participants were asked to talk about their experiences of *socially interacting with the opposite sex and whether they were comfortable in working with them in a group space like action learning*. Given the space in this thesis, I illustrate Khan and Leena's case to provide insight into both male and female gendered habitus, enabling action learning to take account of the different type of *embodied dispositions* participants bring into the sets with respect to gender.

### ***Khan: A Fish Out of Water***

This sub-theme presents an illustrative account of one male-participant, who describes how gender is embodied through social discourse. Action learning's proposal for a socially inclusive pedagogy was challenged when Khan's account was read. Khan, a member of group-II at the EBS, presented himself to belong from a 'backward area', a rural setting situated in the KPK (north-western) province, having strong regional-cultural values, cut-off from the modernised culture of Pakistan (e.g. Islamabad or Karachi's cosmopolitan culture). His description of growing up, schooling and societal interactions depict a segregated upbringing where male and female are distanced from one another.

"I have already told you about my background. It is non-relative to what I'm doing today. It's my first time in co-education. I come from a remote area. My area is backward so there even a man cannot freely talk to women, let alone developing a learning relationship with women in the classroom.... There are culture barriers. You can talk to your cousin but that even in limit. You can't talk to her smiling [...] it's been two years and yet I am not adjusted to this environment and keep struggling. I am happy to do things on my own, but I feel

uncomfortable [...] uncomfortable because growing up we were taught of different stories like a guy did something to a girl, you hear that and you think if that can happen to them then it can happen to me too, if I don't keep my distance or if I did the same thing. It's like a point of no return and I can't go back then. The stories you hear of others that even comes into your mind that study safe" (*Khan, EBS, Group II, Interview*)

Khan described, from where he was, how educational institutions and even households are segregated between males and females. He described females to wearing full veils (i.e. burqa) to cover their bodies and faces and that direct interaction was prohibited in public and even in households. When Khan moved into the business school to pursue an MBA, he described developing psychological problems in a co-educational space and ended up with seeing the school psychologist for advice and academic support. He could not interact with any females or perform class-presentations.

"I remember the first time when I came in the MBA class I was unable to say anything. Even I was reserved with friends too then slowly I tried opening up. Then, we had our first presentation in the very first week. I guess it was of economics, if I could still remember. When I got at the front of the class, the only thing I could say was hello [*assalam – o – alikum*] and that was it. I couldn't say any more after this. I had that pressure of girls and boys sitting in a room listening to me. It was my first time addressing people, especially girls I didn't know of. [...] After that I was so nervous that I asked for water, still I could not say a thing so I went back to my chair and sat". (*Khan, EBS, Group II, Interview*)

He further talked about seeing the school psychologist to help him out with his problems of interacting with people, especially girls. He said that:

"Somebody told me about the psychologist in our university. I went to see her and to talk about my problem. [...] She did work really hard on my problems. As a female, I guess she gave me the confidence to at least interact with females in some way. I also used drugs, someone also told me about this. I then started off with medicine. It did help at the start in releasing some of the pressure. I got a push up from it. I again went to meet the psychologist. One of my teachers made me meet her again. She asked why I was using tablets. I told her the issue, she said it doesn't solve like this through medication" (*Khan, EBS, Group II, Interview*)

It seemed that the cultural change was difficult for Khan, as he struggled to breath. He found himself out of place in the intensive MBA programme of EBS. Khan is a classic example of Pringle's (1998) fish out of water, although he wasn't discriminated for his lack of ability to

work with females, but as Bourdieu puts it his habitus did not match with the MBA field. Khan's avoidance of the opposite sex had been embodied in his upbringing. There was no evidence to state whether any one gender was responsible in marginalizing Khan's participation either in his MBA or the action learning set where he hardly managed to interact with female participants. Khan's gendered habitus in fact played a key role in restricting his involvement with female participants rather than females themselves.

### ***Pedagogising Gender: Leena's 'Family Spirit'***

In this sub-theme, I present an illustrative account of one female-participant, who describes how gender is embodied through familial discourse. The notion of ***pedagogising gender***, as embodied dispositions, is proposed in relation to Bernstein's (1999) idea of ***pedagogising knowledge***, which according to Singh (2002) is helpful in understanding how knowledge is pedagogised to internalize culture. Drawing upon Bourdieu (1977, 1984), Bernstein (1999) explains the social rules inherent in pedagogising of knowledge which is then transmitted to others. Similarly the gendered dispositions, as findings suggest, were prominent in the conversations I had with women participants of the study. Many of the women participants described how difficult it was for them to grow up in a male dominated environment, where they had to sacrifice and concede space for them. Amongst other accounts, Leena's description of her gendered upbringing was interesting as she stood at the junction where many female participants struggled to work their way while interacting with men in the action learning sets. As a forthcoming woman participant, I was curious to explore the reasons of her ability to openly interact with fellow men participants.

Leena, from group-IV, expressed herself as a confidant young woman who was pursuing her dreams by doing an MBA. In her accounts, she conveys an understanding of her gendered identity, which is shaped not only by her interactions with her mother and father, but also

through her familial interaction with her siblings (brothers). Leena's habitus is made up of a dialectical process in which her father (as cultural arbitrary) with positional authority supports her desire for further education. She presents her mother as an entity who has tried to transform her into being a traditional Pakistani female by pedagogising her body and behaviour. Wearing a head veil (dupatta), Leena said that her mother tried 'ordering' her (disciplining) by telling her 'how to do things' because she was a girl. As indicated in other interviews with female participants, the role for nurturing females is delegated to mothers, who themselves possess embodied forms of (gendered) cultural capital (e.g. McCall, 1992).

Also, she attributes her early age development and her father's support to playing a major role in attaining that extra bit of liberty or freedom to interact with others socially. She claims this to be different from many other girls she has seen in her life. She further talks about her familial upbringing as:

"Growing up, my father used to do this [...] I remember he used to tell my mum to let me study what I want to. He said to her to not to force them otherwise they will run away from this [...] having this liberty from my father developed me the way I am" (*Leena, WBS, Group-IV, Interview*)

Furthermore, she indicates that being different was also difficult because of the little liberty she experienced, her mother focused on making her the same as other girls and enforced a type of pedagogic authority to make her like other. She recalls:

"My mum would try to order me and tell me how I have to do things because I am a girl. If I don't do it properly she would always critique me about ... what have you done or why have you done this. She would control me and my actions, but I don't want her to do so. I know how this feels, it is Pakistan it's sort of a trickledown affect here, you know [...] She feels that I should learn to distance myself from others in a way where I am able to preserve my sanctity as a woman" (*Leena, Group-IV: p.24, Interview*)

Despite such pedagogical influences from an early age, Leena managed to find her way to retract herself in a way in which she falls within the broader circle of womanhood and yet

enjoys the liberty to be socially-apt. Her behaviour and dressing, as consulted from the field notes, indicated that she was studying in a private university and hailing from a higher-middle class family wearing a ‘dupatta’ – not a hijab or a scarf, but a veil which covered her hair and forehead. Appearance in fact could’ve been a misjudgement of the ability Leena processed to interact with the opposite gender. In spite of the type of gender distancing exercised by her mother (like pedagogising gender) Leena managed to freely interact with her peers in the learning set.

Moreover, the position of mother in her account is one of a pedagogue who pedagogises gendered differences by socializing her with the cultural practices sanctioned by the culture for women (e.g. knowledge of clothing, dressing, cooking etc.) in Islam. Silva (2005) argues that ‘familiarization guarantees a natural acquisition of dispositions’, an essential pedagogic agency which mothers enact in their roles as cultural arbitraries. Although the role of a mother is stereotypically structured in Pakistani context as a ‘homemaker’, ‘carer’, ‘mother’ etc. but their positioning within the household is not higher than the father. Differentially, her father uses his positional power to overcome her mother’s sanctions for her pursuing an MBA, to which she thinks is a move forward from the domesticated view of women which her mother possesses. Bourdieu (2001) writes about mothers that ‘being assigned to the management of the symbolic capital of the family’ mothers are called upon to transmit culture and transform the young to bear the flag of the culture (Bourdieu, 2001: p.100).

A traditional perspective to her mother’s role could be viewed as one who ‘naturalizes, or [...] masks the permanence of ‘invisible structures’ both in the domestic and in various other fields of the labour [...] in which women [...] are involved’ (Silva, 2005: p.84). Bourdieu theorizes gender in terms of its pedagogic effect that women create over their females to avoid transgression of values inculcated through the intergenerational processes: cultural

transmission of ‘taste, identity, feelings of belonging’ (ibid. p.85). However, Leena’s resistance towards her mother (seen as rebellious by her mother) indicates how she recognizes the cultural politics of disciplining women. McNay (1996) visualizes such indeterminacy as reliant upon conformation of the structure of power relations, as in the case of Leena, her father vetoes her mother’s acts of determinacy. The ability to resist arises from the liberal ways of her father perceiving women (daughter’s) education in Pakistan, which largely is unwelcomed in masses. Again the freedom to exercise the right to education is dialectical, but within the limits of cultural and social values. This does not undermine Leena’s ability to think out of the gendered entrenchments but are unsurpassable (McNay, 1999). Bourdieu neatly summarises this struggle with the following quote:

‘I do not see how relations of domination, whether material or symbolic, could possibly operate without implying, activating resistance. The dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force; in as much as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it’ (Bourdieu, 1992: p.80)

#### 7.4. Theme III - Socialization Matters in the MBA: A Tale of Two Probable *Habitus*

This theme considers *habitus* as a ‘socialized subjectivity’, i.e. self as socially structured, which acts as a repository for social norms or rules that shape schemes of thought and action (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002). Bourdieu notes that, norms generally become ‘deposited in [individuals] in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them’ (Wacquant 2005: p.316). *Habitus* as inculcated involuntarily, shapes practice ‘without any deliberate pursuit of coherence [...] without any conscious concentration’ (Bourdieu, 1984: p. 170). Navarro (2006) proposes that *habitus* as conceived by Bourdieu is developed through social practices leading to the transference of dispositions which are rendered meaningful in its cultural context.

Similarly, this theme decodes a certain cultural understanding conveyed by participants to identify the extent to which MBA participants found action learning practice similar or different to what they have experienced before in their lives e.g. real-life problems, inclusive pedagogy, critical reflection, action-reflection etc. As a result the theme outlines the different types of norm-enforcing dispositions which participants are subject to during upbringing. It suggests two broad sets of dispositions, which were found in Pakistani MBA students. These types were categorized by way of organizing participants' dispositions as ***horizon-expanding*** or ***downward-levelling***. The two dispositional typologies are taken from Coleman's (1988) work suggesting how different cultural upbringing inculcates the two sets of dispositions. The idea is not to reduce participants diverse set of dispositions and differences in two categories, but to present accounts which are suggestive of the tensions between participants from the two spectrums while participating socially interacting with one another. The downward levelling dispositions were a possible challenge to action learning's socially-inclusive philosophy and Revans' (1983) notion of 'comrades in adversity'.

### ***Horizon-Expanding Dispositions***

This sub-theme describes one set of participants' dispositions that were forthcoming in terms of their ability to acknowledge the socially interactive aspects of action learning design and process. I term these dispositions as horizon-expanding. The horizon-expanding dispositions enforce norms through designated institutions e.g. family or schools etc. (Morgan & Sorensen, 1999). These dispositions are broadly categorized as loosely assembled in which there is a degree of flexibility in how cultural norms are imparted and interpreted. Haris, as leading example, illuminates the possibility of a habitus developed in a horizon-expanding culture. Haris was pursuing an MBA at the EBS, East-city Business School. He belonged from the cosmopolitan city of Karachi, and located in the province of Sindh (south). Haris'

case demonstrates a few important things about family-structure and male nurturing in a Pakistani family. Firstly, the family structure involved his father as a role model as well as the leader, which sanctions requests for his children's well-being, finances and educational choices. Secondly, detaching a young male member to a far off place seemed to be an emotional decision. Thirdly, male disciplining by father is an important characteristic of family structures in Pakistan to which fathers play a critical role in shaping their social orientation through rules and regulations (many male participants, except Haron who indicated his mother as playing a key role in his development, referred to their fathers directly or indirectly. Also that gendering is a motherly function that is much focused towards females rather than males). Haris labelled himself as a risk-taking individual, but seemed to indicate the control of his life in the hands of his father even when he was doing an MBA. Haris' experience of his family and his predispositions had allowed him to be one of the active participants in the action learning sets.

When Haris, from group-I, was asked about whether his cultural background affected his ability to participate with others (both male and female) on the action learning programme, he talked about how he had been brought-up in a city culture.

“Personally, speaking I felt very comfortable working with both male and female colleagues in the group, it doesn't makes a difference for me because maybe my brought up is of that sort. But overall if you say this problem did exist in the group” (*Haris, EBS, Group-I*)

Another group member, Ibrahim also responded on similar lines, suggesting that his background was capable enough to allow him to interact freely with other set members.

“I treat [both genders] the same way. I think it's more to do with what I have been taught so far. I try understanding both as humans and as people as part of our society. Taking them differently or considering them differently wouldn't do much in a learning environment. When I have to learn then those boundaries need to be erased. However, what does happen in reality is we tend to shy away from such situations. We try to run away from any awkward situation and try not putting the opposite gender in such a position as well” (*Ibrahim, EBS, Group-I, Interview*).

This excerpt consists of strong views, which actually focus on expanding rules to ensure gendered differences are *erased* from the learning spaces. Ibrahim, again coming from a city culture of Islamabad and educated in co-educational institutions depicts dispositions that are flexible to accommodate others. Also, Haron, from the same group, whose interview account suggests that his formative development was influential in expanding his dispositions, allowed him to freely interact with both males and females. He said that:

“No, not at all. I did not have any problems in interacting with my colleagues in the action learning sets. I have been raised in an environment which was inclined towards both genders. Initially, I used to be a bit hesitant towards females in particular, but then I have been part of this environment for a very long time and I know I have to work with female students to achieve goals, especially in group projects. Also the type of educational background I have, I have been educated in a co-ed school and college, plus the university is also co-ed” (*Haron, EBS, Group-I, Interview*)

Leena, from group-IV, when asked if she were comfortable in interacting with others, especially men, in the action learning set, she said:

“I think I am different from other girls, because the way I have grown, I had interacted with many boys because I had been the only girl at home. Probably, that’s why I didn’t have a problem with males during discussions [...]” (*Leena, WBS, Group-IV, Interview*)

Here, she talks about how her early-age dispositions which has developed her into a confidant person. She said that she has never experienced problems in interacting with others in the group. Being a woman participant she indicated that it has never been problematic to interact especially with men, as she was used to living with boys. The various accounts, which were placed under this category of dispositions, exhibited similar upbringing as of Haris, where there was an element of gendered interaction earlier on in their life, their schooling in co-educational institutions and liberty from parents proved significant in providing impetus to their interactions with others in the action learning sets.

### **Downward-Levelling Dispositions**

This sub-theme describes the other set of participants who were rather uncomfortable with action learning's inclusive approach. I have termed these dispositions as downward-levelling. A habitus subjected to downward-levelling is differently structured from a horizon-expanding one, as it is more vulnerable towards enforcement of norms (symbolic violence) both inside and outside of designated arbitraries with high level of social surveillance (Morgan & Sorensen, 1999). Khattak's case is interesting in explaining how a downward-levelling culture enforces norms that shape his habitus. In his interview account, he indicated that after schooling, in the village, he was sent off to Peshawar (provincial capital of KPK, north). Khattak described his move to Peshawar for his undergraduate as significant, despite the region-specific values of KPK (e.g. secluded female culture etc.). Growing up he was able to recall that the culture had so much influence on him that he wore local clothes to school and college (i.e. *Shalwar, Kameez*). When someone wore pants-shirt, he was teased to be an English gentleman (i.e. *Englisi Sahibzada* – in local KPK language). He continued that he was brought up in a segregated society (similar to Khan's account earlier) where males and females are kept apart even in schools and occasions of marriage etc. Khattak's move to pursue an MBA in a co-educational institution does not mean an abandonment of his cultural values. Throughout the action learning sets, I wasn't able to find any direct interaction of Khattak with the only female participant in the group i.e. Sarah. He was unable to contribute towards the discussion involving her. Khattak's conformity towards the embodied dispositions demonstrates a high solidarity with his cultural values, which influenced the way he learns.

When Khattak was asked whether he had any reservations in interacting with other members from his action learning set, he replied:

“[...] everybody has their own nature. Some talk a lot some don't, some study a lot some don't and some who can but still don't, like me. Some people talk much and say correct things and some talk less yet they say the correct thing and get praised. It can help you learn but people should speak of things that are relevant they shouldn't say irrelevant things. [...] As I told you earlier, I don't talk much. Actually I have come from a background where I have been asked to keep to myself, I mostly live alone. The time I spend with friends, whenever I feel like talking, then I talk. [...] In the sets when an idea came I spoke, when it didn't occur to me I stayed quiet. I do talk to friends but I don't get personal nor let them get personal with me. When you do they get too personal. Some become close friends, who then come at home. I just don't get personal. You meet people; talk about stuff and that should be it. I open the gate only if I think someone is good enough to be with otherwise I am reserved and mostly stay quiet.

INTERVIEWER: So, was interacting during the action learning sets as similar to being frank with others?

PARTICIPANT: Well, people who we know we were frank with them where as people I don't know we have to give respect to them. Because the way the group was working, it was unusual and awkward. It demanded that you give a lot of respect to others. There was a very fine line between where you got personal and where you leave the space for others. If you would get aggressive, it could be interpreted as being rude or personal with the other person. You don't want people to talk bad about you. And you can't get personal with everyone like there was a girl in the group too” (*Khattak, EBS, Group-I, Interview*)

Khattak's account demonstrates how cultural upbringing creates distance between Revans' (1983) comrades in adversity. Downward-levelling is a challenging aspect which can influence how critical reflection is organized in the sets. During the entire learning set not a single word was spoken between Khattak and Sarah, directly. The ones who managed to engage in direction communication with female participants were again giving out solutions without critically engaging in a reflective dialogue. Khattak was unclear about his interaction with Sarah during the set (the only female in the group). When asked from Haron, who managed to interact freely with Sarah, as to why others did not challenge her, he replied with a culturally known gesture of ‘it’ being inappropriate to put women on the spot, it falls within the domain of ‘disrespect’. The learning setting presented here presents itself as a form of a social space where male and female occupy different positions based on the volume of gendered dispositions accumulated previously. It also indicates how the social order of doing things is prescribed in advance:

‘social order is progressively inscribed in people’s minds’ through ‘cultural products’ including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1986: p.471)

Bourdieu (1986) also argues that such inscription, also evident in the cases of Khan and Khattak, results in the unconscious acceptance of power-relations that result in social inequalities, difference and power hierarchies – especially affecting the dynamics of a learning group. Also that the dispositions acquired previously plays a critical role in shaping participants’ socialized subjectivity, according to the educational, religious or social values incorporated during the early years (ibid.). Therefore, in view of Gaventa (2003), the action learning set is a field, a space of positions, in which participants like Khan and Khattak not only resist the transformation of relations by being silent and avoiding interaction, they are also complacent towards conforming to the pre-existing social order in the learning environment. It can be concluded that participants have experienced ‘power differently depending which field they are in at a given moment’ (ibid. p.6).

## 7.5. Conclusion

This chapter is like an egg-shell: when cracked (analysed) it provides a glimpse of Pakistani MBA students’ habitus. It is a broad representation of their embodied dispositions, which they have internalized through their upbringing as Pakistanis and revealed in their interviews. It also demonstrates how their habitus is predisposed by early life experiences, which do not determine success or failure in their action learning endeavours or in their MBA research projects (being the agenda for action learning); rather, their habitus illustrates their conformity to the underlying *power of culture* and *culture of power*, which suggests that this is a challenging context for enhancing criticality (further explained in chapter 10). The chapter draws upon social, cultural, relational and gendered aspects of their dispositions to explain MBA participants’ habitus – i.e. their embodied sense of place. The chapter brings a

spotlight to bear on the learning dispositions embodied by Pakistani MBA students, which unconsciously mediate habits and predispose individuals to learn in ways which they have internalized. The reflective practice engaged in by these participants to an extent reveals the complexities and challenges of culture. For example, participants exposed to downward-levelling (e.g. Khan and Khattak, as discussed in the illustrative cases) demonstrated greater sensitivity towards predisposed dispositions, as challenging dominant beliefs may affect their MBA development.

In summary, the findings suggest that the MBA students' habitus, being generative in nature, reproduces dispositions which are embodied as the values, beliefs and ideologies of learning in Pakistani culture, and these challenge the pedagogic beliefs of action learning. It is not that the students were unable to reflect, but that their embodied dispositions constantly challenged action learning practices. Their habitus was therefore in a way adjusting to action learning, while their embodied dispositions resulted in their participation being limited. This is further discussed in Chapter 8.

## CHAPTER 8

### The Field of the Uncritical: On the Repercussions of Organizing Reflective Practice

#### 8.1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is twofold: firstly, it examines participants' accounts of organizing and implementing critical reflection; and secondly, it offers key insights into what this process demands from the Pakistani MBA participants. Here I draw upon Bourdieu's notion of field to develop an understanding of the challenges which reflective practice in action learning might face. Also, according to Vince (2002), reflective practice has the tendency to engage with issues of power and politics, especially when mobilized through action learning (p.63-64). This chapter therefore considers two key constraints on reflective practice in action learning for Pakistani MBA students: *a contested view of Revans' (1983) pedagogy, i.e. 'comrades in adversity'*; and *contradictions in questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions embodied as learning beliefs* by these MBA students. The analytical discussion further builds on these tensions to capture the complexities involved in transgressing these (unquestionable) learning norms. In other words, it is an attempt to understand the tensions between MBA participants' embodied dispositions to learning (discussed in the previous chapter) and the '*competing discourses*' brought about by action learning's reflective practice (see Bourdieu, 1977: p. 168). In this, the chapter addresses the sub-question: 'what does MBA students' experience of organizing reflection informs about action learning's practice in the Pakistani context?'

The findings in this chapter are discussed under the meta-theme, *the universe of the uncritical*, which outlines the tensions between the doxic beliefs of the MBA participants, internalized as the '*sense of limits*', and the '*competing discourses*' brought about by action

learning. It describes the altercation between MBA participants' predispositions to learning and those of reflective practice, thus highlighting the emotional discomforts associated with questioning insight (Q). The chapter discusses three themes and their sub-themes (see supplementary table, i.e. Table A on page 206, for a roadmap of themes): the first sheds light on participants' cautious attitude towards preserving their relationships during the action learning process. This theme leads to the emergence of two sub-themes relating to participants' psychological and political practices of collectively organizing reflection. The second has to do with the process of organizing reflection and the outcomes of such emancipative efforts. This theme also comprises two sub-themes, which highlight participants' practices for negotiating with reflection and reflective practice. Finally, the third theme and its sub-theme describe the possible repercussions involved in introducing critical pedagogy within Pakistani MBA students' traditionalistic culture.

The themes presented are in fact a reflection of the Pakistani culture of management education, which distances itself from critical thought and practice by focusing on more functionalist and technicist notions of managerial practice (Khan, 2006). The findings discussed do not determine Pakistani MBA students' *habitus*, but rather raise questions about the possibility of a *critical habitus* that is reflexive enough to question the taken-for-granted. On the same lines, Bourdieu has also been critiqued for his overly deterministic accounts of *habitus*, i.e. as something incapable of social change<sup>11</sup> (Decoteau, 2015: p.2), but in reality he does not rule out the possibility of a conscious act, i.e. reflexivity<sup>12</sup> (Wacquant, 1989: p.45).

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<sup>11</sup> Archer (2010) criticizes *habitus* and its determinant character by alluding to its preadapted structure which restricts the way in which Bourdieu theorizes reflexivity. She further argues that Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* is 'semi-conscious' and 'quasi-automatic', reducing the significance of historicity and social variability (Archer, 2007: p.39)

<sup>12</sup> In his earlier work, Bourdieu (1977) conceived *habitus* as a pre-reflective (unconscious) scheme of dispositions, which he later modified to suggest, that in 'times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed '[consciousness]' often appears to take over', but the action still remains a product of *habitus* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.131).

Despite criticism, Bourdieu (2007) argues for achieving a *sense of reflexivity* by placing the individual at the intersection of many dynamic fields, e.g. gender, power, social, etc. (McNay, 1999).

## 8.2. Theme I - Critical Reflection: A Mixed Bag of Feelings

“I got really nervous when people challenged me by asking questions. I felt overwhelmed. I wanted everyone to stop. Honestly, I just wanted to run away” (*Sarah, EBS, Group I*)

This theme draws upon interview and set-meeting accounts of MBA participants, which suggests that they found it difficult to put into practice the process of *critical reflection*. In particular, the theme discusses the power of reflection and questioning insight in unsettling participants' known ways of learning. The interview and set accounts highlight how critical reflection in group settings can be an 'anxiety provoking' experience (Trehan & Rigg, 2005: p.18) generating a *crisis* like situation. A crisis, according to Bourdieu, is an event 'in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted' (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989). Bourdieu further adds that the disruption can occur between embodied beliefs within habitus and the way in which a field is structured, leading to a 'political awakening' – i.e. '[consciousness] which often appears to take over' the habitus (ibid.). Challenging normalized ways of learning through critical reflection provoked a *sense of reflexivity*, thus stimulating emotions (i.e. emotional dispositions) which are a pre-reflexive response to dealing with the *changing* situation (Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore considering critical reflection as a catalyst to provoking emotions provides ample grounds to exploring the underling meaning of participants' feelings: 'be they of anger, confusion, vulnerability, uncertainty, fear, irritation, frustration or warmth' (Trehan & Rigg, 2005: p.18). In other words, their experiences of engaging with critical reflection opens up a possibility for understanding the implications of emotions, i.e. as an anxiety-provoking event (e.g. Trehan &

Rigg, 2005), in shaping participants' *perceptions, actions* and *outcomes* of action learning in the Pakistani MBA.

The findings suggest that critical reflection can often become an emotionally stressful and a painful experience for participants (e.g. Vince & Martin, 1993, Vince, 2002: Trehan & Rigg, 2005). The interview excerpt of Sarah at the beginning of this theme draws parallels with scholars like Vince & Martin (1993) by expressing intense feelings of abandoning the questioning process. Being the only woman participant, in an eight member set, she described the process as 'unexpected'. Already subjected to limited interaction from others (men), the few questions directed at her made her quizzical, in making polite critiques at her MBA project – i.e. limiting the interaction, as she being the only female, to which she mostly responded as 'probably', 'I think so', 'I can try' or ' I don't know'. It also shows that she is not being used to put on the spot as she describes her feelings of uneasiness. Tentatively this might be interpreted as to how the critical reflection process reverses the social dynamics in a culture where questioning women directly by men is a rare occasion. Critical reflection is presented as an anxiety-provoking event in this theme to describe participants' emotionally displaced accounts of engaging with critical modes of inquiry in the group. These emotionally displaced accounts of participants are presented in two sub-themes which discuss participants' feelings of participating in organizing critical reflection i.e. the fear of reflection; dissonance and deflection.

### ***The Fear of Reflection***

In this sub-theme, the findings describe post-reflective experiences that revolve around how participants' felt after engaging with reflection. The accounts reflect an emotionally laden language, which conveys participants' struggle to participate actively. For example Rozie, a member of the action learning set at the West-city Business School, had joined the group to

address problems regarding her final year MBA research project. At the second meeting of the action learning set Rozie presented her problem of accessing organizations for data collection. The problem she presented was twofold: first it was related to the issue of a female MBA student researcher accessing a cement factory locally on her own; second, the study was a qualitative one in which she wanted to conduct face-face interviews with male factory workers at their worksite. Below I include a set illustration, followed by her interview excerpt, to suggest how she presents her problem at a set meeting:

#### **ACTION LEARNING SET ILLUSTRATION**

##### **A hint of fragility**

“At the beginning I felt very confident for instance what I was doing is one of the difficult types of final year projects at the university. When this is over, I have been offered to convert this into a case study, which I am going to write with Dr. [XYZ] and this is going to be published and used by academics in Pakistan. You see the thing is that in Pakistan local case studies are rarely published what we do is we refer to Harvard. So doing a qualitative case study on our local organizations can inform on what is actually happening in our own country. However, it later dawned on me how I would be able to do this type of a research project. How would I access this [Cement] factory? Who do I refer to? I hardly think there would be any females working there. Also going alone and interviewing them, I am not sure if that is an entirely a great idea, and that too on the factory floors. Well, I know this one person which I got hold of through Dr. [XYZ], let’s see what he has to say [...] but I don’t know how to go about this [...]” (Rozie, WBS, Group – IV Set Meeting 21-March, 2014)

Despite Rozie’s openness in the action learning set (as shown in the excerpt above), what cannot be acknowledged from the extract above is the difficulty for presenting a problem which she in normal circumstances would not have shared with a group of colleagues (men and women both). However, there is a lack of clarity in the problem statement and by the words chosen to explain the issue points towards participants, especially men in not fully grasping her situation. When asked about how she felt after the critical reflection process during my interview with her later, Rozie did express that she found her voice to be fading at times after she went through the reflective process. In addition, she spoke of how the reflective process was like a mirror, exposing her as a female researcher in the group. She

commented by saying, ‘it [reflection] makes me realize who I am and where I am’. Rozie’s account exemplifies how she was frightful of *provoking self-exposure* in terms of her limitations as female. She does not however seem to be saying this exposes her femininity to the rest of the group, but in my opinion she curbs this to highlight the difficulties of a woman studying male dominant institutions.

“I am really afraid of reflecting, because when I reflect I realize how fragile I am [...]. When I was being asked to share my opinion to the group and afterwards listening to them, I felt as if I am doing something wrong” (*Rozie, WBS, Group IV, Interview*)

Rozie’s interview showed the depth of her emotions when she recognizes how ‘fragile’ she is, referring to herself, which acts as a limiting factor in her researching journey. It also exhibits concerns about how a critical reflection process can expose conditions which can make the unconscious become conscious - i.e. her going alone in doing research in a masculine environment highlighted through words like: ‘felt as if I am doing something wrong’. Pandeli (2015) talks about the role gender plays for female researcher in either ‘opening doors’ or ‘shutting them out’ as masculine ‘egos’ are at ‘play’ in male dominant institutions (p.2). However, the reflection process seems to have inculcated a sense of low morale by the end of it which is marked by her words saying ‘wanting to do more, but end up doing less’. Although it was unclear during my analysis, whether she meant wanting to do more in her research or in the action learning set.

However, the fear of exposure was not limited to the individual self. In another example, I demonstrate how critical reflection can lead to the exposure of the self to others. Javid, who was pursuing a full time MBA at the WBS, talked about how he felt about the critical reflection process – especially the questioning insight. In my interview with him, he stated that it was difficult for him to expose himself to others in terms of his *naivety*. He felt stressed in doing so. Although he was quite enthusiastic about excelling in his MBA project

but felt incapable in adjusting to the questioning insight. When asked how he felt about the questioning insight, he exhibited a similar sense of fragility as did Rozie, by saying that:

“What happens in such a learning situation is that you are afraid of other people’s behaviour because you know usually they laugh at you sometimes and at your questions if you ask just like that. Then you start to think that what they might think about you? Most of the time you know how they are going to think [...] but what happens is quite relevant to the classroom sometimes you don’t know what mistakes you did and students laugh. Usually what happens is when some student makes some ridiculous question or very basic level question then this is a natural response for some kind of students, they laugh” (Javid, WBS, Group IV, Interview)

Javid describes what seems to be the fear of *exposure of ignorance*. The MBA environment, which Javid talks about, is harsh where there is no place, for what Javid feels as he is afraid of raising a question, which could in fact work against him and can undermine his intellectual position in the group. The unconscious reaction here is to avoid asking questions. The learning set having the MBA participants, mimics classroom dynamics, which play in Javid’s mind and stop him from actively participating in the ongoing discussion due to the fear of being mocked or laughed at. The cultural dynamics in place for asking questions seem evident that in the classroom questions are only meant for those who can raise objective but intellectually challenging points. This was a common fear (i.e. laughed at) in many transcripts, especially in the earlier meetings of action learning set and the transition to abandoning these fears was very slow. Thus, exposure caused by reflection provoked anxiety within participants during sharing and communicating ideas and problems, making them likely to find it hard to critically reflect.

Similarly, the following data extract is from my interview with Rameez who relocated to WBS from an entirely different cultural background. In his interview, he talks about how *exposure of vulnerability* to others’ behaviour, fearful of others’ critique, stopped him from participating in the critical reflection process. He said that:

“Basically it happened to me as if I were placed in an environment that was full of different people. You are there with them and sometimes you feel difficult in talking to them. [...] when I was in there, I felt if I would further interact with them they would come against me, like seeing others I thought they would just keep on coming back to me. What if they might not stop there and what if they continued after the session. This restricted me in that learning environment. Like in classrooms some students have a study group made and they are totally active in discussing with the teacher. So if some other student from outside of their group gets an idea he gets restricted because of them. Similarly, I kept thinking that I might say wrong so I would be badly criticised” (*Rameez, WBS, Group IV, Interview*)

Rameez's fragmented words raise a critical point about the politics involved in the process of critical reflection. He expresses his fears by saying that there were different people in the group and he felt vulnerable in exposing himself in front of them. This exposure is different from what Javid describes above, as Rameez feels vulnerable to others' critique who might degrade his ideas by criticising him. He also recalls similar dynamics within the MBA classroom where group of students who are already active with the teacher, holding a prominent position with the teacher, might feel threatened if someone from outside transgresses their space.

### ***Dissonance***

This sub-theme describes how the process of reflection triggers thoughts, which move deep-seated beliefs, and tries transforming the way we see the world around us (Trehan & Rigg, 2005; Reynolds, 1998). This however is not a straightforward process. It involves elicitation of complex emotions, which at times are combined with 'pain and pleasure' (Trehan & Rigg, 2005: p.20). Within findings two emotional practices were identified because of experiencing questioning insight i.e. *dissonance* and *deflection*.

*Dissonance*, a feeling of discomfort in grasping the nature of task, was noticeable within this study as the critical reflection process often provoked the affective dimensions of MBA participants who displayed, within their interview accounts, mixed feelings of frustration accompanied by events of pleasure (McGill & Brockbank, 2004). Dissonance led to anxiety

and disorientation as the critical reflection process unfolds provoking sensation of painfulness and pleasure (Reynolds, 1999a; Vince & Reynolds, 2004). Trehan and Rigg (2005) also note that dissonance has the tendency of pulling together feelings of ‘uncertainty and fear’ alongside ‘elation’ resulting into a ‘sense of empowerment’ (p.20). The interview account presented below talks about dissonance creating distance, from my interview conversation with Ibrahim a full time MBA student at the EBS, which demonstrates the changing emotions as the process of critical reflection unfolded. The excerpt outlines his initial reaction towards the critical reflection activity:

“[...] asking questions was not easy. It’s not what I am used to doing. [...] it was like appraising which thoughts to talk about and which ones to leave and again it was complicated. The questions forced me to think from other perspectives as well (*Ibrahim, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

Here Ibrahim talks about his difficulty with the questioning insight, i.e. being a difficult thing to do, given that he has not been used to either questioning or being questioned at. Further, the questioning insight involved a process involving evaluation of thoughts. He struggles to find words to give shape to the critical reflection process but does manage to suggest that it forced him to think out of the box. He goes to talk about how he negotiated with the process, knowing that he has not been able to work with this technique before:

“When it came to questioning others, I tried my best to question them according to my own problems and adjusting them as to what I thought about things. But sometimes I stuck to my points thinking they were right, like about marketing research. But I suppose it’s always not like that. When things got a bit intense I had to concede for other opinions and ideas. This was again a very difficult process to get used to. If thinking more about it actually made it difficult at times to trust yourself and when you were right or wrong”. (*Ibrahim, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

This interview excerpt highlights the procedure, which Ibrahim adapted to in trying to question others. He suggests that his way of negotiating was to think about his own problems and posing questions around it. But goes on to suggest that, whether it being right or wrong,

he had to *concede* at times in favour of other people and their thoughts without properly examining them. This demonstrates the politics of the questioning process where relationships between people (good or bad) can impose limitation on the way one accepts opinions without making things intense or worse. Taking their words, despite being stuck to his own point (tightly held beliefs) was again difficult for him. However, eventually all the thoughts gathered from the process creates a sense of doubt within him. This uneasiness comes as part of the critical reflection process where the individual space is transgressed by public space and thoughts are either questioned or accepted as the process continues. It can create an element of self-doubt, especially with individuals who are not used to methods of critical reflection (Hagen et al., 2003). When he was asked to talk about how he felt when others questioned him, he said:

“I should tell you frankly that some question were stupid [...]. Things like these make me angry. I think people who are at this level of study like the MBA need to understand the type of question they are asking or trying to answer [...]. I also think people compromise their position in the set by asking stupid questions. One of the things I think that people forgot during the sets was the goal of the set, or why were they working together in the set, what was their reason for being there. It wasn’t to mock others, but to learn” (*Ibrahim, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

The tone in this excerpt exhibits dissonance, i.e. frustration towards the types of questions raised at Ibrahim. Considering the fact that participants felt difficulty in both questioning and responding to questions, Ibrahim’s reactions were intense. Earlier he talked about sticking to his viewpoint and during this he felt difficulty in accepting the types of questions people asked. Another perspective to this outburst was also related to the types of questions others posed at his colleague (MBA friend) Haris, but he did not raise these concerns in the group. Also, Ibrahim strongly stated that this was not an opportunity to mock people, but to learn. With these emotions Ibrahim felt uneasiness in responding to these questions and showed how he felt about how some of the questions were not up his level, forgoing his own words stated earlier that, “I tried my best to question them according to my own problems and

adjusting them” and without examining their credibility. However, later on in his interview he did confess that critical reflection made him think about himself and his MBA project in these words:

“So while I came to terms with this activity and when was presenting and constructing my thoughts, suddenly there was something which just came to my mind while I was talking and trying to describe to others [...]. I never experienced in how one talks about their practices intellectually and can open up while talking to someone else at the same time, it was like being an observer to what I was saying. I cannot explain it properly, but again as people questioned my thoughts, I thought more. It was like never ending processes of thoughts which were rushing into my mind”. (*Ibrahim, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

Examining these interview excerpts suggests that the practice of critical reflection tends to expose conditions, which are hidden underneath the many layers of doxa. The practice questions the taken-for-granted assumptions that were once deemed undisputable (Reynolds, 1999a; Bourdieu, 1977). The intent behind this approach is generally to help individuals ‘rethink about who they were and/or what they are doing with their lives’ (Trehan & Rigg, 2005: p.20) to which Ibrahim felt uncomfortable. The practice of critical reflection creates conditions, which can be stressful and painful for individuals experiencing its transformational powers (*ibid.*). Later on Ibrahim’s realization about the critical reflection, process indicates dissonance in his accounts: ‘a feeling of unease that occurs when someone evaluates an emotional experience as a threat to [their embodied beliefs]’ but eventually sees the bright side of questioning insight (Jansz & Timmers, 2002: p.79).

### **8.3. Theme II - Question with Caution: Fragile Relationships**

The aim of this theme is to shed light on why emotions and feelings, causing dissonance and deflection, result in the *aversion of questioning insight to maintain group relations* during the process of organizing reflection. In particular, the findings highlight the political aspect underpinning the use of questioning, by MBA participants in their learning sets, for generating critical engagement and reflective insight. As noted in Chapter 3 (literature review

on action learning), Revans (1980) utilizes questioning insight as a key design element in promoting critical reflection amongst what he calls ‘comrades in adversity’. He writes that:

‘Action learning obliges each to look critically at his own experience, dragging it out for the inspection of his colleagues [...] he will constantly be called upon to explain why he is following the course of action he has chosen [...] and will [...] see that the only other persons who can help him are his colleagues, those comrades in adversity who also look to him for help’ (Revans 1980: p. 256-257)

Revans conception of questioning insight, as a dialectical process of critical reflection, provides a twofold perspective to the findings on critical reflection in action learning groups: first, *it invites others (group members) to cross-examine an individual’s experience*; and the second, *it involves the individual to help others (group members) by repeating the same process*. The critical reflection process, as noted previously, stimulates emotions and feelings within individuals who are part of the process (Trehan & Rigg, 2005). Critical reflection eliciting emotions within participants is a key determinant of their heightened sensitivity: eliciting a defensive mechanism, provoking a sense of cautiousness, which could possibly, restrain their thinking (Vince, 2002). The key finding related to using questioning insight, as illustrated in this theme, suggests participants’ attempts to suppress their feelings in the learning process thereby neutralizing interactions to maintain their relationships and position in the group i.e. demise of the emotional-self from the conversation. However, the main challenge in developing this theme was to understand not only what the MBA participants feel about the questioning process but also from what perspective they aim to approach it. Considering the political aspect to questioning in Pakistani learning culture, I was afraid whether the participants would only be able to provide surface insight without reaching the depths of their experience about critical reflection.

Drawing on the above, this theme digs deeper into how MBA participants’ reflections of how they felt while engaging in critical practice (questioning and reflection). However, I remain

aware of what Bourdieu (1990) suggests, that ‘as soon as [one] reflects on his practice [...] the agent loses any chance of expressing the truth of his practice, and especially the truth of the practical relation to the practice’ (p.91) – especially from a cultural perspective. This is akin to Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) analogy about ‘asking a fish, if they could speak, to describe the water in which they swim’ (p.20). Therefore, a critical perspective to understanding participants’ perspective was adapted which ‘foregrounds the social, political and cultural context in which [participants’] emotions are constituted’ (Chubbuk & Zembylas, 2008: p.6). This was mainly accomplished by understanding participants’ *cultural prowessness* to working with questioning insight: *situating action learning sets within their cultural and social milieu; foregrounding group relationships and exemplifying how culture conditions participants’ learning practices.*

As a result two key findings emerged which outlined participants’ predispositions to handling a challenging situation during the organization of critical reflective insight. First, is *the aversion of uncertainty* associated with questioning participants’ assumptions was believed to be ‘the most arduous of all the steps in the reflection process, because identifying and questioning assumptions goes against the [cultural] grain’ (Hammer & Stanton, 1997: p.296 cited in Vince, 2002: p. 67) of Pakistani MBA. Second, is the questioning insight *exposes the fragility of relationships*; and *it influenced their interpersonal process* in the action learning sets (Vince, 2002; Reynolds, 2011). These findings add to furthering the debate on the politics of organizing reflection: i.e. collective questioning and reflective insight in action learning sets from a cultural perspective (e.g. Reynolds 1998; Brookfield, 1991; Vince, 2004 etc.). These are further explained in the following sub-themes:

### Avoiding Uncertainty

In this sub-theme, I explain participants' way of negotiating with the tensions created by organizing reflective insight. Looking at my field notes from the action learning sets, reflection played a key role in exposing group relations which further led to the emergence of '*strategic politics*': interactions having cultural and historical significance that 'emerge from and express the nature of the relatedness between individuals, groups and other collectives' (Vince, 2004a: p.66). The strategies deployed by participants, to alleviate the emotional discomfort caused by questioning insight, categorized by Vince and Martin (1993: p.210), broadly fell under their 'willing ignorance' to avoid situations which exposes power-relations between them. In this, the MBA participants found it difficult to pose questions, which challenged their ideas about their research work practices (i.e. MBA project). The uneasiness of participants, as reflected in one of my initial reactions, highlights not only their difficulty in understanding the questioning insight but their ability to avoid being put in a position, which demands using it. A post-set reflective comment, after my second meeting at the East-city Business School (EBS), in my field journal reads as:

"[...] the participants seem uncertain about how this questioning insight combined with intermittent phases of reflection works. Their disjointed questions, awkwardly long pauses and their struggle to organize their ideas could be associated with their difficulty in coming to terms with this design element. However, I think this is mainly because when I explained critical reflection, unfortunately, it could not be neatly translated into language which they are accustomed to. I think their quizzical looks were mostly anticipated but their **avoidance** of not being put in a position either to be asked a question or pose one is something that I hadn't really thought of entirely [...]" (Facilitator's Post-Set Reflection, Meeting 2: March 2014)

An explanation to the reflection above could be found in Simpson et al. (2000) who suggest that the *overpowering* experience of working with the 'unknown' usually results in the disengagement from the process of learning. They further note that the limiting factor in learning could be a cause of 'uncertainty': 'which is stimulated by facing the experience of not-knowing' (p. 486). The uncertainty associated with the critical reflection process could

often be painful and disorienting as it has tendency to ‘touch participants’ emotions’ (Trehan & Rigg, 2005: p.18). An intensive approach such as critical reflection has the possibility of becoming challenging for participants, as Vince (2008) suggests, as it questions their tightly held beliefs and sheds light on power-relations. Avoiding situations of discomfort and stress, the participants seemed to have strategically posed questions, which could be categorized as ‘*red herrings*’ (Phillips, 2011: p.93).

When prompted by the facilitator to join in discussions, some participants resorted to using these red herrings, i.e. vaguely worded questions or statements, which detracted from challenging beliefs. Following are some examples of red herrings that participants from West-city Business School employed during their second learning-set-meeting, once after Maria had presented her problem: the inability to access literature from her home network. The participants asked her:

- “How are you doing your literature review right now?”
- “How will you defend your project if you aren’t able to access?”
- “What value does the literature add to you and your work?”
- “What do you think about it?
- “How do you think about using university resources?”
- “Have you thought of purchasing memberships to these databases?”
- “Have you thought about time management”

These questions were mostly aimed at exploring the dimensions of the problem rather than moving towards any specific action plan for dealing with the problem. These questions took a lot out of the set discussion time, leaving Maria wondering by the end of the session whether she saw any direction in approaching the accessibility issue. When Maria was asked, during

her interview, whether the discussion was helpful, she responded by saying ‘let’s say I will have to use my own imagination to solve this one’. She further added that:

“[...] there was this guy I probably shouldn’t say it but literally all through he tried picking issues which were out of nowhere [...]. I thought there were some really good ones as well but this one guy, I am sure you might know him but I won’t call out his name, I used to lose track of what he would say because he touched upon things which were not even issues, but he kept talking and talking so it used to make me drowsy and a couple of times I just phased out” (*Maria, MBS, Group III, Interview*)

Although the aforementioned questions do seem as if they were posed with intent by other participants, but it rather felt as if they were lacking emotional value – as confirmed by Maria in her interview account. Such type of questions posed at many instances in all the participating groups alerted me to the possibility of avoiding any direct confrontation amongst participants. It also highlighted the likelihood of imposing personal views to a discussion or avoiding power-relations between individuals, which made them uneasy (Phillips, 2011). This also exhibits how hidden power between participants could operate at different levels, e.g. personal interests, ignorance etc., with the potential of undermining the value of learning.

Brown (1994) reaffirms that students tend to avoid being placed in a difficult (uncertain) situation. In his study focusing on language learning in different cultures, he uses Hofstedian cultural dimensions to suggest that:

‘the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, situations which they therefore try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behaviour and a belief in absolute truths’ (Hofstede, 1986: p.307-308 cited in Brown, 1994: p. 175)

This feeling of avoiding the uncertainty of critical engagement is evident in Haron’s, a participant from group-I at the EBS who was pursuing his MBA project within Islamic banking, interview. He suggested that in order to maintain his relationship with others and the

decorum of the learning environment he made sure that his questions were focused on taking the ‘middle route’ – a way resonated in Brown’s study (1994):

“It is important to know from where others are coming [...] so when someone tried asking questions I always took the middle route – neither being too formal nor being informal like adopting a more diplomatic view of the situation and if it became aggressive tried diffusing the situation. It’s more like to proceed further without disrupting the environment [...] yeah and that’s important too” (*Haron, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

This maintenance of neutrality within relationships is also reciprocated in the following interview excerpt taken from my conversation with Kamran, a participant from the EBS group II pursuing a full time MBA, who comment about how to act and behave in such a discomfiting situation like critical reflection:

“You have to maintain a professional relation with others so in that you can have an edge over them. At least this is what the MBA has taught me, to be competitive. But it’s not negative you know [...] edge in a sense that you are able to handle such pressurizing situation [...] or how you are going to cope with it” (*Kamran, EBS, Group II, Interview*)

What Kamran thinks is noted by Gabriel and Griffiths (2002) suggesting that students in business schools are predisposed to learning approaches which promote ‘defensive attitudes, conservatism and [aversion] of all new ideas as potentially threatening and subversive’ (p.125). As demonstrated in chapter 7, the way in which the Pakistani MBA participants act and behave are dispositions which they have internalized within their habitus through familial and institutional socializations (e.g. social experiences at home and schools, expectations imposed by society, patterns of interaction etc.). Holliday (1994) adds that students’ expectations of how they act and behave are usually influenced by what they have experienced in other learning environments. He further adds that traditions of learning and teaching are inculcated within participants through intergenerational practices practised within institutions.

### **Sensitivity - 'Words Carry Weights'**

This sub-theme demonstrates participants' culturally defined ways of sensing discomfort and negotiating within learning. This is another aspect of how questioning insight affects group relationships was related to the *ethos*<sup>13</sup> of the questioning practice in the Pakistani MBA culture. This is evident from a statement which Haris makes in his interview about the use of questioning insight in his group:

“[...] to be honest at first it caught me off-guard and seemed a bit disrespectful, because others who are with you at the same level try challenging you and you are not used to it and then you start thinking really hard and listening to what people have to say [...].but what is important is that you need to make a very quick judgment about the other asking you a question, about their motivation and interest level within your problem and to see or judge again that the other might be facing a similar situation” (*Haris, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

What Haris' interview account does is suggest a social imperative that since questioning insight is not the norm and makes people uncomfortable, i.e. *feeling disrespectful*, it is important to keep in view how others are trying to use this approach. There are social implications to the ways in which questioning insight could be interpreted: for example the way people pose questions, a “*quick judgement*” needs to be made about when the question is received how one feels about it before responding i.e. how did it originate like circumstances, who asked, the history behind relations etc. Haris confirmed these in his interview script (further explained in chapter 9). This was also noticeable in Haron's interview excerpt, above, who makes a similar comment about needing to know from where “*others are coming*”.

The ethos surrounding the questioning process was believed to have been the most important element in how this process unfolded for participants. One of the implications of the questioning process was addressing members of the opposite sex. The sense of cautiousness

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<sup>13</sup> I use the term ethos instead of ethics, as ethos is more convenient in addressing the underlying beliefs about the questioning process which also covers ethics as part of its philosophy.

expressed by Zayn, a member of the WBS group IV pursuing a full time MBA, conveys the depth of how what is spoken and how it is spoken can affect group relationships between genders. In his interview, he informed that it is not easy to question women in the set even in private institutions, like WBS, which are considered non-conservative in their culture i.e. open to people from liberal and higher class of society. When asked why it was difficult to address the women in the set, he said that:

“We’re living in an Islamic culture and there are some regulations on the base of gender. We need to be very careful while talking to a female. When talking to a male, we can talk as we like, for example can be challenging or aggressive, but when talking to a female we need to follow certain guidelines, obligations and rules so, as such they [set members] were also my [MBA] class fellows but still there were some unspoken limitations that we needed to be careful about as to what and how we are talking to them” (Zayn, WBS, *Group I, Interview*).

Also, the implications of questioning and challenging process are not limited to an individual’s existence or beliefs but extend itself to the entire system of beliefs upon which their culture hinges. The role which religion plays does seem to have been part of many interview conversations, which emphasized caution to be taken while addressing members of the opposite gender. Another implication of the questioning process is the defensiveness arising from the emotionally charged character of participants, who in their own ways address their feelings e.g. fear, uncertainty, frustration etc. When emotions are running high, Haris suggests that it was essential to understand that “words carry weight”, having the possibility of being misunderstood, causing issues which can lead to confrontation. He said that:

“It happened quite a lot that people didn’t like what I had to say, well there were friends they don’t mind but tell you later that they didn’t like this or that, but there were ones who do mind. In my opinion, questioning is related to words and once those words come out of your mouth or said they cannot be taken back. So the body is connected to your mind and I think there’s a mental learning going on inside that you have couple of sentences to speak in certain situations, which one you have to select, and that the other person how would he respond to it. So it is also a careful process of selection to what you say, like **words carry weights**”. (Haris, EBS, *Group I, Interview*)

The use of questioning insight within MBA participants' universe could be seen as creating a 'perceptible shift of dynamics [...] one of assertion, power, and disciplinary boundaries' (Vroman and Kovacich, 2002: p. 165). What is at display, especially in Haris' excerpt, here is the triggering of an appraisal of the interpersonal process in order to cope with the changing dynamics of the group. It was also noticeable from my observations that the boundaries between participants were thin and precise, implying a fear of overstepping to jeopardizing their position in the group (further explained in chapter 9). According to Frijda et al. (1989) the appraisal of the situation causing uneasiness is in fact an emotional one. They further suggest that the appraising of situation depends upon prior emotional experiences: therefore the corresponding actions which the appraisal process enables are dependent whether the situation is known or unknown to the individual experiencing it (ibid.). It is the fear of the uncertain situation that a questioning process creates, thus, resulting in participants heightened sensitivity.

#### **8.4. Theme III - A Difficult Affair: On the Cultural Incongruence of Critical Reflection**

This theme attempts to present findings that outline the difficulties found in participants' accounts of implementing actions generated in the set meetings i.e. exploring what happens when these participants step out of the set and back into their daily life. It has been explained previously that introducing action learning with a critical intent into the Pakistani MBA has been challenging, especially with its focus on critical reflection. This theme contributes findings that underline post-reflection outcomes of Pakistani MBA participants who experienced the critical process of action learning and tried incorporating reflective practices in their daily lives to solve their real-life problems. The theme draws attention to the dark side of critical reflection by pointing out cultural incongruities between the Pakistani MBA and action learning practice (e.g. Reynolds, 1999a; Brookfield, 1994). The dark side as

termed by Brookfield (1994) suggests potential concerns of critical reflection if practiced in a context that does not support its practice. For example, prior to my inquiry on their post-reflection experiences, the MBA participants had already talked about the hierarchical pedagogical approach in which the teacher as expert aims to lecture and impose a theoretical understanding about management practice, a finding similar to Khan's (2006) study of Pakistani MBA. Having said this, most of the MBA participants' who engaged in the critical process of action learning expressed feeling a *pedagogic shock* i.e. being in two different pedagogical universes (Currie & Knights, 2003).

What differentiates between action learning and Pakistani MBA culture, in this study, is the underlying pedagogical philosophy i.e. traditional vs. critical. Most of the themes presented in this chapter have already focused on the critical design elements of the action learning process (e.g. organizing questioning insight and reflective inquiry) (Vince, 2003). Although participants described reflection as being helpful in developing an understanding of their research practice, but their accounts also directed me to the underlying concerns of critical reflection in a culture that is not used to its practice (Lougharn, 2000). The *situatedness*, contextual position, of action learning in the Pakistani MBA culture has compelled me 'to focus attention on the action as well as the outcomes of reflection' (ibid.). In a way I try presenting findings which underline participants' accounts of implementing actions from the set to practice, outside the set to work out their intended problems. Therefore, the sub-theme presented below highlights different aspects of Pakistani MBA participants' post-reflection experiences with emphasis on the hazardous outcomes of *critical reflection in a traditionalistic culture*.

### ***Pedagogic Ambivalence***

This sub-theme outlines the effects a reflective process had on participants outside of the action learning sets. My interview conversations with the Pakistani MBA participants have revealed inherent tensions and contradictions that have emerged in the pedagogical context as a result of introducing critical reflection in the action learning sets. The findings suggest that the tension between how participants have been predisposed to traditional forms of learning complicates the process of action learning practice. The findings reflect what McWilliam (2012) notes as ‘pedagogical ambivalence’, a term which refers to the ‘events, in which there is an expression to challenge social practices’ but is downplayed by its surrounding culture, causing tensions (p.228). This also suggests the emerging contradictions and slippery notions of critical reflection in Pakistani MBA can undermine the effectiveness of action learning practice. Another aspect to the findings which point towards pedagogical ambivalence is participants’ ability to construct ideas based on their perceptions and identities being influenced by experiencing two different pedagogies i.e. action learning and MBA (e.g. Todd, 2012: p.237). First, the power of both pedagogical positions i.e. MBA classroom learning, habituated within participants over the course of their social upbringing, and second, action learning’s transformative potential towards orthodox methods of MBA education in Pakistan. The findings stress the importance of the surrounding pedagogical context in which critical reflection is taking place. Recognizing this unease (contradictions and tensions), Sarah’s interview excerpt explains how difficult it was for her to follow through with the critical feedback she acquired in the learning sets:

“When I left the set, I was overwhelmed [...]. I just wanted to kick start my own project without thinking about anything else. But I wasn’t sure where would I start. I gave it some thought and finally started working... the next when I met my supervisor again I got confused. As I told you earlier, she asked me to select a topic from the table of contents and I did. After our repeated set meetings I got information from here and there to refine my idea. But when I used to meet with my supervisor she told me something else and I ended up being

confused. I wasn't sure what to do. I really had to find a way to complete my project and let the supervisor be happy. So I moulded it [project] according to her [supervisor's] expectations" (*Sarah, EBS, Group-I, Interview*)

In this interview extract, Sarah is indicating to a dichotomous practice which seemed to create a divide between what action learning was transferring and what the supervisor was opposing. Again the challenge here was that the participants were willing to make an effort, but the effort had to be materialized at the hands of the pedagogues which were a product of the prevalent cultural market. This brought forward the challenges, which a learner might face in terms of disparity between the two modes of pedagogies. The ambivalence is noticeable which is created by the power-differentials and the cultural capital which Sarah takes with herself and complies with it.

Another example of Khan, a member of the group II at EBS, talks about his experience of extending the practice of critical reflection to the classroom. Earlier in his interview, he talks about how interested he was in applying this technique in his real life. He said that when he tried questioning the teacher, changing traditional dynamics in the classroom, he was shot down by her, making him sceptical about critical reflection.

"There's a teacher who teaches us in HRM [...] there was this class after the set in which I asked her a question: You are teaching us this regression method to research in HRM, but what is its applicability here. If the regression method is made by foreign countries then why aren't they following it? Why are they moving towards qualitative ways? [...]. Suddenly she went quiet. I think she was more surprised at this, but she carried on [...] later on when she talked about that you see very less white people in blue collar jobs but more in white collar job you'll see them more. I asked her why that is and whether it was her perception? [...] Again things went quiet. She immediately then said you should justify the intent of your question. She further said that [khan] do your questions have some other purpose here ... it felt like she got angry but the thing is she couldn't answer them. So I thought to myself that I won't ask these kinds of questions anymore. Because if one person is not liking it or they don't even feel like answering them so why should I ask... but I don't know it was somewhat different when we met in the groups" (*Khan, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

"What happened with me was that the topic I wanted to do on that the supervisor said that you'll get stuck but a person had his own thing. But then whatever they gave me [...] I knew

what obvious state was ours, I couldn't say no to the teacher and have to accept that [...] but then it's up to you how you do it". (*Elena, WBS, Group-III, Interview*)

What seems to have been causing such ambivalence is the way the Pakistani MBA students have been predisposed to certain ways of learning acceptable in its culture i.e. their *habitus*. Another instance demonstrates this that how Haris tried dealing with the way he recognized the difference between the two modes of learning. During his interview he mentioned that when he attended action learning he felt that he could steer the process of learning in the direction he wanted to, but when he started comparing this with his MBA class he felt agitated to why the MBA classroom cannot manage such a learning environment. He thought that during the action learning set he was given attention and time to express his emotions and feeling towards what he thought challenged his learning. He concluded that the differences in how he perceived things were done in the MBA classroom are usually replicated in other forms of learning. He confessed that he did expect action learning to be so different:

"[...] on the first day we were attuned to you, as if you would deliver a set of slides and we would be done talking about research by the end of your presentation". (*Farrukh, WBS, Group-III: Interview*)

Also, Tariq adds that:

"When I got to know about you I thought we would be sitting, slides would be going on and one sided conversation would be held, but when we met you it was totally different atmosphere". (*Tariq, WBS, Group-III, Interview*)

Here Tariq, sums up what Farrukh has said, that being part of the culture in which they are studying for an MBA, they have already been taught about how teaching will unfold as a process. Therefore, Haris tries indicating that it would have been no different to what he had already experienced before. However then he indicates that when he came to the sets, it was different. Because his previous experience indicated that, the speaker who assumes authority and power of knowledge would deliver information to participants who the speaker assumes

have no prior experience or knowledge. Even if they do it is not equivalent to what the speaker thinks he possesses. Moreover, based on the position the speaker is, Tariq also indicates that there is usually a one-sided conversation i.e. speaker delivering the talk in which the value or significance of the participants is negligible. Therefore, ambivalence is not only an expression but also a shift in the power hierarchy, which results in the construction of difference and perception of participants in the set.

### 8.5. Conclusion

This chapter describes the pedagogical universe of the Pakistani students, using Bourdieu's notion of field. The chapter presents findings that explain the intra-habitus contradictions (e.g. psychological) which any attempted change in learning practice brings about within the field. The participants' accounts presented in this chapter exhibit something of a culture of orthodoxy prevailing within the MBA, which limits critical thought or *heterodoxy*, i.e. 'the awakening of political consciousness' (Bourdieu, 1977: p.170).

Moreover, along the contours of organizing critical reflection in action learning, the themes presented in this chapter expose 'what organizing [had] been and [was] being done to create and recreate the container that maintains and fosters particular assumptions' in the sets (Vince, 2004b: p.117). The analytical discussion brings together two key aspects of reflective practice. The first is *organizing* – 'how reflection can be understood as a stable and self-sustaining feature' (Vince & Reynolds, 2004: p.11), and the second is *strategy-generating* practices – 'enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.18) to provide key insights into the prevailing cultural context of MBA learning: i.e. whether its structures permit the possibility of a critical habitus emerging.

In summary, the findings suggest that the introduction of critical reflection as part of the action learning process ignited a mixed set of emotions about which participants felt perplexed and disconcerted. The findings also indicate that these strong emotions enabled participants to avoid uncertainty and become cautious about their positions within the group (set). They further demonstrate how participants, when allowed to take responsibility for their learning, felt overwhelmed and confused about the opportunity to be empowered. Their reluctance and the negotiations in which they sought to give up responsibility posed challenges for the facilitator as well as the participants. Finally, these findings outline the potential dangers involved in introducing and implementing principles of critical pedagogy with participants whose developmental readiness for critical practice remains questionable.

## CHAPTER 9

### Gender, Power and Social Capital: The Symbolic Forces Shaping Action Learning

#### 9.1. Introduction

In this chapter I draw upon Bourdieu's idea of capital to explore the interview and action learning set accounts of the Pakistani MBA participants, which exhibit asymmetrical relations and practices within their role as action learners: i.e. their position, dispositions and position-taking within the field of MBA learning (e.g. Bourdieu, 1998). The findings presented in this chapter address the third sub-question: what social dynamics do Pakistani MBAs display (and reflect upon) as shaping their action learning set interactions? These findings are analysed in relation to action learning's socially interactive and inclusive pedagogy, which promotes close proximal relations through 'self-disclosure'. In particular, the findings demonstrate the bounded nature of participants' relationships in the action learning sets, during which they were positioned 'alongside hierarchies of power constructed around such factors [as] class, race, gender, age and sexuality etc.' (Brah & Hoy, 1989: p.71). Also, assuming action learning sets as 'microcosm[s] of society' helps open-up grounds for examining the power-relations prevailing within the learning group in this chapter (Reynolds, 1999b: p.543). The findings were arrived at as a result of a Bourdieusian analysis which situated action learning sets in their *cultural and social space* governed by cultural ideologies that produce repertoires (and practices) shaping learning relationships (e.g. Bourdieu, 1972; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Contu & Willmott, 2003).

This chapter draws on the idea of symbolic capital, as discussed in Chapter 4, where Bourdieu views capital as power. Symbolic capital, given its emblematic nature, exposes differences between individuals who possess it and those who are willing to possess it

(Moore, 2008). Here, Bourdieu argues that the field is actually ‘a field of power struggles’ in which ‘holders of different forms of power’, i.e. capital, occupy ‘dominant positions’ (Bourdieu, 1996: p.264). The different types of capital (i.e. cultural, social, gender, etc.) which constitute symbolic capital are in fact ‘specific forms of power that are active in one or another of the fields (of forces and struggles)’ (ibid. p.265). Harker et al. (1990) add that the notion of capital is broad, and Bourdieu imagines it to include ‘material things [...] as well as ‘untouchable’ but culturally significant attributes such as prestige, status and authority (referred to as symbolic capital)’ (p.1). The types of capital which qualify as untouchable and culturally significant are thus at stake in the struggle to achieve power (domination) by individuals that is played out in a field of forces. The struggle for domination divides (and assimilates) individuals through *differences* in terms of the volume and weights (types) of capital to create di-vision. Bourdieu (1989) notes that the ‘differences function as distinctive signs’ and therefore suggests that the ‘social space’ (i.e. field) is in fact a ‘symbolic space’, which is characterized objectively by two aspects: the ‘properties attributed to the agents’ (i.e. capital); and subjectively by agents’ ‘schemes of perceptions and appreciations’ (i.e. habitus) (p.20).

Overall, this chapter aggregates findings that reveal the relational dynamics of the Pakistani MBA participants within action learning sets and the ways in which social and cultural forces mediate these relations under the meta-theme, *the symbolic forces of culture*. The themes and sub-themes under this meta-theme are presented and discussed along with actual quotes from participants’ interview accounts and the action learning sets to demonstrate the form of symbolic forces (power) active in the action learning sphere (see supplementary table, i.e. Table A on page 206, for a roadmap of themes). The chapter ends with a brief summary and overview of the discussion and the findings.

## 9.2. Theme I - Taken for Gender: The Embodied but Disproportionate Relations

This theme addresses participants' gendered dispositions, the way Lorber (1994) points out, to explain their embodied dispositions in relation to their body's vulnerability to what Bourdieu terms as 'symbolic violence' (ibid.). Bourdieu (1992) considers ***symbolic violence*** as a form of power, 'exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (p.167). The findings within this theme suggested that the imposition of gendered norms can, therefore, be visible within the ***habitus***, as a set of 'transposable dispositions' which shape both: an individual's agency and the structures which produce them (Bourdieu, 1990a: p.53). This theme reflects the embodiment of a system of gendered dispositions, demonstrated by participants through their gendered identity – as explained in detail in chapter 7. It is because, as Bourdieu (1991a) notes that, the body acts as a depository to the embodied dispositions and therefore 'certain actions, certain ways of behaving and responding' may seem normal within a culture. He further stresses that normalization of gendered dispositions, as norms, are instigated through bodily ***hexis***. Bodily hexis, according to Bourdieu (1991a), is:

'[...] a certain durable organization of one's body and of its deployment in the world. Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking' (Bourdieu, 1991a: p.13)

The emergence of this theme is marked by cultural precursors that layer the habitus with predisposed gendered dispositions (i.e. embodied) which participants' accounts reveal in terms of whether *gender mattered and did it affect their learning relations within action learning sets as compared to the MBA classroom*. Although men in the action learning sets were mostly of their neutral view but some did express difficulty in how gender dynamics worked when women are to question men about their experiences. The differentiation between men and women in the learning sets could also be explained through the findings in

the previous chapter, which suggest asking questions of women, by men is not a nice thing to do – thus marginalizing their problems and presence in the sets. The women participants did speak about how learning spaces were places where they felt being sidelined as compared to men, and so was the case in action learning sets. The women participants' accounts were enlightening in the sense that they captured the taken-for-grantedness of their gendered identity but have somehow normalized and neutralized this distinction by placing themselves behind their male counterparts. For example, Sarah allowed other men to proceed and sought to take the back-seat. She did state in her interview that this is how she had been taught.

'[...] it was always about my brothers. They were allowed, they were given the freedom. It was always me who was told, let your brothers have it, let them do it or you can't or you need to wait. So, I don't mind any more, I was happy to see them talk and discuss and I was more than happy to learn from their interactions' (*Sarah, EBS, Group-I, Interview*)

Sarah's account, in the next sub-theme, further reinforces such normalization. Amongst women's interview and my interpretation of their distinctive gendered identity, two participants' accounts seemed to resonate what other women's fragmented accounts were unable to visualize. The two women participants' accounts were particularly illustrative, e.g. Maria and Sarah, who were forthcoming in terms of their gendered nurturing as a cultural given, but this was not with conscious deliberation about *it* being different rather *it* being normal. Lastly, this theme also draws attention towards findings that outline masculine relations (male-to-male) with the learning sets, which at times have the tendency to be obscured within the feminist debate and leaving a gap in understanding male-dominant power-relations.

### ***Normalizing Powerlessness: Sarah's Silent Talk***

In this sub-theme, I illustrate Sarah's account, a participant from group-I at the East-city business school, to explain how gender power relations have been normalized for her in the

Pakistani society. In her account, she addresses her family environment to being critical in her development as a woman. In a way, her referral to her family as a ‘secure environment’ portrays connotations towards how she was restricted in participating in activities that fell beyond her reach as a female. Sarah, within her account, suggests that a secure environment for a female is one in which the interaction with other people (especially males) is restricted and less. She also suggested that the way her family developed her was focused on ‘mostly staying at home’ and ‘going to a girl’s only school’. This further breaks down the meaning of a secure environment in which she was distanced from others, which she attributes due to her gender. In her interview conversation, she explained her situation as:

“Like I said earlier, I am a bit slow in understanding things around me, because I think the way I was referred to at home, I was kept in a fairly secure environment. I wasn’t able to interact much with other people. I stayed mostly at home and studied in a girl’s only school. [...] Even at home I always gotten to hear this that I am slow, or I don’t need to be super-active as it doesn’t go with the stature of a girl. For me the boundaries were set pretty early on in my childhood. I think that is why my confidence wasn’t established earlier on and that is why I got anxious when it came to interacting in the group, especially with people I don’t know” (*Sarah, EBS, Group-I, Interview*)

Here Sarah opens up and talks about herself to be lacking the skills to interact and communicate with others in the set. Her family structure in which she suggests that her personal development was subject to her being called ‘slow’ or to which her parents considered females to not being active and taking a passive role, was also predominantly visible in her learning interactions in the set. She identifies the boundaries for dos and don’ts as a female. Like many female participants, Sarah presented herself wearing a head veil (duppata), covering her head, showing that this has been taught to her carried herself calmly through the interview, wherein places falling short of words. As a facilitator, I was able to recall her presence as *passive* and mostly confined to her close friends which she had been able to develop in the MBA. It is again commendable that Sarah was able to pursue an MBA, although she belonged from a conservative family.

She felt the difficulty of interacting with others in the action learning set, where she exhibits frustrations of being passive and left out during conversations – also struggled with her project related problems that she kept to herself. Although at the time of recruiting this action learning group, as a facilitator and researcher I was not entirely in control of who became part of the set but I was dependent on the host business school to communicate and recruit on my behalf. Therefore, this action learning set only managed to recruit one female participant.

### ***One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Gender Displacement***

In this sub-theme, I present an illustrative account of Maria a participant from group-III at the MBS, who in her interview suggested that family nurturing of females in family context is further reinforced by the dynamics of classroom learning (institutions). She mentioned an incident about one male MBA teacher, who considered himself as a strong faith believer, would not even interact with females in the classroom.

“[...] there was this teacher of mine in my MBA. Probably, I shouldn't say it but literally all the time he used to ignore the female students sitting in the class. Usually, females are seated at the front of the class, most of the time, or in groups somewhere in the classroom, but he used to avoid us, wouldn't talk to us properly. Then, we started to avoid him. We also avoided sitting in front row in his class. He would discriminate us with other male students, wouldn't take our problems in account.” (*Maria, MBS, Group III, Interview*)

She further expressed that on other occasions, the division was also evident between the two genders, male and female, is distinct when classrooms are segregated in which girls occupy front rows while boys move at the back of the room. Again, this arrangement is for the few co-educational institutions in the country, apart from other exclusive institutes for males and females. Maria's account implicitly indicates her helplessness in the MBA classroom to choose where to sit, as she was uncomfortable sitting at the front with this teacher, while moving at the back would have seemed culturally inappropriate for her as a female.

Interestingly, Maria did make a comment on how this was not the case in action learning, where the seating arrangement did make her feel part of the proceedings.

“When I first came in for the action learning meeting, I felt excited really, because the setting was uncommon from our classroom style of learning. I was very glad that I was here and I was participating. I really like it when I am sitting in a learning process and where I’m allowed to participate. I can interact and say that I know this, yes you are saying right etc. also by saying I have done this, this and this. But when most of the times when I am not part of the process, [...] then when I am not getting it I get very scared because I am unable to understand what is happening around me” (*Maria, MBS, Group III, Interview*).

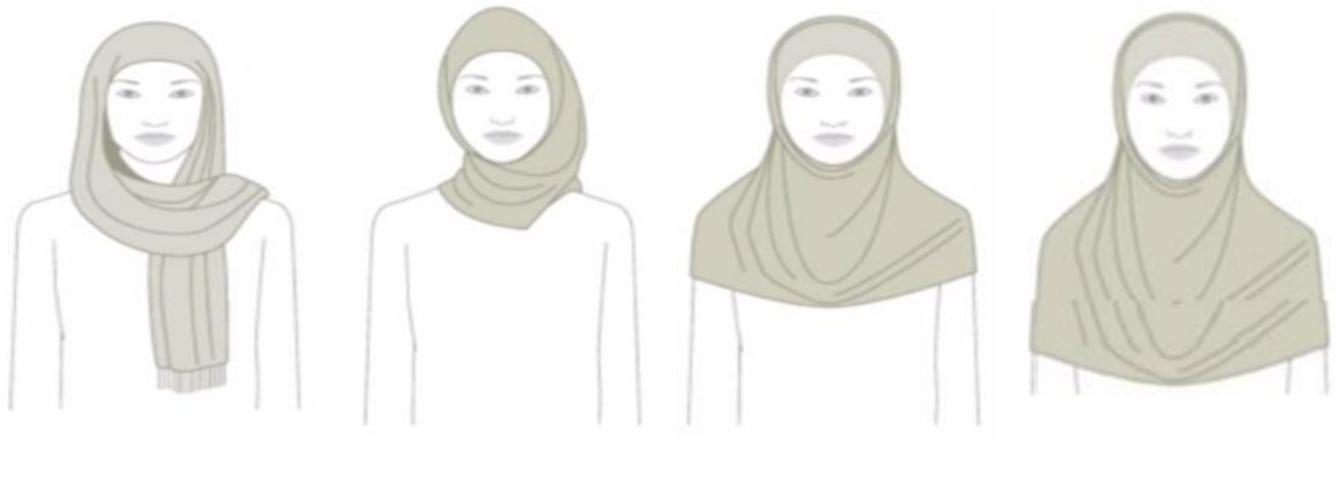


**Figure 9-1:** Examples of Segregated Seating Arrangement in Pakistani Co-Ed Classrooms<sup>14</sup>

During her interview, maintaining an identity of being a female for Maria, as amongst other females, was her prime responsibility as she was taught not only to be a Pakistani, a Muslim but also a female in a male-dominated society. In her attire, Maria presented herself as a composed lady wearing a veil [dupatta] cover part of her head. A dupatta is a covering that women in Pakistan wear to cover their heads and their body. Having said that dupatta is commonly used in Pakistan, there are women who opt **not to wear** dupatta to cover their

<sup>14</sup> Source: <http://www.lorettocommunity.org/mission-work/global-loretto/loretto-mission-in-pakistan/st-alberts-school/> and <https://widerimage.reuters.com/story/schools-around-the-world>

heads but only their body. For example, figure 9.2 (below) illustrates how women typically wear a dupatta or hijab in Pakistan:



**Dupatta (common)**      **Hijab (Head Scarf)**      **Abaya and Chador (can be longer)**

**Figure 9-2:** Examples of Veil Covering for Women in Pakistan

However, in the case of Maria, unlike others she was forthcoming in her conversations in the interview and the learning sets. The distinction of being part of the active process can also be associated to Maria's upbringing in the modern city of Islamabad where she had been educated in the co-educational institutions including her MBA education – which was also being pursued in a private institution. Maria's account as being a female illustrated a summary of what many women participants implicitly pointed: i.e. family-imposed values, conditioning within the classroom and normalizing distinction. She indicated that her upbringing made her less confident and nervous and was unable to interact with males. However, her openness to interact with males gradually has developed within the private institution where she was pursuing an MBA under the guidance of a female professor. According to Maria there weren't any senior female academics in her university, and found

this female professor to being more understanding of her situation. This excelling was not part of her family upbringing, but was developed by her interaction with her female professor (who she idealized). While recollecting her memories she said that:

“I would become conscious, stressed and anxious while interacting with male students or even to outsiders, but now thanks to Professor [ABC], I have become confident in realizing my abilities” (*Maria, MBS, Group III, Interview*)

### ***Alpha-Culture: A Rift in Masculine-Masculine Relations***

In this sub-theme, I move towards describing gender power relation between men in the learning set. These relations were hard to identify as they had the tendency to be obscured within the feminine discourse, i.e. male dominant relations over female, thus leaving a gap in understanding power-relations between men. This masculine alpha-culture was spotted within interactions between male-male learning encounters which had direct impact on male participants and indirect on females (e.g. Stead, 2014; McGill & Brockbank, 2004). Simpson (2006) suggests that the MBA space is tagged with unconscious processes, which construct masculine discourses and the male-managerial identity. In addition, Sinclair (2006) notes how MBA pedagogies are male-oriented which tend to discipline and limit women’s role in the managerial domain. The Pakistani MBA, as Khan (2006) notes, is one that builds itself on such pedagogies to isolate the MBA classroom to reproduce certain managerial discourses, which have been powerfully inserted by a certain class of academics who promote managerialism and safeguard the MBA curriculum.

Analysing so, in this theme I was able to observe two forms of masculine power-relations arising from their male participants interactions: the first type of power-relation was based on *historicity of relations* of power between male members. The historicity depicts previous relationship ties that participants had experienced during their MBA journey. In one case, for example, Haron and Haris, male members of group-I at the EBS, who shared the same

supervisor for their MBA project (also having the same specialization group of finance) had a positive effect on their work relations, neutralizing the power-distance between them (i.e. friendliness). However, in the case of Haris, who had tensions with other participants in his group works prior to the action learning set, struggled to maintain his position in the group. In my interview conversation with Haris, he suggested that previously fractured relations played a significant role in how these male MBA participants marked their space within the learning set. Haris felt that the critical reflection phase provided a license to these 'others' to disguise their personal feelings to negatively taunt and pick on him. When asked how he felt about colleagues challenging him in the critical reflection process, he said that:

"[...] they weren't really questions, except some, they were personal attacks, to pin someone for no reason ....but I'm okay with it, it keeps happening to me. I am used to it. I mean look at their statements, their questions and their persistence to debate rather than discuss. You're a masters level student you would be senseless if you would talk like that. For example they were pinning me down on my ideas and I was telling them practically how I did things. [...] I have known these people, I have unresolved issues with them, who are in class and with whom I have to think before speaking because they can grab on to any word, they can take negatively, but on the other hand if it's Haron or someone I know personally, then I feel free to talk to them about anything, any problem, they are always going to give you constructive feedback and won't make fun of you, won't say anything." (Haris, EBS, Group I, Interview)

In a way Haris' interview account corresponded with some intense discussions which took place between Haris and a couple of other male members in the set – both trying to show dominance over the other. Given Pakistani culture, in such intense discussions I was not able to observe if any female member participated or stepped-in. Haris' account also suggests how members used questioning as means of getting even with one another. Another example of historical relations was also evident in group-II at EBS, where Khan and Ahmed openly expressed in their interviews that they had prior problems with one another, which were unsettled – i.e. creating hindrance in group work.

During my interviews with Khan and Ahmed, I spoke to them about how they felt working with other group members in the set, towards which they expressed their difficulty in working with, one of the, set members. They expressed this as:

“Amongst others in the group, I had class-fellows with whom I share the MBA classroom but there was this other guy I wasn’t quite up to talking with him. Actually we had a fall back in the first semester and ever since we haven’t quite worked out between us and sharing a group with him knowing how our relationship has been since day one, it was difficult in working with him” (*Khan, EBS, Group II, Interview*)

“There were some whom I knew well and before-hand, while there was this one person and I am sure you know who I am talking about, I wasn’t quite on equal terms with him. [...] I was particularly conscious about giving my opinions or views towards whatever he said as I was aware of my position and avoided crossing over boundaries into territories which wasn’t mine to be in” (*Ahmed, EBS, Group II, Interview*)

The second type of masculine power relations, power-relations which are situated in the broader male dominant culture, found were based on intercultural similarities and differences between participants. Within the action learning sets participants who belonged from different parts of Pakistan were subject to stereotypical (relational) discernment based on either the way they spoke, dressed or educated. For example, in my observation of the action learning groups, members with similarities in spoken language resulted in sub-groupings of the set i.e. participants from KPK had the tendency to stick together – to informally interact with one another in Pashtu language.

In my interview with Ahmed, a participant from group II at the EBS, I was able to learn about how his prior affiliations with certain ethnic groups isolated him from other group members.

He said that:

“The first thing I faced was that I was criticized for my dialect, the way I spoke Urdu language. [...] My teachers told me that when I talk I prolong words, and that I don’t pronounce them the way they should be, I miss words. And when you speak Urdu you speak in a difficult way, which no one understood. So I was made the butt of many jokes. Sadly, I was made to learn Urdu then. This also continued in the [action learning] group where I felt isolated at times” (*Ahmed, EBS, Group II, Interview*)

These intercultural differences between male participants, as Jonasson and Lauring (2012) suggest, emerged during communicative interaction amongst individuals and their embodied cultural values in their talk patterns. This also explains the lower-level of participation of individuals with dissimilar cultural backgrounds, leading to intra-group conflicts amongst members. Bourdieu's (1990) understanding of group relations provides insight into how participants' ability to distance from one another based on culture was not only due to the geographic distances in cultures, but also on intentional choice of participants. Much of the confrontation for example between Haris and others was based on his regional (provincial) identity (cultural stereotypes). His use of words and his details about adjusting to Islamabad were critical in understanding his struggles with culture. Although he was brought up in Karachi, but still struggled with the culture of Islamabad. He also spoke of how other participants, during his MBA classes made fun of the way he pronounced certain words in Urdu. Khan, Sam and Kamran also confirmed this in their interviews, as to how difficult it was for them to adjust to the culture. They also recalled specific incidents that suggested that cultural differences play a critical role in how group dynamics between males are organized.

Overall within this theme of **gender**, the social and cultural norms through which a gendered habitus is shaped within Pakistan, reflects what Bourdieu considers as the 'family spirit' which portrays the 'collective principle of construction of collective reality' (Bourdieu, 1998: p.66). Although other women participants, do provide a partial description of a developmental (cultural) habitus, but the distinction, in case of Sarah and Maria, could be attributed to the type of cultural upbringing by the family (or parents) and the social institutions. Bourdieu (1998) argues that families and social institutions form the basis of our faculties of perception i.e. families possess a cultural habitus: to which they act as a 'structuring structure' – family as part of the wider culture, and a 'structured structure' – family as producing discourse and identity (ibid. p.67). The habitus provide a 'matrix of

countless representations and actions (such as marriages) which help to reproduce' culture (ibid. p.67). The habitus is also vulnerable to pedagogic strategies (e.g. disciplining, distancing, empowering, structuring environment, interactions etc.) which normalize distinctive habits.

### **9.3. Theme II - Negotiating (*dis*)-Empowerment: Discomforts of Giving & Taking Responsibility**

In this theme, I describe how participants' were encouraged to take responsibility of their own learning from a facilitator's perspective: this was facilitated through presenting of real-life problems and engaging in critical reflection (Weinstein, 1999). The design further guided that role of the facilitator and group (set) process was to '*empower*' participants to take action as a result of organizing reflection, i.e. questioning insight and reflective inquiry, on their problems (McGill & Beaty, 2001: p.13). The perspective that I assume for empowering individuals who are yet to experience it in a learning setting is by giving out responsibility and then progressing towards empowering them to take action. The bracketing of dis – e.g. (dis)-empowerment in this theme tends to reflect, within the space of action learning set, there was varying degree of responses towards how MBA participants felt about being empowered. Also, a mix of facilitation approaches were adopted in this study to facilitate the giving of responsibility to the participants. However this was again a difficult process to manage as delegation of power to take responsibility of their actions in a learning setting tended to fall outside the purview of the Pakistani MBA participants, who were mainly reluctant of this approach. This mainly echoed in many participants' interview conversations, which reflected a higher degree of dependency on the individual directing the learning activity. For example, Ibrahim, a participant from group-I at the EBS, during his interview said that:

“I’ve never experienced such a learning activity before in which we were put in-charge of what we wanted to do instead of the teacher. It is unusual because the teacher is always in authority and in-charge of what is happening around you. Everything is monitored and observed by the teacher, the teacher then keeping this in view directs you in ways that he or she deems right” (*Ibrahim, EBS, Group I, Interview*).

Ibrahim’s expression is a reply towards the facilitation he had experienced in the action learning sets that challenged his previous perceptions of classroom learning. The democratization of the action learning set was experienced as devolution of authority, i.e. delegating a sense of responsibility, which oriented a ‘power with’, rather than a ‘power over’ approach (Fenwick, 2003: p. 619). The sense of responsibility was difficult to handle as it shifted the power dynamics of learning. This shift was burdensome to some extent as it exerted additional pressure on MBA participants to take into account their own interests, practices which marginalized them and complexity of the learning process (*ibid.*). In some interviews this was viewed as a frustrating experience as participants’ tried re-negotiating this undue sense of responsibility, which forced participants out of their shells. Qadeer who was a participant from group IV at the WBS, running a family business, asserted in his interview that:

“I think this transition is very difficult for us [...] Its quiet difficult I must say, because of the habits we have acquired in our education for the last 12 to 14 years. It’s not easy to let them go [...] This other thing kept on coming to my mind and it kept on playing [...] how one has to learn in this type of [learning setting] group. But there is a limit you know [...] on you as a facilitator and [...] for us too in that sense [...] that limits how you have to work and learn and how to avoid other things” (*Qadeer, WBS, Group IV, Interview*)

Empowerment can be seen as problematic for MBA participants who have never experienced taking responsibility of their own learning in their entire academic life. It is more of a fear of how to act and behave in such circumstances followed by participants’ frustration of being unable to accomplish the intended objectives (solutions). Thus, Qadeer in his interview excerpt does emphasize that there is responsibility not only on the participants but also on the facilitator to guide them with supervision that is more direct and acknowledge their limitation

to learning. The findings suggest three implications to the notion of empowerment in the Pakistani MBA: first the MBA participant is empowered to ‘make personal decisions about a course of action’ (Leach et al, 2001: p.294). The roots of such philosophy lay in the adult education literature, more specifically self-directed learning, which is met with considerable challenge in the Pakistani MBA’s expert and reverent mode of teaching. Second, empowerment seeks to de-marginalize individuals in the ‘context of inequality’ (Usher et al. 1997: p.38). De-marginalizing individuals mean that the relationship of inequality, for example between the student and the facilitator, is made explicit to the participants. Third the ‘politics of difference and identity’ needs to be acknowledged (Leach et al, 2001: p.294). The predisposed identities of Pakistani MBA students, embodied within their habitus, portray rather a tension between the preaching of critical learning and traditional forms of MBA learning – thus undermining the emancipatory potential of action learning (e.g. Willmott, 1994; 1997).

Another scribbled field note suggests that participants occasionally used the *facilitator to springboard ideas* off in other people’s direction to reduce the risk of direct confrontation. This was mostly the case when participants were encouraged to use questioning insight as a method to reflectively inquire about the problem, ideas or thoughts.

“Previously, I had noted that some of the participants were re-routing their queries and thoughts through me. I may have naively redirected these to the concerned set members, but I guess it dawned on me later that what they were doing was quite strategic in enticing the facilitator to take the heat of how relationships (*in particular between opposite sex*) progressed while their position remained neutral during the critical engagement phase” (Facilitator’s Post-Set Reflection, Meeting 3: March 2014): *emphasis added post-reflection*)

This field note entry was made after the second set meeting at the East-city Business School, in which I had noticed how men tried spring-boarding their ideas off the facilitator to address Sarah’s problem. This is presented below:

## ACTION LEARNING SET ILLUSTRATION

## Enticing the Facilitator

Ibrahim is presenting his set of problems in the meeting. Ibrahim is doing his MBA specialization in the field of marketing and therefore his final year project is from marketing. Similarly, Sarah is his class-fellow who is also pursuing a marketing specialization. Ibrahim and Sarah are the only two who are from the marketing group in the action learning set. Sarah who has been building up courage to speak about her problems related to developing a final year project, was mostly quiet throughout and we had agreed whenever she would be ready to share we would accept that as a group. This suggestion was mainly floated by the facilitator after noticing how quiet Sarah was during the first set meeting and also half way through the second – so that she doesn't feel intimidated and outnumbered by other men in the group (this group had only one female participant). Sarah saw an opening when Ibrahim started talking about his project related stuff on marketing research. Haron and Ibrahim try being helpful to further Sarah's problem and discuss, however, they try addressing the facilitator each time when they pose a question. The excerpt below is taken from this discussion:

Ibrahim Let me give you a bit of a background on where I am [...] my study is more slanted towards consumer behaviour. How does culture impact local and international brands [...] but I am really not sure on how to tap into the niche which is consuming local brands like Amrat Cola, Gourmet Cola etc. Accessing such data is challenging and is driving me crazy, not really sure where to start on this and I am running out of time [...]

Sarah Ibrahim, what are the dimensions of these so called challenges, what are these things that you call challenges?

Ibrahim Challenges are like [...] *[goes on explaining]*

[...]

Sarah After listening to Ibrahim (**directed at the facilitator now**) I am more confused since I started as to the practicalities of a marketing research project. I went to my supervisors and they had asked me to read these papers and books [...] /...

Facilitator I was wondering since all of us are more or less consumers of such products and services identified by Ibrahim and Sarah. I was wondering what others thought about these issues, specifically the ones identified by Sarah on the use of mobile phones. We are users aren't we?

Ibrahim **(Looking at the facilitator)** For her I would like to point out an issue, which is that she is likely to face the same problem that I am facing right now e.g. the local brands versus international ones, so for her I am curious how she will access data which is relevant to mobile phone giants like Samsung and Nokia etc. The local brands might welcome you on sharing data of mobile phone usage and sale, but how will she gain access to the big guns? This is something she will have to think clearly about. **(still keeps looking at the facilitator)**

*Silence for a couple of minutes*

Facilitator Have you thought about this Sarah?

Sarah **(Addressing the facilitator)** Yes, but not like this. But the way Ibrahim had presented his own challenges has made me think.

Haron Another thing (**Addressing the facilitator**) for her she might want to first think about whether she is talking about the mobile phone devices or their services. This I think remains unclear in her thoughts.

***Again Silence***

Facilitator So Sarah, any thoughts on this?

Sarah Services. I think. No most definitely (**still addressing the facilitator**)

Ibrahim (**Looking at the facilitator**) Now having said this, I think she will be able to collect data from companies which are locally-based like Ufone etc. But what about the companies which are based in Karachi like Telenor etc. how would she access those?

***Silence***

Facilitator ***Noticing how agitated Sarah is feeling*** I am not sure if you have thought about it in this detail Sarah? Have you?

Sarah I think I will make them region-specific to my study ***[and so on]***

*(Sarah, Ibrahim, Haron, EBS, Set Meeting March 2014)*

***A Disempowering Culture***

In this sub-theme I explain how empowering MBA participants to take responsibility of their learning in a culture that promoted dependency on experts and their knowledge was rather disempowering in certain ways. The question that raises concerns in this study is how this affects action learning practice, especially a culture of reverence, invisibility and silence. This, however, is elaborated in participants' interview conversations in which they talk about the learning culture of the MBA classroom and its subsequent effect on their action learning endeavour. Jasmine, a part-time MBA student at the MBS and a manager on a government-funded project, talked in detail about the MBA culture: what she had felt inside the classroom and how did this influence her ability to participate within action learning sets. She said that:

“[...] in class its like sit silently, don't talk to anyone like there are many restrictions [...] and when you come to the university you have to follow their ethics and discipline”  
*(Jasmine, MBS, Group – III, Interview).*

A similar perspective is also reciprocated by another participant, Farrukh – a part-time MBA student at the MBS and an Assistant Producer at a media company, who suggested that the divide between the teacher and student is as such that it creates a communication gap.

“[...] a typical classroom culture is 'stay quiet', 'Don't speak' etc. this is the problem of our traditional culture. [...] This is a communication gap. This makes the class room environment too formal and because of which it gets harmful” (*Farrukh, MBS, Group III, Interview*)

The gap between the two, i.e. teacher and student, formalizes the environment promoting a culture of reverence – creating hierarchical learning (Reynolds, 1999b). What facilitates this culture is *tradition* (historical significance) and is fuelled by participants who like Elena, a full-time MBA student at MBS, ‘can't say no to the teacher’ as it is ‘disrespectful’. She informed me in her interview that she tries being ‘emotionally detached’ in the classroom as ‘you can't take the teacher personally because it's their job to correct you’. This I considered as power-trigger that strengthens the power-distance between the teacher and the student. Hasan, another participant from the MBS, said that ‘although it is mentally repressive but it maintains discipline in the classroom’. Also, according to Jasmine this type of learning, enforced through disciplinary action, indorses fear. She further suggests that the teacher controls the environment so tightly that they literally fear their anger. Jasmine added that:

“[the MBA] class room has a different environment, there is a pressure of teacher on students in class ... and many people can't question the teacher and where they are thinking they are unable to put their thoughts together. In cases when the teacher might be wrong they are afraid that he might insult them” (*Jasmine, MBS, Group – III, Interview*)

This informs about the MBA participants’ problems stated earlier regarding the difficulties in handling power to direct their own learning. Many participants had mixed feelings about the MBA classroom’s learning culture, which was seen as ‘content-driven’ with ‘no real market value’. Khattak, a member of the EBS set, said that there is no real value of the knowledge gained in classrooms as the teachers wanted them to ‘*ratofy*’ (an Urdu slang for memorizing content) the material ‘imposed’ upon them. This drastic comparison between action learning and MBA was prompted after participants experienced the power of action learning itself. Haris from the EBS group 1 was clearly surprised at the beginning of action learning when he exclaimed that:

“You know it was different in the [action learning set] as we talked at first, to which I thought **how can this be learning** about research?” (*Haris, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

But he further goes on to comment on the difference between action learning and MBA classroom culture that:

“Well in the classroom, you [students] are there but not really there. The teacher is not willing to see you even if you are there. [...] What you think and what you feel... it doesn't matter what you feel. What matters is what the teacher wants. You are just an MBA class for them [...] in the past I have taken up research based courses, but they don't teach you this stuff, or as a matter of fact they don't even have time for your experiences or expressions or problems, they stick to a course outline and that is it.” (*Haris, EBS, Group I, Interview*)

The reason for Haris' amazement was due to action learning breaking with the traditional culture of silence and lack of individual voice. Haris in his interview was critical of the MBA learning culture. He made frequent comparisons between action learning and MBA classroom learning. He went on to talk about this at different parts of his interview, as:

In my MBA experience we don't take practical things into consideration. We don't bring our problems in the classroom. We don't talk about our experiences. I think what is missing from the MBA classroom is the practical or field knowledge of how to accomplish things. It's all theoretical knowledge having totally unrelated examples which do not apply in our Pakistani context. For example before taking up the research project, I have already complete three research courses, but still I am unable to do research in the way my supervisors want me to do. The reason behind this is that I wasn't aware of how to do research. I know I am good at analysing financial statements, but that is just one aspect of my project. The other is getting that primary data and talking to people about financial instruments and financial practise” (*Haris, EBS, Group-I, Interview*)

“Once I had the opportunity to present my problem of gaining access into the organizations I wanted to, a lot colleagues interacted with me on the various dimensions of my project. You really don't get a chance to talk about your project you know because there is neither a platform nor anyone interested. Well having the opportunity of presenting a problem, which I felt was challenging, because people working in the financial sector don't usually share their practices as for them they are secret” (*Haris, EBS, Group-I, Interview*)

What comes across from Haris' interview is the shift between the detached learning of MBA and the inclusivity of action learning's set process. Haris welcomed the emotions of pleasure and delight (e.g. Rigg & Trehan, 2005) as it helped him see through his problems in his project. Nevertheless the participants did feel frustrated about the passivity of the facilitator

during the set process, as opposed to being used to the MBA classroom. For example, these illustrative quotes from participants' interview demonstrate this aspect:

"It's not possible because we just plan, we don't act so, if you weren't there we wouldn't have get that gathering or ideas discussion like again we need a teacher or supervisor who gathers up things for us and imposes upon us that we have to act on it".

"A facilitator has to apart from just being there, he has to tell us about practical experiences and should discuss the actual scenario of how research is conducted" (*Rameez, WBS, Group IV, Interview*).

A sense of frustration on part of the participants did prevail, struggling to find the role of facilitator passive during the learning process and less intervening. This was mainly due to the way their habitus was attuned, offering greater sympathy for facilitator's pedagogic agency to control proceedings. The experiences of the MBA classroom have undermined participants' ability to assume responsibility of their learning. The classroom culture as described by participants is one of 'overwhelming control': 'it serves the interests of oppression' by disempowering students (Freire, 1970: p.261). It is 'based on a mechanistic, static ... spatialized view of consciousness, it transforms students into receiving objects' (ibid.). This culture undermines the creative power of students by controlling their thinking and reproducing the social order (ibid.). This theme demonstrates this culture and its affect though participants' reluctance to adequately assume responsibility. The shift in the power dynamics can be seen as unsettling for participants, also making it difficult to give responsibility while participants were keen on restoring the balance of power. The negotiations of participants to restore the power back to the facilitator, as seen above, is indicative of MBA participants' exercise of covert agency which unconsciously avoids creating a disequilibrium in the embodied power-relations (e.g. Cornwall & Edwards, 2010).

#### 9.4. Theme III - Learning at the Periphery: On Social Ethics of Sharing Space in the Set

This theme presents accounts of Pakistani MBA participants describing their experiences of sharing the learning space in the action learning sets. It highlights how participants found it difficult to comprehend the socially-interactive aspect of action learning which exposed participants to directly engage with one another in an individualistic culture – leaving little room for face-saving. Face saving, within Pakistani culture, is a common practice in classrooms where students indirectly engage with one another through the teacher, as an intermediary, in a non-confronting way (Ebert & Culyer, 2011: p.65). Action learning's group style of learning was initially found being intrusive, which invaded participants' private space – thus posing difficulty in how these students handled the social aspect of action learning practice. Group methods, like action learning, have the tendency to encroach inside an individual's subjective zone but with the aim of solving problems confined within those willing to solve. Boot and Reynolds (1983), with regards to group learning, note that these methods are:

‘[...] not simply more efficient than conventional approaches, they are by their nature more intrusive into the personal and social [space] of the students. After all, they usually require students to reflect on their personal experiences and to engage actively with each other. That is one reason for valuing such approaches, but it throws into greater [respite] the moral questions inherent in [group process]’ (Boot & Reynolds, 1983: p.5).

The Pakistani MBA participants', not used to such an encroachment, recorded their reaction to action learning's group-interactive way of learning through feelings of amazement and surprise. One participant, Ibrahim from group-I at the EBS, during his interview said that:

“The session started off with us discussing, surprisingly this was a first. At this time I realized that this would be an interactive session, which required of us to participate by talking [...] by being involved. Although the content of these discussions revolved around our MBA project but it demanded that we interacted with each other [...]. Like if I am presenting then people would talk about me, I have never been a subject of any learning discussion, but then pacing myself with how others were interacting with me was really different, an entirely new experience”. (*Ibrahim, Group-I, EBS, Interview*)

What Ibrahim experienced was similar to others who indicated their unease at first, but ruled it out in favour of learning about their problems with regards to the MBA final project. Although, action learning drew upon participants experiences by inviting others to challenge their thoughts for solving their problems, but it also called into account the ethical perspective surrounding learning relationships in the Pakistani MBA. This way of learning challenged the cultural norm, which required participants' from different geographical backgrounds, gender, and diversity to engage with one another i.e. transgressing culturally defined relational boundaries between students. In previous chapters I have explained in detail about the boundaries which separate male and female students and also how students belonging from different cultural backgrounds mark their territories to stay in their own packs. Earlier on this did restructure relational boundaries between participants, with the onus dropping on how participants used language to socially engage in the set.

Haris, from group-I at the EBS, raised a concern in his interview about the caution necessary to engage with others, especially in the action learning set. He identified how previously fractured relations hovered on the edge, making it more important for him to choose the sort of words appropriate for the set and which would not haunt him back after the set i.e. 'words carry weight'. He went on to suggest in his interview that:

"Like, for example, if I said something to you that you didn't like but somehow you digest it. Here you show some flexibility. It does happen quite a lot that people don't like what I say, it did happen there that people didn't like what I had to say, well there were friends they don't mind but tell you later that I didn't like this or that, but there were ones who do mind and take it in the wrong way. In my opinion, talking is related to words and once those words come out of your mouth or said they cannot be taken back [...] this made me really conscious at times" (*Haris, Group-I, EBS, Interview*)

The opportunity to examine group learning from an interactive perspective also provided insight into the critical aspects of group-life. For example, like the norms which make possible group interaction; the climate (atmosphere) of the group which makes possible

individual development; the social interaction process through which individuals make possible the understanding of the world; the ability to nurture the learners to make possible learning; or the power-relations which define the social dynamics of the group (e.g. Hampden-Turner, 1971). Rowan (1976) proposes that a processual focus on group (learning) can outline two key characteristics of their shared social space i.e. power-relations and the social organization of a group. On similar lines, the findings under this theme reiterate how group's social dynamics shape relations (processual relations) amongst its members. In a way this theme sheds light on social methods through which the MBA participants engaged with one another, with key emphasis on processual relationships, during the different phases of action learning (e.g. critical reflection, problem presentation, social interaction, group process etc.). It takes into account action learning's socially interactive aspect in restructuring the 'spatial, temporal, role and task elements' that constitute participants' relational boundaries in the group space (Barrett et al. 2007: p.4).

Also, this theme recognizes the power of the action learning groups and the social forces mediating participants' relations and the underlying learning processes which shape group space. As a result two critical factors surfaced, during the analysis, which the participants considered as crucial in either enabling or disabling learning relations within the set: *trust*, and *reciprocity*. For example, Haron, from group-I at the EBS, during his interview when asked about the reasons which disabled his participation in the group discussions at the start, he said that he was waiting for the group to reveal itself – to 'open up'. He further said that during the early stages of the group he tried analysing people within the group to develop some sort of learning relationship based on his criteria for assessing people for their malleability. The fragmentation within the groups, earlier on in the sets, also indicated the polarization that can be accounted towards difficulty in developing cohesive relations and therefore resulting in the establishment of thick boundaries between members.

### ***On a Two-Way Street: Reciprocal Relations***

This sub-theme describes that developing reciprocal relations was another key feature of how relationships within the groups worked collectively. It draws upon reciprocity, as an offshoot to trust, to explain the growth and evolution of the group to maintain itself through its life. Reciprocal relations, according to some participants were built on how others behaved towards the individual and their actions in the set. Haron, a member of group-I at the EBS, said that he could sense the way others behaved towards him and the type of words they chose to throw a question. He said that their intentions matter e.g. interest and genuine concern towards his problems. He thought that by explaining his problems and making people aware of his learning impediments made him vulnerable and in return he expected people to deliver an appropriate response in terms of showing sincerity, empathy or support – when not showed put him down. He further identified the importance of reciprocity in the way he sought social interaction was conducted in the group. This was apparent in some of the interviews about letting people inside personal space just to find out that they were not genuinely concerned for their problems.

Additionally, Maria from group-III questioned the participants' sincerity in trying to help others. She indicated that when others presented their problems and some of them helped to reflect and carry the discussion forward, but when it came to them helping them back, they were not interested anymore. Maria insisted that with the type of questions participants asked, ideas they presented in the action learning set they seemed superficial – 'far from being relevant'. She also commented that that there were a number of issues which were not research-related issues, but issues of common sense. She felt that participants wasted time on petty issues and personal grievances decreasing her interest in the set. She suggested that the

facilitator must intervene on the demeanour of participants and guides others in how to approach problems.

“In action learning we enjoyed a lot by interacting on pressing issues, apart from like there was this guy I probably shouldn't say it but literally all the time he used to just pick issues which seemed so irrelevant and I even avoided sitting with him. [...] I thought there were some really good issues for example the one we discussed on the accessing resources for literature and secondary data but this one guy, I am sure you might know him but I won't call out his name, I use to fall asleep when he used to talk or present because he touched upon issues which were not even issues, but he kept talking and talking so it phased me out a couple of times. I think there needs to be a system which selects the type of issues being presented or the questions being asked and take action on which ones to be chosen for discussion. In this way the discussions could grow long without any useful outcome [...]”  
(*Maria, Group-III, MBS, Interview*)

Rameez, from group-IV also had similar point of view on participants being irresponsible about using problems as a learning source. For him, he felt that it was dealing too much and as a result he felt distracted from his own research project because participants were not able to develop a two-way link between each other. He felt that some level of facilitation should guide this process:

“I think although the sets went well, they were organised but I disagree with some of the people having presented problems which weren't related to the research paradigm because the activity that followed its after they were done presenting was always questioning and discussion which went on continuously [...] and at sometimes it caused problems in interest. You lose your interest in the discussion and simply also focusing on one thing repeatedly also creates problems. I thought others did not realize how a group works. They need to care more it's a two-sided affair. [...] Broadly speaking I think discussions need to fall into at least the broader areas of our interest, otherwise there is no point in sitting together as a group or is there [...]”  
(*Rameez, Group IV, WBS, Interview*)

The account of Rameez conveyed a sense of dissatisfaction in what people presented at times and considered offering advice about the type of problems that should fall broadly within their interest. It should also be mentioned that these MBA students are not used bringing their own problems into the classroom for discussion. These viewpoints indicate how they felt when either sharing their own problems or listening to someone else's problem. It highlights the type of skills they are not used to for example they urge for the facilitator to

play an active role by controlling the type of problems people bring in, rather than suggesting a selection system of their own. Some of them also seem impatient while listening to others and lack the necessary skills of listening to their colleagues.

The ethics of working together as a group has implied the need for developing trustworthy relations and a sense of sincerity and care in form of others reciprocating interest what others have to say and present. Since learning in action learning is based on a social process in which individuals form dependencies (or relationships), developing mutual understanding is of great significance to a group's well-being. Also, Pakistani MBA presents itself as a linear process which is hierarchically organized. Participants' were already anxious of the action learning programme which had minimized the role of the facilitator, thus provoking anxiety in the action learning. Vince and Martin (1993) suggest that anxiety is a normal feeling when participating in action learning, given its socially inclusive and interactive pedagogy. They further argue that it tries 'breaking free of the dependency on teacher, and place emphasis on the responsibilities of the learner' (ibid. p.208). The issues of trust and reciprocity highlight the psychological and political aspects of group learning, as articulated by Vince and Martin (1993), which tag along during the learning process.

## **9.5. Conclusion**

The findings presented in this chapter show the effects which the cultural context (cultural forces) had on the social organization of the action learning groups. The notion of capital is useful in bringing to the surface the relations of power that mediate learning practices in action learning within the Pakistani MBA. The groups put into action the practices, within the action learning field the way in which they occupied certain roles and positions in society i.e. based on their embodied dispositions e.g. gender and identity. Also, there was a bi-directional relationship between how participants' predisposed habitus, their new positions in the field and their embodied cultural capital played a critical role in either restraining or reinforcing

cultural practices (Stone et al. 2012). Stone and Hart (2007) argue that learning communities' habitus and field are connected through intersubjective states (e.g. communication) which make it possible for knowledge, acquired through cultural capital, to be reproduced and embedded within the learning context, defining the way in which learning tasks are accomplished, social resources are mobilized, and relationships are negotiated.

Overall the three major findings discussed in this chapter throw into prominence the capital (power) embodied within Pakistani MBA students, i.e. disproportionate gender relations, the negotiation of (dis)-empowerment, and the social ethics of sharing social space. These findings help understand group dynamics in three ways:

- Gendered-power relations operate through social and interpersonal processes to maintain the di-vision between males and females (e.g. taking women's problems for granted, the avoidance of engaging in critical discussions, etc.) and male – male relations (e.g. differences between men).
- The MBA participants demonstrated uneasiness in accepting and dealing with power in guiding the action learning group. They were not ready to accept the responsibility of leading discussions, presenting problems or asking questions of their colleagues, as they were accustomed to the traditional methods of MBA learning.
- The participants showed a high level of uncertainty and a lack of trust of each other during the learning process. This decreased the efficiency with which they worked together to find viable solutions for their problems.

## **Section Four**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This section, the discussion and conclusion, is the final part of this thesis, and is organized over two chapters. The aim of this section is to bring together the various ideas and themes discussed earlier and present a coherent discussion, summary and conclusion of this ground-breaking research.

Chapter **10** presents a detailed discussion of the meta-themes and themes presented in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 by drawing upon Bourdieu's theoretical framework, discussed earlier, to explain Pakistani MBA participants' durability towards critical forms of learning. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 used Bourdieu's theoretical ideas of habitus, field and capital to present separate analyses, and this chapter draws on this framework again to discuss how these combine to present an integrated view of social practice in the Pakistani MBA. Chapter **10** explains how these elements when presented together provide insights into the durability of embodied culture in adapting to criticality. It is interesting to note that the interaction between the Pakistani MBA participants and action learning resulted in a dialectical construction of participants' 'self', one constructing the other. Also, in the interviews the participants constituted their 'selves' as learners making sense of action learning by bringing into account the socially-accepted behaviours of learning in their view. Moreover, the findings also indicate that the context surrounding the Pakistani MBA poses significant challenges to action learning in introducing critical and reflective forms of management education and practice. The evidence in the data suggests that what happens is that action learning acculturates itself with the ground culture, as participants either distance themselves from culturally insensitive ways of learning or affirm certain elements which are culturally modified by their own interpretations. All these findings when presented and discussed

together help explain why the Pakistani MBA is a challenging context for organizing action learning to develop critically reflective student practitioners.

Finally, Chapter **11** presents my key theoretical contribution (i.e. major finding), which also address my overarching research question, i.e.: can the reflective practice of action learning enhance criticality in Pakistani MBAs? The chapter further highlights other theoretical and methodological contributions that this thesis makes along the way. The implications of this study for action learning, the Pakistani MBA and reflective practice in management learning and education are also presented, along with certain limitations in the research. Finally, I present a reflection on the role of the researcher and the facilitator during the action learning programme before ending by suggesting future directions and recommendations for practitioners interested in pursuing action learning practice in the Pakistani MBA (context).

## CHAPTER 10

### Can Reflective Practice Enhance Criticality?

#### 10.1 Introduction

The results of the analysis based on the key elements of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, i.e. habitus, field and capital, led to the emergence of three meta-themes: *an embodied sense of place*, *the universe of the uncritical*, and *the symbolic forces of culture*, which I also illustrate in the roadmap given on page 206. These meta-themes provide a holistic understanding of the cultural context of action learning practice in the Pakistani MBA. The aim of this discussion is to address these meta-themes in relation to the central research question underpinning my study, i.e.: **can the reflective practice of action learning enhance criticality in Pakistani MBAs?** The discussion in this chapter revolves around the question of whether the embodied dispositions of Pakistani MBA students, presented as findings in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, are durable enough to accept newer, reflective, dispositions to engender a habitus that is critical (i.e. a critical habitus which is reflexive enough to question predisposed dispositions). As suggested earlier, the framework provided by Bourdieu helps in examining Pakistani MBA students' embodied dispositions, which they exhibited as practice during action learning set meetings and narrated in their post-programme interview accounts. Bourdieu's theoretical elements aided in explaining the cultural challenges which participants experienced and expressed through their words, actions, attitudes and display of feelings and emotions during fieldwork.

As a whole, the use of the Bourdieusian framework provides an integrated view of the practice of action learning in the Pakistani context by illuminating the challenges of

conducting reflective practice and of the complexities in enhancing criticality in the MBA students. Furthermore, Bourdieu's concepts when operationalized together explain why the Pakistani MBA is a challenging context in which to design, develop and deliver an action learning programme using a critical perspective on management education and practice (e.g. Reynolds & Vince, 2004b; Reynolds, 1999a,b, etc.). This chapter sheds light on the findings to help understand the surrounding culture of the Pakistani MBA in terms of design aspects, pedagogical practice, learning relationships and facilitation of critical programmes within the context of management education in Pakistan. Overall, the findings are suggestive of a culture of high power-distance: a culture in which action learning is constrained by the power of this culture that continuously shapes the learning process through participants' embodied practices to a level where it is either culturally aligned to its normative structure or is discarded. This further helps in theorizing the practice of action learning in terms of design and dynamics for application to the Pakistani MBA. The chapter will then discuss the three meta-themes and synthesize findings in relation to the literature on management learning and education, action learning, reflective practice and Bourdieu's sociology of practice. Each meta-theme is divided into further meta-narratives that aim to offer an integrated perspective on Pakistani MBA students' cultural practices.

## **10.2 Meta-Theme I: An Embodied Sense of Place**

This meta-theme aggregates and theorizes themes presented in chapter 7 to contribute towards answering the overarching research question of this study. The Pakistani MBA context described in terms of Bourdieu's framework, is now put together to suggest the significance of participants' habitus in shaping learning practices. To reiterate, this meta-theme operationalized Bourdieu's notion of habitus, as a 'socialized subjectivity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: p.126), which acts as a reference system for MBA participants to make

sense of action learning's process, pedagogy and practice. As explained earlier, Bourdieu defines habitus as:

‘a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diverse tasks’ (Bourdieu, 1977: p.83).

The Pakistani MBA habitus reveals a meta-disposition underpinning their learning practices: a *cultural sense*, embodied by participants during upbringing, inculcated via pedagogic authority vested in cultural arbitraries to develop subservient learners who are oblivious to social inequalities. Further, within findings, the Pakistani MBA participants suggested that the opportunity to learn in a socially inclusive, reflexive and critical environment was subject to different types of cultural evaluation in view of being exposed to certain dispositions during their formative years. An understanding of the participants' habitus provided insight into the type of embodied dispositions that challenge action learning in the Pakistani MBA. The embodied sense of place, as meta-theme, outlines the internalization of a wide range of cultural dispositions that critical designers and pedagogues must consider before devising critical pedagogy programmes for Pakistani MBAs. This cultural challenge is discussed as an embodied perspective in two parts below: an embodied sense of culture; and an embodied sense of self.

### ***An Embodied Sense of Culture***

The findings suggested that the transmission of dominant culture and inequalities occurred through various forms of pedagogic action e.g. family inheritance and schooling etc. For Bourdieu (1997) the acquisition of habitus begins at birth. It is conditioned by a *cultural sense* which is inculcated within the habitus through the accumulation of *cultural capital*. Bourdieu (1997) notes that the inculcation of cultural capital ‘starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural

capital' (ibid. p.49). Bourdieu (1986) also distinguishes the forms of cultural capital (e.g. objectified, embodied and institutionalized), with embodied cultural capital (e.g. awareness, knowledge, taste etc.) acting as the primary source of cultural knowledge and that is reinforced through institutionalized cultural capital (e.g. education, degrees etc.). He notes that:

‘By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture’ (Bourdieu, 1977: p.494)

Bourdieu argues that the acquisition of cultural capital is dependent on an individual’s openness and ability to internalize dispositions (Dumais, 2002: p.44). Bourdieu (1973) writes that internalization of cultural capital is a function that initiates within the family context and is further rewarded through social institutions (e.g. schools, colleges etc.). Also, Dumais (2002) indicates how cultural capital ‘passed down by the family’ leads to academic rewards and cultural competence (p.44-45). Accumulation of cultural capital denotes the amount of cultural resources possessed by an individual, while a habitus provides competence in using resources to accomplish social goals.

An emerging perspective from the findings suggests, as also noted by Bourdieu (1986), that cultural capital possessed by Pakistani MBAs is unequally distributed amongst various classes of people, but a specific class of people possess more than others creating distinction in the society. This is again evident in the way gender as capital was unequally distributed between the male and female participants e.g. Khan and Sarah etc. He also stresses that it is within the family where cultural capital is inherited by the young and ratified through pedagogic actions and reaching at a certain age the practices continue through schooling (formal education) (Bourdieu, 1977). Although it may seem that the educational institutions

provide a standardized curriculum, but the values inculcated through its imposition cannot discount the inherent inequalities of the social system. The educational institutions reward the young who possess the cultural capital inculcated by the family and penalize who do not. It is not the case that Pakistani MBA education lacks innovative and creative managerial knowledge and practices. Rather, it is highly influenced by technicistic and functionalist perspective to management practice. This, in words of Staw and Barsade (1991), has made Pakistani MBA students ‘wiser but sadder’: wiser in dealing with the economic and operational functions, but sadder in dealing with the political and emotional uncertainties of the modern day organization (p.304).

### ***An Embodied Sense of One’s Self***

The findings suggested that the embodied sense of learners ‘self’ was developed through participants’ ***family spirit*** and was relatively evident in how participants attributed their schemes of learning and practice. The family spirit with cultural values of ***deference*** or ***reverence*** inculcated a strong sense of power and authority in arbitraries who pose to structure learners’ identity as obedient. Through various pedagogic systems in place for the individuals, like in the cases of Khattak and Khan, who do not possess enough cultural capital dedicate their lives to a struggle for achieving it, unconsciously misrecognize and legitimize its value and power (Bourdieu, 1984). However, participants, like Haris or Haron, who possess the city’s cultural capital, tend to show the ability to actively participate in the learning set interactions. Bourdieu’s theory also informs that individuals engage in ongoing, informal, modes of learning through interactions that shapes their habitus. The family spirit bombarding individuals with values of reverence then designate ***surrogates*** to further their development as competent cultural agents and in Bourdieu’s view these surrogates reward learners with relevant cultural capital. The three elements of the Pakistani cultural habitus

depicted by MBA students in their accounts provide the type of challenges a critical pedagogy might face in the Pakistani business schools.

The findings also suggested that participants' ability to socially interact and actively participate in action learning's socially inclusive pedagogy was influenced by acts of deference that they expressed in their accounts. A reason to action learning being unable to fully develop pedagogy of difference, as illustrated by Reynolds and Trehan (2001) and democratic thinking of Giroux (1991) can be attributed to the misrecognition of differences amongst participants (e.g. their gender, experiences and diversity etc.). Deference acts to assimilate social differences to distance them from their active faculties of thinking to interrogate the unequal relationships amongst learners and the facilitator (e.g. Reynolds & Trehan, 2001). Participants' habitus also demonstrates how gender is embodied as identity during their formative years. The *embodiment of gender* is a critical process which influences the way male and female are positioned within the learning spaces. The case examples of Khan and Leena show how male and female individuals acquire a gendered habitus that informs their position and practice. The embodiment of gender is differently structured for males who enjoy a certain degree of social freedom, while females are relatively restricted in their ability to enjoy freedom. This *distinction* between males and females is further strengthened by institutions where these learners acquire education e.g. schools, colleges and universities. The distinction is pedagogised through arbitraries and normalized by individuals through practice.

Lorde (1983) reiterates, what Freire (1970) suggests, that individuals learn to normalize themselves of differences (of race, sexuality and gender etc.) through acts of ignorance, and reproduction. Within Reynolds and Trehan's (2001) work on illustrating the pedagogy of

difference, they cite Lorde's (1992) work to which I was able to relate Pakistani MBAs' pedagogy of obliviousness, as a mode of cultural pedagogy in which there are:

'no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion' (Lorde, 1992: p.48)

The implication for a gendered habitus in action learning is critical for understanding social differences that inhibit inclusive pedagogies to work. For example, males outnumbered Sarah during the action learning sets. Although she does not mention this in her accounts, but rather laminates the argument by suggesting females as minorities in almost all the classrooms she has been through – making this normal for her. She was unable to openly discuss her feelings or emotions, apart from the few minutes she took to position her MBA research project amongst other introductory discussions. She concealed her feelings throughout by showing deference to various actions and events around her. These situations reflect the wider social and cultural beliefs inherent in the Pakistani learning space. However, according to Giroux (2001) the family plays a critical role in ascribing values that maintain the social order, which is further strengthened by social institutions. The ordering within families and institutions tends to mediate the way thought and action is expressed (*ibid.*). Language is also instrumental in instilling values, as it is the language of pedagogy and culture through which knowledge is transferred.

### **10.3. Meta-Theme II: The Universe of the Uncritical**

This meta-theme aggregates and theorizes themes presented in chapter 8 to discuss findings that describe Pakistani MBAs behavioural challenges during action learning while being situated in a traditional space. To reiterate, I applied Bourdieu's notion of field to make sense of participants' doxic experience of engaging with critical reflection in the action learning space. Doxa, as a cultural layer is a 'way in which a particular, contestable view of the world

becomes established as a normal, natural and unquestioned truth, by means of propositions which are assumed and so never examined and questioned' (Cushion and Jones, 2006: p.14).

When operationalized within this thesis, the concept of *doxa* suggested that Pakistani MBA's body is a 'memory pad' which shapes their mind and body to perform practices which are unconsciously memorized (Bourdieu, 2004). The universe within which the MBA is situated comprised of strong ortho-doxic beliefs, when challenged creating a *crisis* like situation (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977). With the introduction of action learning in an uncritical universe, it instigated a '*field of opinion*' where participants were asked to question the unquestionable beliefs and to relegate the taken for granted assumptions about their position as learners in the Pakistani MBA i.e. revealing what has been hidden by doxa. Bourdieu (1977) suggests that the 'truth of doxa is only ever fully revealed when negatively constituted by the constitution of a *field of opinion*, the locus of the confrontation of competing discourses' (p.168).

'In a determinate social formation, the stabler the objective structures and the more fully they reproduce themselves in agents' dispositions, the greater the extent of the field of doxa, of that which is taken for granted' (Bourdieu, 1977: 165–6)

Action learning, in this study, was one space where relations, structures and knowledge, which were taken for granted in the Pakistani MBA, were challenged. What remains critical is the relationship between how the field structures habitus for the Pakistani MBA participants to either enable or disable the formulation of a 'field of opinion', which counters the taken for granted assumptions and reconditions the habitus. It was observed that the doxa of the Pakistani MBA education field controls the habitus by exerting implicit power, which has been embodied by the students through a period of socialization. In the case of Pakistani MBA students, as findings suggest in this theme, the doxa reinforces a culture of unquestionable authority implied by the teachers, limiting participants' capacity to think and therefore misrecognize teachers' authority as experts. The challenge of questioning what these arbitrariness, like teachers, have imparted is discussed below in two ways: the

conditioning of the Pakistani MBA participants' habitus by the doxa through 'the body-culture interaction'; and the reconditioning of participants' habitus via action learning to embody a 'field of opinion'.

### ***Embodying the Body-Culture Interaction***

Organizing reflection within the Pakistani MBA habitus was a challenging aspect of this study. Reflection being a process, which 'challenges the kinds of assumptions that foster the inevitability of authoritarianism', can be, a difficult transition for people who are socialized in an uncritical universe (Reynolds, 2000: p.184). The persistence of critical reflection in asking questions and challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions, according to findings, created an implicit distance between individuals who have been habituated with prevailing MBA norms.

Questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions, according to Trehan & Rigg (2005) can stimulate emotional dissonance: 'a feeling of unease that occurs when someone evaluates an **emotional** experience as a threat to [their embodied beliefs]' (Jansz & Timmers, 2002: p.79). The findings note that the process underpinning critical thinking mobilized a strong sense of emotions coupled with feelings of displacement, 'distress and also joy and exhilaration' (Brockbank et al. 2002: p.12). A growing body of literature on critical action learning, as noted in chapter 03, acknowledges the significance of how the affective dimension of learners' experience emerges as significant, especially when organizing critical thought (Fenwick, 2003, Vince, 2004b). According to Trehan and Rigg (2007), a critical approach to action learning tries foregrounding issues of power, emotions and diversity. This is further acknowledged by Ram & Trehan (2009) in their study which suggests that 'action learning sets are environments within which emotions, politics and social power relations that are integral to organizing can be viewed, discussed and (potentially) transformed' (p.307).

The critical reflection process in the action learning sets had the tendency to create a crisis like situation for Pakistani MBA participants, where the taken-for-granteds were opposed and confronted, illuminating the psychological process which otherwise would have been hidden beneath many layers of *doxa* (e.g Bourdieu, 1977). The critical reflection approach included a collective approach to questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions, which participants held on tightly, as part of their embodied dispositions. A general feeling of unease was noticeable in the data that seemed to have occurred when participants tried engaging with the questioning insight to cross-examine one another in an effort to generate a critical discussion and feedback. Much of the discussion on MBA participants' emotions and emotional reactions during the critical phase could be directed to Bourdieu's idea of emotions as dispositions within the participants' *habituses*.

The meta-narrative underpinning the questioning process portrayed an **emotional** experience as it exposed participants' embodied beliefs (Jansz & Timmers, 2002). However, as the interview accounts unfold, this theme further explores how MBA participants *evaluate* their experiences of critical reflection as part of action learning process. Also, it is important to note how I intend to use the term critical reflection in my discussion, which has a twofold meaning: a catalyst which exposes *the conditions of learning* and the *underlying political and psychological processes* which otherwise would have been hidden underneath the many layers of *doxa* (e.g. Vince, 2008; Rigg & Trehan, 2004; Bourdieu, 1977). The MBA participants' accounts provide 'valuable insight into individuals' feelings and emotions: be they of anger, confusion, vulnerability, uncertainty, fear, irritation, frustration or warmth' (p.18). They also set the tone for exploring how emotions and feelings structure MBA participants' actions and the outcomes of the action learning effort i.e. conditioning of the *habitus*.

### **Embodying a ‘Field of Opinion’**

Vince (2004a) suggests that ‘action learning constructs a *learning space* within which assumptions and power relations can be explored’ (p.65). The design elements underpinning action learning encourage reflection over action and experience; and critical reflection which challenges participants ‘assumptions, values and frames of references’ (O’Neil & Marsick, 2007: p.180). A critical approach to action learning suggests that learners become ‘critically aware of how and why their assumptions [...] constrain the way they think’ (ibid.). Action learning makes visible the everyday assumptions that are hidden beneath layers of doxa (experience), causing ‘resistance and possibilities’ to transform practices and solve problems (Vince, 2004a: p.65). The challenging of doxa in the action learning sets (or critical reflection over the taken-for-granted assumptions and power-relations) for Pakistani MBA students resulted in bringing to light what had been unexplored, thus triggering distress and discomfort within participants’ response (e.g. Vince, 2004a,b; Vince & Martin, 1993). The patterns within data displayed by the participants suggested the difficulty in coming to terms with the learning group challenging thoughts and ideas. At times, this hindered the group flow as participants either overlooked the problems or engaged in aggressive discussions.

The challenging aspect of working with critical reflection on Pakistani MBA using action learning was documented in my field notes. After conducting sets and post-set interviews, I had reflected upon the action learning programme where I captured my pre-analysis feelings about how these Pakistani MBA students handled the notion of critical reflection in their groups:

“I think these students have not been able to work with the idea of questioning the way I had intended. It is likely, as also in my experience that, this has not been passed down to them or entertained in classrooms in the years that I have been away from the Pakistani MBA, which from my personal experience as a cultural insider holds true for most part of my learning there. I believe their lack of understanding may have been one of the culprits in having

difficulties in negotiating with critical insight, but also not to forget their way of interpreting is also different as to the way I perceive critical reflection. May be for me its inadequate having had exposure to critical forms of education in Lancaster, but for them it seems like a struggle or perhaps in their own cultural way they are trying to challenge the taken-for-granted. I must also confess, that the miracle of critical reflection did not happen overnight for me but may be over a gradual period of time the boundaries fade" (Personal Reflection, Field Note Action Learning Set at EBS, Meeting 2: March, 2014).

What the field note, above, suggests is that ***critical reflection*** is a ***mixed bag of feelings***, as some of the participants found it difficult while some did encourage it as a fresh perspective. The participants' accounts about their experience of critical reflection provide grounds to think about the ways in which they practiced critical reflection: questioning insight and reflective thought. The organizing of critical reflection seemed to have been an intensive process which exposed inner 'conflicts and contradictions' within participants' accounts and behaviour, mainly through their lack of understanding about critical reflective practice and coping strategies (Vince, 2008: p.102). Overall, these accounts reveal how dynamics of the questioning process affect action learning (group) practice. It furthers our knowledge about the unconscious emotions which contributed towards emotional resistance and irrationality, of participants – thus leading to 'self-limiting' structures (ibid. p.103). Lastly, it exhibited the social and cultural dynamics of the MBA classroom and how they are mirrored within the action learning sets, leading to 'inaction'. Therefore the feelings of discomfort and disorientation associated with critical reflection are part of the organizing process as suggested by Mezirow (1985) and Vince (2004), while emotional dissonance is complicated and can be experienced in different ways (Trehan & Rigg, 2005).

The use of critical reflection within the group was also risky, given the ***fragility of relations*** between participants e.g. gender differences, inter-cultural politics etc. Revans (1983) conception of questioning insight, as a dialectical process of critical reflection, provided a twofold perspective to the findings on critical reflection in action learning groups: first, *it invites others (group members) to cross-examine an individual's experience*; and the second

*it involves the individual to help others (group members) by repeating the same process.* The critical reflection process, as noted previously, stimulates emotions and feelings within individuals who are part of the process (Trehan & Rigg, 2005). Critical reflection eliciting emotions within participants is a key determinant of their heightened sensitivity: eliciting a defensive mechanism, provoking a sense of cautiousness, which could possibly, restrains their thinking (Vince, 2002). The key finding related to using questioning insight suggested participants' attempts to suppress their feelings in the learning process thereby neutralizing interactions to maintain their relationships and position in the group i.e. demise of the emotional-self from the conversation. However, the main challenge in developing this theme was to understand not only what the MBA participants feel about the questioning process but also from what perspective they aim to approach it. Considering the political aspect to questioning in Pakistani learning culture, I was afraid whether the participants would only be able to provide surface insight without reaching the depths of their experience about critical reflection i.e. avoiding uncertainty.

**Avoiding uncertainty** did become a way to deal with questioning insight: vaguely worded questions were commonly received from participants to ensure their participation in the critical reflection process. This in turn affected the quality of discussion and reflection generated as an outcome of the questioning insight. Reflection at this point of time became looking at past actions, i.e. how participants did things etc., rather than a way to develop action plans for resolving the issue. The questioning insight seemed to have constrained participants' ability to think forward, beyond what was apparent to them. Simpson et al. (2000) note that what hinders the group to move forward is the penetration of defensiveness, avoiding to compromise with either challenging or being challenged, within their learning practices. Therefore the assertion of a defensive attitude is like a protective shell which helps MBA participants from exposing themselves in front of the group, thus indicating some form

of consciousness, and more importantly, unconsciousness in ‘[avoiding] the pain and struggle of confronting [...] difficult dynamics within the group, which such experiences provoke’ (ibid. p.494).

Freire (1994) argues that a radical pedagogy, i.e. pedagogy of hope, empowers students to think and act independently. However, employing such pedagogies in this study where students were predisposed to certain learning dispositions, normalized in their daily practice, developed grounds for a discomforting pedagogy. A radical pedagogy might fall apart at the seams when the degree of *cultural incongruity* between what is embodied and what is imparted is greater. Finlay (2008) argues that there are cultural, social and political risks involved in enticing individuals to engage in critical reflection and as a result ‘not everyone ends up feeling empowered’ (p.10).

Overall, the findings in this meta-theme suggested that the cultural incongruity affected action learning – i.e. the MBA classroom practices influenced how facilitative action should be taken within the set. This was also significant in the findings on facilitation that suggested that the role of the facilitator in the eyes of participants’ was equal to an MBA teacher, but discomforting when it became passive. The decorum of the MBA class i.e. silence for the all-knowing, submission, respect, was also noted in the sets along with moments of frustration about the facilitator as to why was he not providing an answer, or the spring boarding ideas. McGill and Beaty (2001) suggest that ‘action learning is empowering because it starts and ends with individual and their project [...]’ (p.26). The accounts of Pakistani MBA students revealed that the incongruities between the MBA’s cultural and action learning’s pedagogical context invited emotional discomfort and contradictive learning practices. In a broader sense, for the pedagogues encouraging a critical practice to learning, Price and Osborne (2000) argue that these

‘[...] contradictory and complex dimensions of the process are not obstacles to developing humanness but integral and inherent to the process. We must embrace these emerging contradictions and the slippery notions of [critical] pedagogy. We must explore the tensions inherent in the power differentials in classrooms as we develop our cultural, social, and intellectual selves with our students’ (Price & Osborne, 2000: P.51)

Moncrieffe (2006) quotes Bourdieu saying that ‘tensions and contradictions [...] arise when people encounter and are challenged by different contexts’ (p.37). The incongruities, therefore, are bound to occur within the Pakistani MBA habitus, where a crisis like situation sets the foundation for reflexivity in an individual’s habitus (e.g. Mouzelis, 2007). Hence, the challenges in working with the critical dimensions of action learning serves as a point to think about the power differentials operating in the classroom and to work out a strategy to encourage critical practice and yet be culturally-sensitive.

#### 10.4. Meta-Theme III: The Symbolic Forces of Culture

This meta-theme aggregates and theorizes themes presented in chapter 9, to discuss findings that highlight the socio-political context of participants’ learning relationships in action learning sets. To reiterate, I operationalized Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital to exhibit the relationships of Pakistani MBA students’ in action learning sets. According to Gaventa (2003) fields are social networks of interrelated positions, where individuals occupy different positions based on the volume and nature of the capital they possess (p.6). What distinguishes an individual from one position to the other in the social space is ***capital*** – ‘a set of actually usable resources and power’ (Bourdieu, 1984: p.114). ‘Capital is accumulated labour’ (Bourdieu, 1986: p.241), which is ‘accumulated either in material or embodied form’ (Bourdieu, 1983: p.13).

The notion of ***symbolic space*** has been critical in operationalizing the interplay of habitus, field and capital, with the Pakistani MBA participants, to outline the way in which ***symbolic systems*** operate to reproduce ‘social inequality’ (Swartz, 1997: p.82). Bourdieu is critical of

the role played by the symbolic dimension, of power and processes, of the social space in manipulating the field structure to maintain the order of unequal capital distribution amongst the individuals (ibid.). The symbolic space consists of structures, according to Bourdieu, which act as ‘structuring structures’: ‘a means for ordering and understanding the world’; and ‘structured structures’: the embodied logic that ‘channels deep structural meanings shared by all members of a culture’ (Swartz, 1997: p.83). The symbolic structures within the Pakistani MBA’s space act as mechanisms for exclusion and inclusion of individuals based on an internal logic of either grouping or dividing on the nature and amount of capital possessed by the students (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984). The analysis in this meta-theme utilizes this logic to reveal the ***symbolic power-relations*** which dominate the action learning sphere of Pakistani MBA students. These power-relations, which are distinct in nature, have been embodied by the Pakistani MBA students within their habitus and are considered as legitimate e.g. the student-teacher relation, male-female students’ relation etc.

Findings presented under this meta-theme provided insight, using the symbolic space, into how MBA participants mutually share the (action) learning space with one another, and what underscores movements or mobility in a relational space (field). The positional configurations in a field thus depict the social inequalities of an action learning group which in learning processes mediated participants’ relations with others. The social organization of relationships (roles and positions) sheds light on what took place in action learning sets i.e. how power-relations were actualized in the learning space. Below I synthesis how embodied power-relations influenced participants and how social spaces were in fact symbolic spaces that shaped learning relationships based on their social and cultural capital.

### ***The Embodied Power-Relations***

Bourdieu (1989) considers capital as a form of ‘power’, which individuals and groups acquire to maintain their position in the social space. The symbolic forms of capital (e.g. cultural, social, intellectual etc.) are conceptualized by Bourdieu (1989) to act as mediators within power-relations as they differentiate amongst individuals. Bourdieu suggests that the ‘source of power’ lies between the ‘relationship of symbolic systems and social structures’, which structure the field (Swartz, 1997: p.88). For example, the field of MBA education in Pakistan was found to be one where deference outlined learning relations, as noted in participants’ accounts. It was further found that deference was enacted as a cultural strategy to create (power) distance between MBA students and teachers, thus suspending independent thinking (and feelings) and their ability to question the legitimacy of socially-ascribed practices during their formative years (e.g. Pepinsky, 1998).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1997) note such deliberate practices to impose culture in the form of ‘***symbolic violence***’ – i.e. imposition of values (p.119). Symbolic violence occurs through legitimization and misrecognition of dominant cultural arbitraries (e.g. teachers as experts etc.) as being legitimate. Misrecognition, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), is the ‘process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’ (p.xiii). This meta-theme also suggested that participants’ ability to socially interact and actively participate in action learning’s socially interactive and inclusive pedagogy was undermined by acts of deference. A reason for action learning being unable to fully develop, as pedagogy of difference – illustrated by Reynolds & Trehan (2001), can be attributed to the misrecognition of differences amongst participants (e.g. their gender, experiences and diversity etc.). Deference acted to assimilate social differences to distance them from their active faculties of thinking

to interrogate the unequal relationships amongst learners and the facilitator (Reynolds & Trehan, 2001). Therefore, the key outcome of this finding suggests that symbolic systems operating in cultural spheres produce symbolic forms of power (i.e. symbolic power) creating difference and distinction amongst Pakistani MBA students (Bourdieu, 1984).

### ***The Embodied Cultural and Social Capital***

The discussion on the power-relations of Pakistani MBA participants takes on a distinct perspective of how the social forces within the learning field operate to ensure that the social order is maintained within the action learning group. The first theme on ***disproportionate gendered power-relations*** highlight that gendered relations have been embodied within participants, i.e. within their habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), as part of their cultural socialization. Also, the way in which the MBA is structured to exhibit values of ‘instrumental rationality’ i.e. means to an end (Simpson, 2006: p.185), depicting the overall managerial discourse of masculinity, power and control (Collinson & Hearn, 1994), thus effecting group relations on the MBA programme.

The findings suggested that marginalizing women members in the set, through acts of silence, deference or respect, either by women participants confining themselves or male members projecting themselves was a common string of actions. The male members avoided any direct confrontation or interaction with the female set members and rather used the facilitator as the springboard to jump ideas off or merely prescribe solutions – playing the ‘doubting game’ without genuine interest or empathy in female participants problem (McGill & Broackbank, 2004: p.87). Most of the female participants in the sets exercised their right to privacy, by disallowing other members to access personal space. However, female participants were more inclined in listening to others because of embodied cultural dispositions (habitus), as mostly the interactions were male dominated throughout the learning set recordings.

A reason that can be associated as to why male members were reluctant to engage directly was their familial and institutional upbringing, which, in some cases, prohibited direct interaction with females. Bourdieu explains that power arises from culturally created symbolic values (Wacquant, 2005). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital acquired by participants, as noted in previous analysis, facilitates gendered forms of power relations. Gaventa (2003) explains that cultural capital ‘provides the means for a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy’ (p.6). The pedagogising of gender inherits a power-base that legitimizes the predominance of a segregated society (e.g. Dunbar, 2004), in which men are not allowed to directly engage with women but rather look down upon them (Malik, 2012). The ones who managed to engage in direction communication with female participants were again prone to respecting the gendered boundaries, without critically pressing for a reflective dialogue. Hence, the learning setting presented in the Pakistani MBA presents itself as a form of a social space where male and female occupy different positions based on the volume of gendered capital they have acquired previously.

Bourdieu (1986) states that the nature and volume of capital structures the learning field, which the findings also indicated that the:

‘social order is progressively inscribed in people’s minds’ through ‘cultural products’ including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1986: p.471)

Bourdieu (1986) further points out that such inscription, evident in many participants, results in the unconscious acceptance of power-relations that result in social inequalities, difference and power hierarchies – especially affecting the dynamics of a learning group. Also that the cultural capital acquired previously plays a critical role in shaping relationships according to the educational, religious or social values incorporated during the early years (ibid.). Therefore, in view of Gaventa (2003), the action learning set is a field in which participants not only resist the transformation of relations by being silent and avoiding interaction, they

are also complacent towards conforming to the pre-existing social order in the learning environment. Here it can also be concluded that participants have experienced ‘power differently depending which field they are in at a given moment’ (*ibid.* p.6) and that the social remains a powerful context that structures their habitus to conform to the gendered-power relations.

This theme further discusses another set of power relations, which closely emerged as a result of gendered-power relations i.e. the relationships amongst male participants (male-male). This masculine culture portrayed through male-relationships had direct experience on male participants and indirect on females (e.g. Simpson, 2006; Stead, 2014; McGill & Brockbank, 2004). Simpson (2006) indicates that the MBA space is tagged with unconscious processes that construct masculine discourses and the male-managerial identity. Also, Sinclair (2006) notes how MBA pedagogies male-oriented which tend to discipline and limit women’s role in the managerial domain. The Pakistani MBA, as Khan (2006) notes, is one that isolates the MBA classroom to reproduce certain managerial discourses, which have been powerfully inserted by a certain class of (male) academics who promote managerialism and safeguard the MBA curriculum.

The Pakistani MBA’s learning culture was found to be more content (banking) oriented, as described by participants, where it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide knowledge and MBA students are merely asked to reproduce it (Khan, 2007). This divorces them from the complexity of the real world. Also, recent studies, example Trehan (2011), note that a distinguishing feature of critical action learning is ‘a more active facilitation role’ but there remains doubt over how active is this facilitation in the set process. However, others contest this view, by arguing that despite Revans’ static learning equation, action learning focus falls between a practice-based perspective and an emancipative view of management learning.

Such a view is '**suspicious of canonical ideas** (and the **experts who trade in them**) and **distrustful of speculative knowledge** untested in action' (Pedlar et al. 2005: p.62: emphasis added) - i.e. making facilitation a challenging aspect especially in the Pakistani MBA context.

In light of Khan's (2006) study on the pedagogical styles adopted by Pakistani business schools suggested that the MBA programme hangs between traditional to radical content but the underlying process is still traditional. According to Giroux (1981), the traditional process encompasses conventional teacher-student relationships, roles and power-positions inside the classroom. The challenging aspect arises when students as products of hierarchical pedagogies are placed in participatory (critical) setting within a socially inclusive process. Vince (2008) and Reynolds (1999a) indicate possible pitfalls for a critical design when implemented in a traditional context, e.g. inaction, resistance or powerlessness. Hanson and Hanson (2001) note that educational institutions in a hierarchical cultural context face difficulties in adapting to participatory, inclusive and critical designs where power-relations between pedagogues and participants are more symmetrical. Pakistani business schools in view of Hanson and Hanson (2001), and in my personal experience, can be viewed as:

'notable examples of such hierarchies, and developing a participatory practice within them presents many challenges, particularly because of the demands for grades, credits, time-lines, syllabuses, etc.' (Hanson & Hanson, 2001: p.30).

The shifting context of power-position from the facilitator to participants in the sets highlights the asymmetrical power-relations operating in the action learning sphere. The asymmetrical power-relations address the power issues, which were observed in my field notes and participants' accounts, indicated difficulty in understanding the structure of action learning. It is understandable, as Marsick and O'Neil (1999) point out, that the simplistic notions of action learning have led to multiple variations and interpretations of its design and

process. Inglis (1994) terms this as a difficulty in itself for the facilitators and participants to actually enact the design purported by Revans' (1983).

Overall, the findings under this meta-theme discuss dependencies (or relationships), which are essential in developing mutual understanding for the group's well-being. Also, the Pakistani MBA was presented as a linear process which is hierarchically organized where social interaction between students is minimized and students have normalized their reservation as comfortable. In light of this the participants' experienced anxiety in the action learning when stepping out to interact with others (unknown and gender-opposite people), which is unusual in the Pakistani MBA. Action learning was a process that was more cyclical in nature, involving dialogue over action and experience, during which participants faced difficulty. Thus, stepping out of their comfort zone to socially interact, according to Vince and Martin (1993), created anxiety for the Pakistani MBA participants i.e. the freedom to manoeuvre the self in the learning space and 'breaking free of the dependency on teacher, and place emphasis on the responsibilities of the learner' (ibid. p.208). The forces operating within and outside the action learning sphere highlight the power of culture to persist with the order normalized for the learning process in the Pakistani MBA.

## 10.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, what the meta-themes, themes and sub-themes collectively indicate is that there is a possibility for engendering a critical habitus (i.e. a habitus that encourages critically reflective dispositions), and that this lies in the ability of the embodied culture to accept transformation. Therefore, the answer to my overarching research question (explained in more detail on page 310, under section 11.1) is that the emergence of a critical habitus depends on how durable the embodied dispositions are in empowering or disempowering Pakistani MBA students in 'certain ways of perception and conduct' (Ostrow, 1979: p.280).

This finding draws upon three important aspects of culture that are brought to light in the meta-themes discussed above: i.e. gender, familial upbringing and the institutionalization of norms in Pakistani MBA students. These aspects suggest that a culture that is power-structured and applies power and control on its subjects poses a major challenge to any attempt to enhance criticality through the use of the reflective practice of action learning. The power-relations between participants, and between the participants, the facilitator and the set and its cultural environment are suggestive of a high-power distance culture in which a critical pedagogy is likely to face resistance. This also questions Revans' (1983) concept of action learning in that it suggests that 'comrades in adversity' are in fact not 'equal' comrades in organizing reflective insight, as the greater the power distance between individuals the more difficult it becomes for these participants to challenge each other. However, on the positive side, it can be suggested that, given the key areas (findings) identified in this study, certain design elements and group dynamics could also be re-designed to facilitate the implementation of a culturally sensitive form of critical pedagogy which induces critical thinking without transgressing major dividing lines like gender, which are inscribed and embodied from a socio-political perspective.

The study also points towards the possibility of a future study which takes into consideration these gendered aspects to further investigate how traditional discourses of familial and institutionalized upbringing affect women as managers and leaders-to-be in their professional life in Pakistan. Using the work of Stead (2014), I would like to make a final point about the gendered aspect of my study to highlight the influences of the socio-dynamics of wider society upon the action learning set. The themes emerging from Stead's (2014) work suggest how women leaders are marginalized in the entrepreneurial sector, which is often associated with masculinity. She also demonstrates how marginalizing practices in the practical field are reciprocated in development activities like action learning. Stead (2014) indicates that women

leaders can feel that they are ‘outsiders’ in an action learning set dominated by males. The themes and accounts presented by Stead (2014) indicate deeper issues of power, which due to the lack of women in leadership roles results in marginalization. The embodied sense of the female participants in my study means that they can also be thought of as individuals subjected to a social pedagogy of what Stead (2013) terms ‘(in)visibility’. Deploying (in)visibility means that their physical presence as females gives them a visible physical presence, while stereotypical expectations and gender divisions makes them invisible. Some female participants in my study had also learnt to ‘deploy (in)-visibility’ (Stead, 2013: p.63), in which family and society played a critical role, making it difficult for them to acquire critical dispositions. Thus, the social sanctions imposed by society define the limits of visibility for females and males in Pakistani culture.

The findings discussed in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 and the meta-themes in this chapter thus collectively reflect what Delpit (1988) terms a ‘culture of power’, a culture in which power structures everyday life practices (p.282). The ‘culture of power’ perspective, as noted by Delpit (1988), helps illustrate participants’ persistence in leaving responsibility to the facilitator. Therefore, the less leverage power has over learners the more durable their habitus is towards developing criticality. The durability of the habitus in Pakistani MBA students is governed by power-relations, which indicate the following:

- The power dynamics enacted in the family and in classrooms are reflected in individuals’ learning preferences.
- Power relations have a structure or a code with a well-defined political and social agenda for inculcating values of respect and obedience.
- The power dynamics within the family and classroom are a reflection of the wider socio-cultural and socio-political context in which the learning system is situated.

- Interaction with cultural arbitrariness enables the acquisition of a structure or codes in a meaningful way.
- Sensitization towards power relations in everyday life allows cultural arbitrariness to maintain social order (control).

## CHAPTER 11

### Conclusion

This chapter begins by describing how this study contributes theoretically towards understanding the complexities and challenges of organizing reflection in action learning in the Pakistani MBA context. It then describes other theoretical and methodological contributions that this study makes along the way. In this chapter, I also highlight implications for research and the practice of action learning in diverse cultural contexts. Before ending this thesis, I provide readers with a post-study reflection on the design and process of this doctoral project and present some potential limitations. This is followed by proposals for future research and some final thoughts on this study. While I informed the readers about my motivation for undertaking this study in Chapter 1 (section 1.3), by the end of this study I can also acknowledge that this doctoral research journey has made a lasting impact upon my thinking and practice as a researcher.

#### 11.1. Main Contribution of this Study

The purpose of this section is to present the main contribution of my doctoral study, i.e. a proposed way of understanding the possibility for reflective practice in the Pakistani MBA and similar contexts. In this, my study reveals that understanding the embodied dispositions of action learners is a significant step towards fostering a critical pedagogy of action within a given cultural context. Engendering a habitus which is critical here not only means to become aware of what was previously hidden under layers of cultural ideologies, but also to be sensitive towards the influence of cultural practices on critical awareness. This study contributes in revealing the resilient character of Pakistani MBA students' embodied culture to experiencing action learning practice in three ways: Firstly, it helps identify the challenges of the predisposed learning dispositions embodied by Pakistani MBA students towards action

learning. Secondly, it explains the psychological and political implications for encouraging reflective practice and challenging those dispositions within action learning sets. Thirdly, it sheds light on the complex interaction between embodied and situated culture by exploring the symbolic significance of the power-relations of action learners within the Pakistani MBA context. These three elements combine to provide an integrated perspective on the culturally conditioned learning practices of Pakistani MBA students using Bourdieu's framework of practice (habitus, field and capital). The insights generated through this framework help situate action learning within its broader cultural context – a context in which individuals are predisposed to certain practices. This integrated perspective also reveals that criticality in habitus stems from within the durable dispositions by adopting reflective practice, which becomes difficult given its way of challenging predisposed beliefs. Recognising the durable character of embodied culture is thus a factor in understanding the resilience of cultural context, as this can help in the design of programmes which draw on critical perspectives and reduce failure and resistance towards critical pedagogies. This is further explained below:

### ***Durability of Embodied Culture***

This study reveals that the durability of Pakistani MBA students' habitus towards adapting reflective dispositions is crucial for learners to comprehend with reflective practices that develop awareness of taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions. The study further illuminates that the challenge to enhancing criticality in the Pakistani MBA comes from the power-ridden, dominated, embodied culture of Pakistani MBA students. The findings collectively demonstrate that the culture in which the MBA is situated has been embodied within participants' conscious and unconscious dispositions. These embodied dispositions are in fact dispositions which inculcate the acceptance of power and the norms of culture by the Pakistani MBA participants. Thus, the findings indicate that the participants' habitus is

situated within a power-structured environment, in which it acts as a scheme of perceptions and practices which are predisposed to allow domination over them – and this is embodied at an early age through various pedagogies, i.e. familial, social or institutional, etc. (as explained earlier in chapter 7).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) propose that ‘all pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power’ (p.5). The participants’ culture also indicated the significance of family relations, teachers (e.g. as spiritual fathers), or the older generation in possession of wisdom. The elders enjoy great status in Pakistani culture as sources of appreciation and transmitters of culture who nurture participants to become competent cultural citizens. The elders possess pedagogic authority, and teachers in educational institutions possess the same authority by virtue of parents allowing them to undertake the pedagogic work of reinforcing the cultural habitus. By virtue of their position, teachers are unquestionable within the ranks of Pakistani culture and society.

Jenkins (1992) further notes that Bourdieu describes symbolic violence as: the ‘imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups [...] in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate’ (p.66). The legitimation of power and authority through symbolic violence is created through misrecognition, a ‘false consciousness’, through which culture forces power-relations to maintain its order (*ibid.*). Misrecognition, in the case of Pakistani MBA students, is created during cultural upbringing, which according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) acts as ‘the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder’ (p.xiii). The cornerstone of what Pakistani MBA students perceive as normal arises out of ‘pedagogic action’ through which cultural arbitrariness impose symbolic values upon them in a

way that legitimizes these values (Jenkins, 1992). The cultural values imposed by the arbitrariness, identified by the Pakistani MBA students as familial, gendered and social, are embodied through ‘pedagogic authority’ they exercise over them (*ibid.*). Bourdieu argues that the embodiment of symbolic capital works in three modes, i.e. *diffuse education*, or through social interaction, *family education* or family upbringing, and *institutionalised education*, or learning in institutions like schools and colleges, etc. (Jenkins, 1992: p.66). The mainstay of pedagogic action is *pedagogic work*, which according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) is:

‘[...] a process of inculcation which must last long enough to produce a durable training, i.e. a *habitus*, the product of internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself after PA [pedagogic action] has ceased and thereby of perpetuating in practices the principles of the internalized arbitrary’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990: p.31)

I argue in this thesis that the application of a Bourdieusian lens helps to illustrate the tensions between two positions of the Pakistani MBA participants, i.e. that of their predisposed dispositions (*habitus*), and the other arising as a result of reflective practice (*critical habitus*). Organizing reflective insight in action learning provided a basis for Pakistani MBA students to assume identities as reflective learners who were able to recognize relationships and encouraged political awareness and sensitivity towards gender, group work and critical reflexivity. The possibility for developing a critical *habitus*, i.e. for Pakistani MBA students to evolve as reflective practitioners, firmly lies in their ability to reflect upon their *habitus* with a critical intent so that they are ‘able to critically envision the manifold cultural entanglements and contradictory political lines of conflict of every [cultural] act’ (Draxler, 2007). The findings suggest that the main challenge to developing a critical *habitus* was participants’ embodied dispositions that have normalized high power distance between individuals. However, this does not mean that the Pakistani MBA participants did not recognize the need to develop independent thinking, but rather were unable to distance themselves from their predisposed dispositions.

## 11.2 Further Contributions of this Study

In this section, I describe further contributions that this study makes theoretically and methodologically.

### ***Action Learning in the Pakistani MBA Context***

Theoretically, this study makes four significant contributions to action learning theory and practice. Firstly, this study adds to Dilworth, Boshyk, and Marquardt's work, which suggests that one reason for action learning's failure in eastern contexts may be cultural incompatibility. Marquardt (1998) notes that 'cultural variations and practices in many parts of the world do not fit as naturally with action learning values and practices' (p.113). The findings of this study raise a similar concern about the differences between the learning practices of Pakistani MBA students and action learning. In fact, the findings advance thinking on membership diversity, the delegation of power and authority and openness to sharing experiences and personal opinions within sets (Marquardt, 1998). Although the strategies suggested by Marquardt (1998) to overcome cultural challenges seem naïve, this study provides insights into the complex structure of culture embodied in individuals and embedded in their context. Also, in a way, this study reaffirms the concerns of Dilworth and Boshyk (2010) about practising action learning in the Asian context: 'setting up action learning teams in Asia with team members of unequal status is usually not going to work. Mixing men and women in a team does not work [either], and it also can encounter keen resistance in Asia' (p.206). However the words 'does not work' used in this context contradict the findings of this study, as action learning does work although its emancipatory potential is at risk.

Secondly, this study also adds to the literature that recognizes the emancipatory potential of action learning (Fenwick, 2003). The action learning design used in this study was focused on Pakistani MBA learners to help them become critical of their learning practices. The programme was designed to develop sets to work alongside a ‘power-with’ approach to document the contested nature of learning in the Pakistani MBA (e.g. Fenwick, 2003). The findings not only confirm that ‘action learning – as an organizing process – is a container for emotions [...] and for power-relations’ but also illuminate cultural practices which ‘influence the possibilities of and resistance to learning and change’ (Vince, 2004b: p.119-120). Organizing, according to Vince (2004b), is a critical factor in connecting action learners with their context – thus revealing the politics surrounding the process through which reflective insight becomes possible (p.117). The findings pertaining to organizing reflective insight show hierarchies and the unequal distribution of power amongst Pakistani MBA participants. In explicating the emotional and psychological aspects of action learning, this study responds to calls for evaluating the use of reflective practice in enhancing criticality (Perriton & Reynolds, 2004). The findings presented in Chapter 8 show that the behaviour described by Pakistani MBA students during critical reflection could possibly lead to the rejection of critical pedagogy given the delicate and sensitive nature of relationships between learners (e.g. gender-power) (*ibid.*). These findings add to the understanding of the ‘development and the conflicted role of the critical management educator in the colonizing structures of management’ within the context of the Pakistani MBA (Perriton & Reynolds, 2004: p.74). In particular, these findings additionally highlight the repercussions of critical approaches (Brookfield, 1994; Hagen et al. 2003), especially in the context of action learning (Vince, 2008).

Thirdly, this study recognizes the power of critical action learning in problematizing issues and in learning from the tensions which arise because of this (Rigg & Trehan, 2004).

However, the findings contribute to better understanding the challenges triggered by the mobilization of emotions and feelings as a result of developing an awareness of the politics of relationships within the Pakistani MBA (e.g. Vince, 2008). What Pakistani MBA students consider as being respectful or cautious in questioning their peers when organizing insight supports Vince's (2008) view of this as 'inaction' – constraining individuals in learning and solving problems. The research voices the psychological and political implications of the reflective practice of Pakistani MBA learners in action learning sets (i.e. the findings presented in Chapter 8), an area of interest to critical action learning (Vince & Martin, 1993; Vince, 2004a; Vince, 2008). This study also moves beyond narrow conceptualizations of reflective practice, which normally would indicate that reflection *per se* was accomplished by the Pakistani MBA students, in that a critical examination of these findings contributes to the literature by exposing the fragility of relationships and the incongruity of a critically reflective practice. Moreover, the study acknowledges the situated nature of action learning (Contu & Willmott, 2003) and contributes to a clearer understanding of how relationships of power operate within the Pakistani context.

Fourthly, this study advances the debate on gender-power relations in action learning practice, as posed by Stead (2013). The findings presented in Chapter 9 specifically contribute to '[understanding] the tacit nature of social and situated learning through an articulation of the ways in which gender and power operate' in action learning (Stead, 2013: p.63). This study contributes to the debate in terms of suggesting how male and female Pakistani MBA students normalize gender roles through modes of socialization and upbringing and the difficulties this brings for reflective action. The emergence of power-relations within groups also gives rise to the issues of facilitation which this study addresses. As a final theoretical contribution, this study and the findings presented in Chapter 9 also add to the literature on facilitating action learning in different contexts (Pedler et al. 2013;

Marquardt, 2007; McGill & Brockbank, 2003). It addresses what Pedler et al (2013) claim is the question that facilitators most often ask: 'am I doing it right?' (p.1). This study addresses this question within the context of the Pakistani MBA by advising facilitators about the potential problems of incongruity, gender-power relations and hierarchies in operation within sets.

### ***The Bourdieusian Theory of Practice as an Explanatory Framework***

The application of Bourdieu's theory of practice to understanding the learning practices of Pakistani MBA students is a significant contribution to action learning theory and research (i.e. theoretically and methodologically). As an explanatory framework, Bourdieu's theoretical elements of habitus, capital and field help conceptualize culture and cultural practices embodied as dispositions. The embodied practices are analysed as dispositions, providing an understanding of the mental schemes that shape the learning habits (or nomos) of Pakistani MBA students. The use of Bourdieu's habitus helps explain how these habits (nomos) are embedded within Pakistani MBA students' identities as learners (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977). This study also contributes to the methodological literature in this regard in that it demonstrates the use of Bourdieu to understand how durable these dispositions are and to what extent they shape learning practices.

Theoretically, Bourdieu's ideas of culture and cultural practice help to structure debates about the normalization of dispositions and legitimization of the ideologies, practices and social hierarchies prevailing in the Pakistani context (Malik, 2012). The analysis of the findings presented in Chapter 7 help to identify challenges to critical pedagogy and its application in a normative society (Swartz, 1997). This significant contribution helps the literature on critical management education to better understand the complexities of culture and cultural practices. The findings presented in Chapter 8 reveal the forces within the cultural field in which action

learning is situated, which helped identify the behavioural and psychological challenges to critical practice in the Pakistani MBA context. Again this is a significant contribution to the literature which advances the notion of emotionality in learning (Vince, 2004a,b). Finally, the findings presented in Chapter 9 direct our attention towards the symbolic values of certain ideologies and practices which are otherwise hidden from the world. Bourdieu's framework helps reveal these aspects of culture, which if ignored may result in failure to learn or in disruptive consequences of reflective practice in the Pakistani MBA context.

Methodologically, the Bourdieusian theoretical framework, operationalized through an analytical strategy, helped interpret participants' embodied dispositions. The strategy is further supported by an interpretive framework designed to make sense of participants' learning accounts and practices, which are grounded in the cultural context of the Pakistani MBA. In other words, Bourdieu's sociology of practice and thinking tools (i.e. habitus, field and capital) enable me to interpret the meanings assigned by participants in their accounts to learning practices, and serve as an analytical lens for my thesis and for readers. Once the analytical process was initiated and the themes started emerging from the data, Bourdieu's concepts helped make sense of what the participants meant when they referred to their predisposed understanding of learning. As noted in Chapter 1, Vara and Fay (2011) suggested the possibility of using Bourdieu to explain the 'rules of the game' of the MBA. They further stressed that 'there is a lack of integrative conceptual models that help to better understand the underlying reasons for the alleged problems of MBA education' (p.27). My study responds to this call and contributes to their work on advancing Bourdieu's theory of practice to understand the problems associated with MBA learning and practice. This study also adds to the debates which naively isolate Bourdieu's theoretical elements for analysing social practice. My study suggests that using Bourdieu's elements together (habitus, field and capital) provide a strong basis for explaining how practice is integrated in its culture. Also,

years after Bourdieu's work in the Algerian context, this study makes way into the Pakistani context, leading to further development of his ideas especially in the higher education sector. Lastly, the use of Bourdieu is significant in this study as it contributes to management learning and education, action learning, MBA education and the Pakistani context.

### ***Action Learning and Design-based Research (DBR)***

Methodologically this study makes two significant contributions to action learning research and design-based studies. Firstly, empirical studies in action learning practice suggest the use of various methodologies such as action research, ethnography, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, phenomenology, phenomenography, etc. (e.g. Fox, 2009; Vince, 2002; Rigg & Trehan, 2004; Pedler, 2012; Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). The use of a design-based study adds to the literature on DBR by taking into account the social context of learning through a constructionist episteme: this provides an emic perspective for the researcher to investigate the subjective meanings embodied by participants and their practical relation to their context (Barab & Squires, 2004; Bell, 2004: p.248). This study also addresses the questions posed by design-based researchers about the 'core foci of design-based research', its 'usefulness for advancing assertions investigated' and how far it helps in 'understanding the role of researcher/facilitator' (Barab & Squires, 2004: p.2). In Chapters 5 and 6, I address the issues of design and provide a design-based framework for researchers to develop practices which address not only these questions but also issues of 'understanding the contextuality of research claims generated' in the process (ibid.). The power of the design-based framework which I present lies in the critical perspective it provides for studying how the design is situated within its overall social, cultural and political context. The findings generated by this design, coupled with an active-reflective interview technique, in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 capture

not only participants' reflection of the design but also the wider contextual influence on design elements such as reflective practice or critical reflection.

Secondly, this study adds to the works of Sandoval and Bell (2004), Barab and Squires (2004) and Barab (2006) to advance the use of DBR by placing this methodology within its context. This addresses the criticism levelled against DBR that it isolates the learning design from its immediate context. In a way, this methodological approach is driven by the same motive as that proposed by Reason (2004), namely to recognize the co-operative and participative potential of design-based research. This study operationalizes an interpretive framework, as suggested by Barab & Squires (2004), to 'examine how [learners] might be able to deeply attend to and learn to shape the cognitive activities and social interactions constituted by participants in everyday settings' (ibid.). This also adds to what Cobb et al. (2012) note that, by drawing on a learning design, the design-based researcher provides storied accounts which outline the learner's cognition, the situated nature of the learning activity and the relationship between participants and with the design. The storied accounts, as Barab (2014) suggests, provide 'a process of reflective action', which in this study helps to understand the experiences of participants with respect to action learning practice (p.163). The design-based research is able to provide accounts about the process and context of the learning design in a particular cultural setting – i.e. the Pakistani MBA. Therefore, the use of an interpretive, critical, design-based framework drawing on a constructionist episteme is a genuine contribution which stands in opposition to the quantitative, positivistic traditions of social science in Pakistan.

### **11.3. A Post-Study Reflection on Positionality**

In this section, I provide readers with a reflective account of my positionality in this study, following the completion of my doctoral dissertation. Drawing on the literature, methodology

and findings of this research project, I provide insights into the challenges and opportunities which positionality offers in knowing one's own position within a research process. England (1994) notes that 'research is a process, [and] not just a product' of a researcher's efforts. Moreover, it is an 'ongoing process', which leaves a long-lasting impact on its stakeholders (researcher, participants, etc.) (Bourke, 2014: p.1). England (1994) further reminds us that research practice is a joint production of knowledge that takes place in a shared space, shaped by both the participants and the researcher. The identities of both the participants and the researcher impact the research process, and as a result influence the outcomes of the research. Kezar (2002) suggests that 'people have multiple overlapping identities [and interests ... and] people make meaning from various aspects of their identity' (p.96). However, it becomes even more complicated when the process of research draws upon interpretivist, critical and design-based perspectives to study learners in a design.

A critical perspective on research calls for a reflexive practice whose impact lies beyond the mere sense of completing a research project. Bourke (2014) adds that:

'Research continues as we reflect: on the development of an idea; on data collection; on findings, and; on implications. Our reflections may take shape in other ways' (Bourke, 2014: p.1)

On reflection, I wrote this thesis in an effort to explore whether reflective practice in action learning can enhance criticality in Pakistani MBA students. As suggested earlier, the Pakistani MBA is situated in a traditionalist culture, which favours power-position, hierarchical pedagogies and the submissive self of the student, making positionality all the more important for a researcher - especially for one who is the product of the very same system that he sets out to study. Throughout my study, from drafting the initial research question and proposal to the design and facilitation of the action learning programme, my position as a researcher was at the forefront of my mind. The fact that I was born a Muslim

and Pakistani Asian, come from a middle-class background and was educated in Pakistan, to study the challenges of embodied culture, a culture embodied by myself as researcher, was indeed a challenge for positionality.

As a reflexive practitioner I examine the context of my positionality in Chapter 1 (section 1.3), where I inform the reader about the impetus and motivation for this study. Also in Chapter 5 (section 5.4) readers are provided with a reflexive account in an effort to scrutinize the assumptions made on the part of the researcher, i.e. reflecting to create ‘a self-conscious awareness of the relationship between the researcher and the [research project]’ (Bourke, 2014: p.2).

In Chapters 1 and 5, I remind the reader that I am a Pakistani Asian, heterosexual male who has lived most of his life in Pakistan, with exposure to education in the USA and the UK. Prior to this study, I served as an academic (assistant professor) at a leading Pakistani business school based on my academic credentials and experience of the MBA. My years of teaching Pakistani MBA students and the distance that this programme created between the students and their learning ultimately led to my interest in developing and designing an action learning programme which bridges this gap. Therefore, following the completion of my study and presentation of my findings, I began to reflect deeply on the experiences, lessons and learning beyond the written pages of this thesis. While writing this chapter, I asked myself:

- What role did my position as a Pakistani Asian play during the research process?
- Did my position as a male academic influence my role as a facilitator and my interactions with the Pakistani MBA students?

As I try to answer these questions, it should be borne in mind that the nature of this qualitative design-based study places the researcher within the site as a medium for designing

the learning programme, facilitating the learning sets and collecting data during and after the action learning sets. Bourke (2014) suggests that in such a research project ‘the researcher’s beliefs, political stance, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process’ (p.2). I framed the Pakistani MBA students within a certain socio-cultural context, and by the same token my own assumptions and being cannot be divorced from my role as a researcher. Bourdieu (2003) adds that the objectification of the researcher lies at the heart of a reflexive scientific practice. For Bourdieu,

‘[...] to achieve a scientific practice, the social researcher should turn the objectifying gaze upon herself and be aware of her pre-research notions and beliefs, rather than placing herself outside and observing the social world afar and from above’ (Bourdieu cited in Costa et al., 2015: p.34).

The notion of the researcher as instrument reflected my own sensitivity towards the design and process of this study: data collection, designing and facilitation, etc. This also influenced the way I interpreted the data which I had collected. The interpretations of participants’ experiences were not just narrative accounts of events, but were also interpretation of my experiences, beliefs and values as a Pakistani Asian male academic. Hall (1990) argues that

‘[...] there’s no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all’ (Hall, 1990: p.18)

Below, I attempt to answer the two questions I posed myself earlier to provide readers with some reflection on my positionality in the design and process of this study:

### ***Positioning the ‘Self’ during the Research Process***

As I prepared to conduct post-action learning set interviews with the Pakistani MBA participants about their experience of working as action learners in a learning set, I expected that my position as a male academic who knew the MBA process would aid me in acquiring

data from male participants, but require me to strive to connect with the females. My expectations were grounded in the logical assumption that individuals with similar identities connect well (e.g. Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). However, what I found was the opposite: the female participants were forthcoming in their interviews about how they were treated as individuals and learners, while the males generally described events and process without digging deep to connect with their emotions. Here my assumptions about positionality were indeed reversed, as I was taken aback at times when the females discussed their family, social and personal lives. For example, one of the female participants had recently lost her father and broke down in tears during the interview, saying how helpful the action learning sets were in bringing her back into the MBA studies when the loss of her father had had such a huge impact upon her that she was drifting away.

I believe that I might have taken my position for granted while interacting with male participants, as in the case of females I was more cautious about overstepping boundaries and posing any threats as a male by intruding in their personal space. One potential explanation for males shying away from their emotions and feelings could be that they might perceive themselves as men, with the strongly masculine ability to suppress emotions and present themselves as logical and objective. If this is the case, then developing trust with male participants demands reasonable efforts by a male qualitative researcher in Pakistani society. As a Pakistani male academic, I am perhaps critical of the segregation between men and women within learning spaces. Although my upbringing serves as a lens for interpreting both men's and women's accounts of action learning practice in the Pakistani MBA, the ways in which I interacted with the participants was mostly based on my lived experiences. Even I looked at, listened to and analysed the data with my Asian Pakistani male academic ears, and processed it through my feelings, emotions, values and beliefs. Therefore, not only were the findings mediated through my research perspective, they were also influenced by my interest

in pursuing a critical agenda – i.e. introducing critical and reflective learning practices which challenge the hierarchical pedagogies and power-positions of the dominant discourses in learning spaces. In the end I believe that my maleness in Pakistan somehow created a space which gave voice to women participants, as my cautiousness might have been perceived as a ‘soft approach’, allowing them to participate more. At the same time, my openness with male participants might have been perceived as a direct approach which inhibited the show of any deep emotions and feelings which the men might have had.

### ***Positioning the ‘Self’ during the Action Learning Programme***

Merriam et al. (2001) note that ‘positionality is [...] determined by where one stands in relation to the *other*’ (p.411: emphasis added). Reflecting upon my experiences of undertaking this study, I am reminded of the assumptions which I made regarding my position during the action learning programme and in particular when I was negotiating access to the learning sets. The dual role of a researcher and facilitator was complicated, and it presented itself as an insider/outsider dilemma. As a researcher, I had reviewed many learning theories and frameworks that enhanced my understanding of the learning process. This also enabled me to review a range of methodological and analytical perspectives while planning my data collection activity, which mainly revolved around student participation in the action learning programme. I was determined to base the collection of data on clear methodological underpinnings in order to get the data I had planned to get. In my position as a researcher, I was like an outsider coming into the business schools with the intention of taking something away from them, i.e. their experiences and accounts of action learning. As a facilitator, theoretically I saw myself as an insider, a participant, working with Pakistani MBA students. From a practical point of view, however, given my work experience, age, gender and foreign exposure, I could see myself as hierarchically placed in relation to the

participants. The role of facilitator meant that I had a responsibility to ensure that the action learning sets met their goals and were safe places for participants to learn. As facilitator, I tried to present myself as being in a similar position to the Pakistani MBA students, as a Ph.D. student who had done his MBA in Pakistan and knew the setting well. In the belief that we were all students, I tried to establish a bond with my participants. In some cases, I was indeed successful in positioning myself as a student. However, in certain situations the MBA students pressed and elevated me in the hierarchy to seek answers (i.e. straightforward recipes) about how to succeed at research work – knowing my status as a doctoral research student.

Both the roles were complicated, as I had to juggle the role of researcher in order to capture data and that of facilitator to start off the sets in the right direction. The responsibility associated with facilitation was as great as that of being a researcher. As researcher, I was anxious to keep things confidential and anonymous, while as facilitator, it was my responsibility to look after participants' physical and emotional well-being during and after the sets and to ensure that the action learning sets were developmental and learning-oriented. The pressure to ensure that sets were fruitful but also meaningful for the researcher in terms of data was at times too much. I sometimes switched off in one role or the other, but luckily the fact that the sets were audio-recorded helped a little bit in recalling events and incidents. I felt that if I were to devote too much attention to ensuring that the sets worked as they should, then I would not be able to record much of the data in my field journals, and vice-versa. Lastly, but more importantly, the challenging features of my role as a facilitator was intervening when an element of aggression emerged in set discussions. This was tricky from two perspectives: as a researcher, I wanted to capture the entirety of the situation and its natural end while as a facilitator I felt responsible for ensuring that the sets were safe places for learning.

#### **11.4. Limitations of the Study**

Amongst the limitations of this study, I believe, the first is the fact that defining Pakistani MBA pedagogy in the light of my own experiences could possibly have limited my focus. Moreover, coupling this with the belief that a critical pedagogy of action (in a form such as action learning), as a western discourse, of itself poses a challenge to the dominant cultural and social values of the existing educational system. The collision of two pedagogies might have caused resistance and tension in the ways participants experienced action learning during its course and resulted in an ambiguous mind-set. Another limitation could be that my prolonged interaction with the MBA students could have resulted in developing a relationship in which participants might have felt constrained purely by politeness to participate in interview sessions and on occasion provide appropriate answers (although this risk was reduced by crosschecking observation data with the interview transcripts). In Pakistan, the normal research practice involves questionnaires, and therefore interviews and learning sets could possibly have softened up the relationship between the participants and me. Also, this study used a fairly small sample of MBA students in Pakistan. The reasons for selecting a small sample had to do with making the study cost-effective, time-efficient, manageable and realistic. Action learning as a mode of education takes time to set up, recruit participants and run. Added to this, the use of a qualitative approach made it intensive, complex and time-consuming, and eliminated opportunities for expanding the study to other cities of Pakistan (or a larger sample). Since the study is a pioneering effort to introduce action learning in a Pakistani MBA programme, there were no precedents or programmes which could have acted as a baseline. Therefore, I do not aim to generalize the study to the larger MBA population.

The second limitation was the time-bounded nature of the action learning programme. The Pakistani MBA, just like other MBAs around the world, is a very busy programme. The

students work within a semester system, with a course load of 4-6 courses (i.e. up to 18 contact hours a week), plus course work, quizzes, supervision, end-of-course projects and presentations and examinations. Fitting action learning into such a busy schedule put extra pressure on the students and therefore demanded that the action learning sets should move faster to maintain progress and achieve their goals. Furthermore, the doctoral study is a 3-4 year programme, and finding the time to design, deliver and collect data was a significant effort and acted as a constraint on developing a project that was time-bound. The action learning project ran from February to May, 2014. By May, most of the MBA students were preparing for end-of-term exams and project submissions, which imposed a completion date: the lifespan of the action learning project had to be designed around the learners' needs. Having exams in June meant that the students would be on vacation till August or September, while I had limited time to collect the data and return to Lancaster to take up my summer term teaching. Lastly, it would have been interesting to ask students to give a final presentation or write a reflective essay. Yet I was already indebted to them for taking part over almost 16 weeks, and it would have been awkward for me to put additional pressure on them. I thought the interviews would serve the purpose of a reflective debriefing.

### **11.5. Implications of this Study**

The findings of this study respond to the overarching research question, which has the aim of exploring and explaining the cultural difficulties of enhancing criticality amongst Pakistani MBA students using action learning in the context of Pakistan. The findings illustrate the challenges posed by the cultural learning practices embodied by the MBA participants during their upbringing, the complexities of adapting to reflective practice in the light of cultural norms and hierarchies, and the forces which preserve gender and power relations in the learning space. These findings have three significant implications for both researchers and

practitioners in the field of management learning and education for advancing a critical pedagogy of action in the Pakistani context.

First, the action learning design used in this study encouraged Pakistani MBA participants to openly discuss issues of gender and power relations to overcome difficulties in expressing problems and to problematize taken-for-granted assumptions. This strategy has implications for the Pakistani MBA context as it aimed to provide a learning space which facilitated the discussion of non-routine aspects of MBA education. Although this could be considered a way of developing sensitivity to issues of gender and power, taking up these issues may have implications for safety, diversity and impartiality in the sets. The question then arises of how this type of critical learning can be collectively shared and applied amongst Pakistani MBA participants in a way which ensures the welfare of members. Rigg and Trehan (2004) note, in their work on critical action learning, that discussing issues of racial discrimination might act as developmental on some levels but may have serious implications in terms of diversity and equality within the sets. Ensuring that action learning provides 'a safe place to explore these important relationships' is a significant characteristic of its methodology (Pedler, 2016: p.216). Researchers and practitioners espousing the use of action learning for emancipatory purposes need to understand the social dynamics in the first instance. It was explained by many participants that interacting with the opposite gender, especially in rural areas, is still considered difficult. Challenging the opposite gender in the Pakistani MBA context disrupts the gendered hierarchy, creating an uncomfortable environment for learners, i.e. anxieties (e.g. Vince & Martin, 1993). The findings presented in Chapter 8, which discuss the behaviour, emotions and feelings of the Pakistani MBA students in moments of critical reflection, suggest the difficulty of achieving the full potential of action learning (*ibid.*). Also the findings presented in Chapter 9 suggest that the Pakistani MBA participants felt uneasy in assuming power and taking responsibility for challenging the facilitator - or as a matter of

fact the knowledge imparted by other cultural arbitraries. Therefore, researchers and practitioners must recognize the limits of criticality (in terms of their cultural implications) for participants before applying critical methods or drawing conclusions about the emancipatory effects of reflective practice.

The second implication has to do with the adoption of a critical pedagogy of action in the Pakistani MBA. Suppressing cultural norms or ignoring them would likely create tensions and friction in learning. Revans' action learning model fails to provide any guideline to facilitators and practitioners on how this type of learning will adapt to or be adapted by participants in different contexts. Practitioners in the Pakistani context must develop facilitation skills that recognize the sensitivity of cultural factors such as gender segregation, class hierarchies, power-positioning and the submissive 'self' of individuals. Facilitators must understand the politics of the action learning model in the Pakistani context, as provoking reflective practice on cultural matters might result in resistance to learning or a defensive attitude on the part of learners (e.g. Vince & Martin, 1993). Enhancing participants' critical awareness of their taken-for-granted beliefs and practices is difficult, and recognizing participants' cultural bias through their language, behaviour or practices can help facilitate learning (ibid.)

The third implication is that challenging rational beliefs about gender or hierarchy which are created through cultural constructions might result in ambiguity, vagueness or a desperation to achieve success. Facilitators must learn to work with the culture to enhance the criticality of participants rather than naively suppress or create distance from the context in which they are situated. The insights generated in this study as a result of action learning are supported by the participants themselves, but there is also evidence that they felt some unease and discomfort with regard to its critical design elements, e.g. the demand for questioning insights

or reflection, etc. The social constructionist philosophy underpinning the action learning programme in my study also attempts to challenge the technicist and functionalistic views of management which the Pakistani MBA promotes. However, while this philosophy promotes an inclusive view of management education and practice, it also challenges local values and norms, e.g. gender segregation, power-position, class differences, etc. Therefore, being well-versed in the politics of learning is crucial for facilitators operating in Pakistani society to better manage the sets so that they achieve their intended learning objectives.

### **11.6. Future Directions and Research**

The 31 Pakistani MBA students participating in this study represent a small sample of the MBA community, highlighting the need for a larger action learning study which examines business schools' learning practices across the country. Figure 11.1 illustrates some possible areas which offer direction and opportunities for future research in the area of management learning and education in Pakistan. The areas identified below focus on expanding my current research to other domains of management learning and education. These also offer avenues for:

- exploring Pakistani MBA educators' teaching and learning practices;
- extending reflective practice to executive and leadership education;
- identifying the challenges of positionality (facilitating and researching) in learning programmes from a cultural point of view; and
- highlighting the role of stereotypical constructions of gender, embodied during upbringing, in relation to learners' (in)visibility in group learning within Pakistani context (see Figure 11.1).



**Figure 11-1:** Future Directions and Research

In addition to the above, there are potential areas for research publication within this thesis, which I have already identified. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 have great potential to be developed as research papers for top-ranking journals. The recent call for papers by the Academy of Management Learning and Education (AMLE) for a forthcoming special issue, 'Navigating between different Approaches and Learning Impacts', indicates a change in scholarly thinking in that it seeks to invite contributions which voice concerns about the lack of effectiveness of critical approaches to strategic management education (Bell, et al. 2016). This editorial invite also encourages research that helps identify the underlying issues and problems in management development programmes which challenge the development of critical thinking amongst learners (*ibid.*). In this context, MBA education can qualify as strategic for managers and would-be managers in providing knowledge about management practice. The challenges of introducing critical and reflective practices in an international,

MBA education, context is likely to appeal to the global readers of the AMLE journal. Chapter 7 of this thesis contains a great deal of important material which would contribute to the journal by highlighting the key finding that learning dispositions embodied in childhood could undermine pedagogies that reinforce critical thinking. Also, the Journal of Action Learning Research and Practice (ALRP) is inviting contributions which can help advance the practice of action learning in different settings and contexts. In particular, it encourages empirical research that furthers knowledge about the design and process of action learning. Chapter 8 provides just such empirical evidence, offering insights into the critical design and process of action learning in the Pakistani MBA context. Moreover, it sheds light on how learning within a specific cultural context mobilizes learners' psychological and political positions within action learning sets. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 collectively highlight areas for the investigation of gender-power relations in action learning practice as a means of further exploring the cultural implications of reflective practice in enhancing criticality in the Pakistani MBA. These findings would be particularly useful in advancing knowledge if published in the Journal of Management Learning (ML), as they contribute to identifying the implications of a critical pedagogy of action. Furthermore, positionality in facilitating and researching action learning could help researchers, practitioners and the wider target audience of the Journal of Human Resource Development International (HRDI) to study learning programmes which have critical intent in international cultural contexts.

Finally, I aspire to undertake further research with the aim of exploring how action learning theory and practice might work in a variety of other contexts in Pakistani culture, such as government, health and agriculture etc. This will enable practitioners to identify the needs of individuals and develop appropriate ways of using and practicing action learning. The latest debates in the action learning literature focus on its cultural diversification. However, it can be suggested that action learning may be explored more fully in terms of how its outcomes

and process within these contexts can achieve a better fusion with culture. Such efforts could prove beneficial in producing empirical accounts of action learning practice and its variants in a diverse range of contexts in Pakistani society to gain a better understanding of its usability, applicability and fruitfulness. There is a case for more detailed research methodologies to study Pakistani culture in an attempt to overcome cultural incongruities in long-term projects employing ethnography and action research techniques. Also, in-depth analysis could be undertaken of participants' experiences of action learning in community or organizational contexts using phenomenological studies to better understand the positionality of action learning in the Pakistani context. I also believe that a larger study needs to be undertaken to fully persuade Pakistani business schools to understand the usefulness of action learning in developing student practitioners, would-be managers, leaders or executive learners for realistic and practical situations. There are thus many ways in which the outcomes of this study in the form of publications could serve as a starting point for promoting critical management education in Pakistan.

### **11.7. Final Thoughts . . .**

This study serves as a point of departure for further studies on understanding the design, process and dynamics of action learning practice in the Pakistani context. In a way this thesis provides several lessons for action learning practice in Pakistan, relating to the state of MBA education in Pakistan and the cultural context and learning practices embodied by Pakistani MBA students. It also informs the reader about the design and process of action learning, i.e. about the challenges and opportunities it faces in practice. If this study has highlighted one word that would aptly encapsulate action learning in Pakistan, i.e. 'sensitivity' – towards the country's cultural norms, beliefs and values.

Action learning in Pakistan needs to be flexible in taking into consideration the local culture within its programme philosophy, but without altering its own principles and design elements. Recognizing how culture operates within and around action learning sets is critical to its success. The evidence in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 provides insights into how culture, embodied by individuals, works within a learning setting. Also, it provides a perspective on the difficulties of working with what in this context are less familiar aspects of learning such as reflection, questioning insight, the use of experiences, social interaction and taking an inclusive approach to gender and power-positioning. The groundwork laid in the earlier chapters (1, 2, 3 and 4) provided this study with perspectives on how to develop and design an action learning project, while Chapters 5 and 6 offered guidance on the aspects of turning such designs into practice.

Overall, this has been an exciting opportunity for me to delve into the complexities of implementing action learning practice in the Pakistani context – which involved thinking, designing and facilitating action learning. During this journey, I became aware of the complex issues involved in conceptualizing a learning design, researching empirical precedence, studying the Pakistani MBA, observing culture as an insider and an outsider, the politics of fieldwork and the difficulties of facilitating and managing action learning sets. The knowledge gained from this endeavour is more than I had initially anticipated, and especially from the research process, which involved designing a research strategy compatible with the objectives of the study and the development of an analytical strategy to interpret cultural acts and actions. Moreover, what should not be forgotten is the learning I gained from using an abductive research strategy, whose underlying theoretical perspectives were influenced by constructionist, interpretivist and critical thoughts. In the end, as Revans' (1980) says, action learning has 'taught me to be more interested in any ambiguity that other persons raised with

me than in the replies they gave to enquiries I might put to them'<sup>15</sup>. This study of action learning has finally made me agree with what Revans' (1982) notes, that action learning is 'the development of the self, not merely development by the self of what is known of the external world' (p.632). In the light of these final words from Revans, I am convinced that the understanding and insights that I have gained from this research journey are not an end point, but a point of departure for exploring new avenues for studying action learning in new cultures and contexts.

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<sup>15</sup> Thoughts by Revans - <http://actionlearningfacilitator.blogspot.co.uk/p/what-is-action-learning.html>

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## APPENDICES

### *Appendix – A: Sample Participant Consent Form*



#### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

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##### **PART – A: RESEARCH DETAILS**

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**Working Title of the Study:** Action Learning in MBA Programmes of Pakistan

**Level of the Study:** Doctoral Research Study (PhD Research)

##### **PART – B: RESEARCHER DETAILS**

---

**Name of the Researcher:** Farooq Mughal

**University ID Number:** 30154991

**Programme:** PhD in Management Learning and Leadership

**Department:** Department of Management Learning and Leadership

**Affiliation:** Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster University, LA 1 4YX

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##### **PART – C: CONSENT**

---

**Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet dated 15/10/2013 (attached) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team.

4. I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations.

5. I agree to take part in the above recorded study (interview & observations).

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Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Farooq Mughal

---

Researcher

Date

Signature

*Appendix – B: Sample Participant Information Letter/Sheet*



**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

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Dear Participant,

I would like to extend an invitation for joining me in a quest for exploring viable options for introducing action learning, an experiential education technique, within Pakistani MBA programmes. I am sure your *experience* and *knowledge* as an MBA student will be of great value to this study. In order to help you decide on your participation within this study, I have compiled some information for your ease and satisfaction which outlines the aims, data collection process, participation, confidentiality concerns, risks and commitment required for the study.

Please read the following carefully:

**INTRODUCTION**

My name is Farooq Mughal and I am a PhD student at the Department of Management Learning and Leadership, at Lancaster University UK. I am supervised by Dr. Caroline Gatrell and Dr. Valerie Stead, who act as my guide and mentors in this study. This research is part of my doctoral thesis which I am organizing for the qualification of doctor of philosophy in management learning and leadership (PhD in MLL). I started my PhD study in 2012 and currently I am transiting into my second year of study. At the moment I am planning to collect data pertaining to my research area i.e. action learning in MBA programmes. I will be highly grateful to you for taking time out and reading this document.

**AIM OF THE STUDY**

In my research I am planning to collect data from leading business schools of Pakistan, including your university, to ascertain how MBA students organize their learning practices at individual and collective levels. In particular, I am interested in understanding the cultural influence on learning dispositions of Pakistani MBA students. These learning dispositions have been internalized as a result of your upbringing and development through your unique cultural affiliation and identity. Your cultural affiliation and identity are of great significance in contributing to the development of a culturally-sensitive and socially-inclusive pedagogy of action. In other words, I am interested in how MBA students interact with each other and how do they organize their learning process. What constitutes their ability to reflect and think and how does their cultural upbringing affect their learning dispositions within action learning sets.

**DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITY**

On a collective level, I will be organizing action learning set meetings of MBA students which will revolve around real-time problems brought by you in a group formation (of 4-6 students/colleagues). Action learning sets are groups of 4-8 students who come together with the intent of learning through social interaction by using their prior knowledge, experience and power of reflection to question and critique each other to develop basis for



future action on a range of educational problems. For further information please see the FAQs at the end of this document.

In addition to the above, I will act as a facilitator in these set meetings to facilitate your interaction with other students, so that you can walk away from the set with clarity and sense of action for your problems. Your role within the set, like others, will be of a critical friend to question set members in a constructive manner to guide/help solve their problems, like yours. Data collection in this phase will be conducted through observations (field notes) and audio-recording of the naturally occurring talk amongst set members.

On an individual level, I will arrange individual interviews with you at the end of the action learning sets to ask about your experience of interacting with others within the set and how were you able to benefit from such a learning exercise. Data collection in this phase will be through audio-taped one-one interviews between you and me (only).

#### **SITE AND LOCATION**

I have arranged for collecting data (set meetings and interview sessions) on campus. This includes a comfortable environment on campus where we can meet and interact. It is my preference that we meet on campus so that you and I will not have to travel anywhere else during your term time.

#### **DATE & TIME**

Once I have recruited a batch for the sets, we will mutually agree upon dates and time to meet frequently for the set meetings (keeping all in the loop). However, we can always conduct interview sessions upon your convenience and availability as it doesn't involve others.

#### **COMMITMENT**

Action learning sets are usually dependent upon set members choice and ability to take up the initiative to meet on a regular basis to help solve genuine problems and contribute to the development of the self and others. It helps to empower learners to learn by implementing ideas and experiential tips filtered through a critical process of questioning and collective reflection. It also involves time to digest the set information through a process of self-reflection which leads to a critical assessment of options and planning for action to solve a problem.

However, keeping in view time constraints and your availability, I have arranged for time-bound predefined set meeting sessions. In the pilot study phase, I will request if we can meet twice followed by an individual post-set interview session. Each set meeting should not take more than a couple of hours and an interview should last no more than an hour. Your participation will be a commitment to the learning process as other colleagues who will have made it to the set meetings will look forward to your presence, encouragement and knowledge to help them learn from one another.

If you volunteer to be in this study, please remain satisfied that no part of this study will lead to any academic assessment in your MBA or any other program of the university. You may withdraw at any time and this will in no way affect your identity and place in the university.



You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise, such as aggressive and unethical behaviour or use of morally unacceptable language, which warrant doing so.

Also I am aware that at any stage of the study the participants have the right to withdraw from this research due to any reason they feel necessary. In this regard, I would like to assure participants to feel free to leave the study either from the action learning sets or the interview sessions.

With regards to the data of the interview session, I would like to convey that their data can be deleted and not used upon their request as the recording will be of a single-person (themselves) and the session will be one-one (between the participant and the researcher). However, if a participant wishes to participate in the action learning set, after which if the participant wishes to leave, unfortunately the participant data (recording) cannot be deleted as it will have been shared with other set members on a recording device. It is difficult to delete any one person's voice from a group discussion, but the participant has the right to leave the study. Deleting any one person's data from the set meetings will disrupt the group dynamics of the study. Therefore, the data will remain part of the study for further use.

Please note that your participation or withdrawal from this study will not affect, in any way, your relationship with your business school/university/institute. This study is purely based on voluntary participation from MBA students and is not intended to be part of any evaluation, assessment or examination. The data yielded from this study will only be used for my research only. The identities of all participants shall remain anonymous and will not be shared with any person, entity or organization under any circumstances other than the researcher.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Your data will be kept secure and anonymous. The same anonymity will be expected from you and your colleagues to keep the information, shared, between colleagues to ourselves. On my part, this information will not be shared with any university official, tutor or staff member. In addition to the set meetings, the interview session data will also be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. The data will not be shared with any colleague/set member or tutor/staff member or any other entity/source other than the researcher.

When the interview/set meetings are completed, the consent forms will be separated from them immediately and a code will be allocated. All information will be kept secured at all times. The information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to the researcher. The data provided by you will be used only for educational purposes. If the study will be published, your names will be anonymized and deleted along with any text which may disclose your identity. In addition to the strict compliance, I have also arranged for the digital data to be kept under password protection at all times on all devices. The audio-recorder has limited space to store data on it, thus the data will be transferred to a secure medium soon after each data collection event. I can confirm that the data from the (audio) recorder will be deleted and the recorder will be destroyed at the end of the doctoral research / study.



## BENEFITS

I expect that participants will benefit from this study by their interaction with other participants, on their problems, through reflection and critique. Furthermore, this is an interesting opportunity for you to learn something from and about a new learning methodology. I also hope to add to the body of knowledge about exploring options for introducing critical and process-driven management educational methods like action learning to the MBA programmes in Pakistan.

## QUERIES

If you have any queries or concerns regarding any aspect of this research project, please feel free to contact the following from Lancaster University to help you address any issues. The contact details of the concerned are:

Dr. Caroline Gatrell / Dr. Valerie Stead  
Management Learning & Leadership  
Lancaster University Management School

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Lancaster University, LA1 4YX  
United Kingdom

Email: [c.gatrell@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.gatrell@lancaster.ac.uk) and [v.stead@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:v.stead@lancaster.ac.uk)  
Telephone: +44 1524 510913

## ICE BREAKING SESSION

Before I formally start action learning set meetings, I will provide an introductory workshop on how action learning sets work and how can we benefit from it. In the workshop session I will also introduce some of the basic terminologies and concepts pertinent to action learning.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

In order to facilitate the easy transition to the set meetings, I am also including some frequently asked questions for you to read:

- *What is Action Learning?*

It is a method of collaborative learning where a small group of people meet regularly to reflect on real time problems.

- *What are Action Learning Sets?*

The term set refers to a small group of learners usually 4 – 8 people.

- *Who is a Set member?*

A set member is the individual participant of an action learning set, for example if you agree to participate in the study you will become a set member of one of the action learning sets.

- *What is the role of a Set member?*

The role of the set member is to either bring in actual, real time problems to the set meetings or help critically, collectively and constructively, reflect on an issue by questioning and challenging others to critically think.

- *Who is a Facilitator?*

The facilitator or the set adviser is a person who helps set-members to question, reflect, and learn from their emerging experiences while refraining from involving in the problem.

## CONTACT

If you have any questions regarding any aspect of this research or about your participation, please do not hesitate to contact me:

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## ENDORSEMENT

I hereby endorse that all the information provided above is true and I shall adhere to the participant's privacy and anonymity.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(FAROOQ MUGHAL)

*Information Sheet (Revised, Version 2.0) Dated: October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013*

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*Appendix – C: Sample Inscriptions from the Field Journal*Sample Reflection on Meeting a Participant

**Ibrahim, Group-I, EBS**  
Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> of March, 2014

Ibrahim was open to talk about his experiences of the action learning set and tried informing me about how action learning tried creating parallels with his real life learning. In order to explain the closeness of action learning to real life, Ibrahim made his MBA classroom learning a point of reference to describe his experiences. He was critical of the traditional average MBA classroom teacher whose main idea revolves around exercising of pedagogical authority over MBA students. He tried criticizing their way of teaching which was curled up in layers of power positioning and struggle to dominate mind-sets of students. He urged a need for having interactive classrooms where the autonomy was given to students to work through in a collaborative way on real life problems. He valued the experiences of MBA students and his own and pointed out how action learning was an outlet to those problems which were inside, not spoken of before but managed to become a part of the learning process. Ibrahim was also satisfied the way action learning had a pragmatic approach to the range of problems he was facing during his research thesis. He acknowledged that the problems might seem small but they had a big impact on the outcome of his thesis. He liked how action learning had action and inter-action as part of its learning philosophy which revolved around social exchange and collaborative work practice in small groups.

Sample Reflection on an ALS Meeting

**Zee, Group-I, EBS**  
Tuesday, February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014

The learning set took a new direction while talking about doing and managing research projects in MBA. One of the participants, Zee, wanted to talk about how to manage the relation with supervisor as a direct question to all. ...

In Pakistan talking about teachers and supervisors is a sensitive topic. It is a critical issue in nature as there are varying dynamics between students and supervisors. ... Zee tries exploring the dimensions of this problem. He confessed that ( as he tried speaking on behalf of everyone – as if others were hiding this problem) they haven't done a lot of research in the past (especially in practical terms) and were unaware of how to do research or manage this process or even write-up. During his problematizing he brought forward his inner feelings. He talked about how he is afraid to step into newer things or newer situations. He also admitted that the way he has been taught or raised is to submit him to the way things are happening and are being asked of him. He said that I feel easier to follow and obey rather to question or jump into newer areas. I want a lot of supervisions and instructions he said. I want my supervisors to give me direction (but they don't give you enough time and direction in an MBA project as compared to any other MS or PhD project). But again he said that he needs to be in touch with his inner self and he is a team worker and a team player. He wants someone to give him direction and he fears that during this project he will have to come out of his shell and face his fears and was really worried about how to handle this project.

**Appendix – D: Call for Invitation/Sample Letter to Business Schools**



Dear Sir,

I am writing this email as part of my on-going doctoral study on designing and developing an action learning programme for the Pakistani MBA. This email is part of my call for support to the Deans of leading business schools in Pakistan to help support this initiative for the introducing critical and reflective pedagogies in Pakistani management educational system to strengthen the link between management theory and practice.

My research is interwoven in the fabric of an action-oriented pedagogy, such as action learning, to ensure self-directed groups of MBA students to learn from their experiences and discussions which take place with their peers. In this regard I have designed an action learning programme: *Managers of your Own Research? An Action Learning Approach to Managing and Organizing the Research Process*. This workshop involves a series of 4 to 5 meetings (approx. 02 hours each) spread over a period of four-six weeks. During this workshop I plan on facilitating management students to manage and write-up their final MBA dissertations/projects.

The workshop is free and open to MBA students, preferably who are enrolled for their MBA projects. Since this is a customized workshop, the number of students I would like to work with can be around 06-08 at a time. I am willing to conduct more than one session for a larger group, if interested. I am also attaching programme details and a flyer so that, if the school is interested, can recruit willing MBA students on my behalf for this voluntary, non-assessed, programme as part of supporting student learning.

Sir, I would like to request if your business school would like to take up this initiative to pioneer, for the very first time in the history of Pakistan, the introduction of critical management education – learning which aims 'to present ... an alternative to the seeming neutrality and authority of orthodox management theory as a means of opening up and facilitating a transformation of management practice' (Willmott, 1997: 169). In this regard I am attaching details of the programme which informs the activity and my research project.

I am flexible in tailoring this workshop based on your business school's needs and time-table.

I look forward to hearing from you.

My very best wishes,

**Farooq Mughal**  
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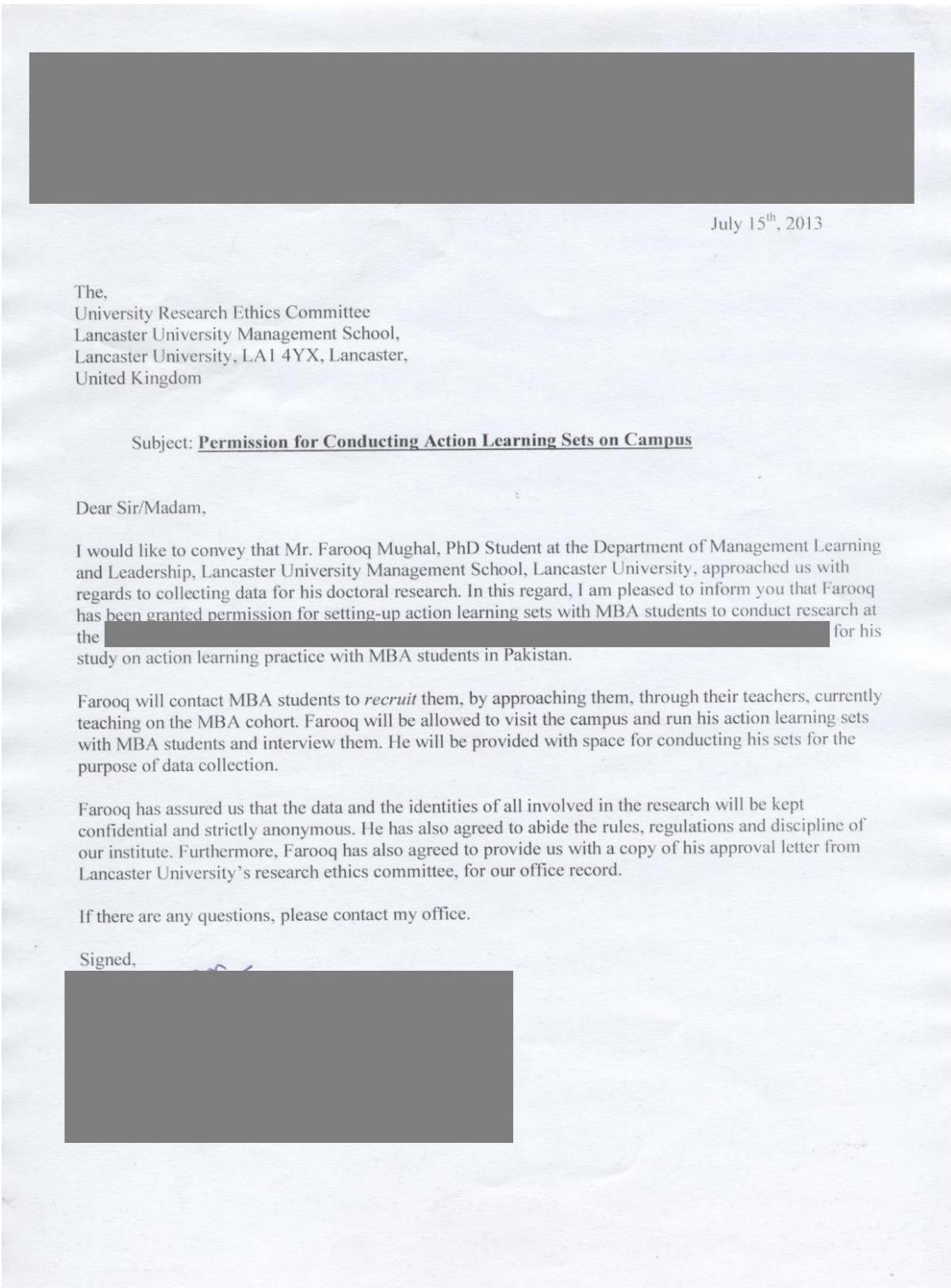
**Reference:**

Willmott, H., (1997a). Critical Management Learning. In J. Burgoyne, & M. Reynolds (eds.), *Management Learning: Integrating Perspectives in Theory and Practice*. London: Sage



## Appendices

### ***Appendix – E: A Sample Letter of Access from a Participating Business School***



## Appendix – F: Sample Interview Excerpts

Excerpts on: Gendered Distancing	Excerpts on: Social Upbringing	Excerpts on: Silence and Obedience	Excerpts on: Respect and Deference
<p><u>Data Extract:</u></p> <p>I think I am different from other girls, because the way I have grown, I had interacted with many boys because I have been the only girl at home. Probably, that's why I didn't have a problem with the other gender during discussions... Growing up, my father used to do this..... I remember he used to tell my mum to let me study what I want to. He said to her to not to force them otherwise they will run away from this ..... having this liberty from my father ..... my mum would try to order me and tell me how I have to do things because I am a girl. If I don't do it properly she would always critique me about ... what have you done or why have you done this. She would control me and my actions, but I don't want her to do so. I know how this feels, it is Pakistan it's sort of a trickle-down affect here, you know ..... She feels that I should learn to distance myself from others in a way where I am able to preserve my sanctity as a woman. (Leena)</p>	<p><u>Data Extract:</u></p> <p>Like I said earlier I am bit slow in understanding things around me, because I think the way I was brought up, I was kept in a fairly secure environment. I wasn't able to interact much with other people. I stayed mostly at home and studied in a girl's only school. It would've been different if I were a boy. I would've gotten more freedom to go out and interact with other people. Even at home I always gotten to hear this that I am slow, or I don't need to be super-active as it doesn't go with the stature of a girl. For me the boundaries were set pretty early on in my childhood. I think that is why my confidence wasn't established earlier on and that is why I got anxious when it came to interacting in the group (set), especially with people I don't know (Sarah).</p>	<p><u>Data Extract:</u></p> <p>In group discussions emotions seem to kick in when dealing with intensive and sensitive arguments. The arguments at times were really personal and came from personal problems and people seemed to be attached with those things. ... I would have said nothing or remained quiet or that if you would like to do it that way, so do it, but I like doing it this way. I think one of the major concerns of being in a group is disagreement and dealing with those disagreements. I think my way of dealing is diffusing situation with silence, whereas silence for me doesn't mean that I am confirming their opinion it's just that I want things to be calm again (Ibrahim)</p> <p><u>Data Extract:</u></p> <p>I take inspiration from my parents or teachers, as their value is also equivalent of parents. It is hardly that we go against their will. I learn from what they say and what they do. If they tell me something I try adopting it, and it is something that is also valued by others. (Sarah)</p>	<p><u>Data Extract:</u></p> <p>For me I respect my elders, elders are ones who have experience and seen the world. What they say is of great value to me. They are more knowledgeable. And since they are more experienced they give good knowledge. In order to seek their knowledge I first describe myself and my situation and how I want to benefit from the situation. (Ibrahim)</p> <p><u>Data Extract:</u></p> <p>If I don't like someone, or if my relationship wasn't good with them, so when they tried asking questions I took the middle root – neither being too formal nor being informal like adopting a more diplomatic statement and diffusing the situation if it became aggressive. It's more like to proceed further without disrupting the environment (Haron)</p>

**Appendix – G: Sample of Reconstructed Transcripts**

**Sample of Translator's Transcript**

The main method of learning in action learning is communicating. You need to act if you are to learn here. Through talking a person can learn only when he says something that he was not supposed to say it; you get to understand from other person. Expressions are important as well, because with words also come out expressions and the non-verbal communication others show.

Maybe I'll take it as personal, to pin someone for no reason but I'm okay with it, it keeps happening. I am used to it. I mean look at their statements, their questions were to debate rather than discuss. You're a masters level student you would be stupid if you would talk like that. For example they were pinning me down on my ideas and I was telling them practically how I did things.

You know the facilitator touches you from inside and urges you to think. It was my first learning workshop, after a couple of minutes I realized what an action learning workshop is and I thought this is the best way to learn anything. I thought action learning is a way to learn about you by taking control of yourself. It goes beyond traditional MBA classroom teaching. The things that are inside you like there was someone saying to me that you can't speak in class and here you talk...

**Reconstructed Transcript by the Researcher**

I think the main method of engaging in action learning is conversing. You need to push things forward if you are to learn here. Through conversation, a person can learn only when he says something that he was not supposed to say it; you get to understand from the expressions of the other person. Expressions are very important as well, because with words also come out expressions and the non-verbal communication others show towards you.

Maybe I'll take it as a personal attack, to pin someone for no reason but I'm okay with it, it keeps happening. I am used to it. I mean look at their statements, and their persistence to debate rather than discuss. You're a masters level student you would be stupid if you would talk like that. For example they were marginalizing me and I was telling them practically how I did things.

You know the voice of a facilitator touches you from inside and urges you to reflect. It was my first learning workshop, after a couple of minutes I realized what an action learning workshop is and I thought this is the best way to learn anything. I thought action learning is a way to learn about yourself by taking control of your 'self'. It goes deeper and beyond traditional boundaries of MBA classroom teaching. The things that are hiding inside you like there was someone saying to me that you can't speak in class and here you are...

**Appendix – H: Sample Codes and Categories**

<b>Sample Codes</b>	
C_Action Repositions People C Actions as determinants of the reflective process C Actions determine Actions C_Active Engagement as Significant C_Active Engagement in AL C_Active Thinking C_Adjusting to Relational Expectations C_Benefiting through Observing C_Bodily Action to Words C_Bodily Expression C_Breaking the Power Hierarchy C_Brought-up C_Burden over Thinking C_Burying Problems rather than Solving C_Capturing Ideas C_Categorization of Question C_Challenging Existing Knowledge C_Characteristic of Mind C_Detaching the Self as Observer of the Self C_Detaching the Self from Situation (Reflection) C_Developing a Pragmatic Perspective C_Developing Actionable Knowledge C_Developing Communicative Understanding C_Fear of Learning C_Fear of Loosing Social Status in the Group C_Fear of New Situation C_Fear of Unknown	C_Developing Constructive Relations C_Developing Expectations through Judgement C_Developing for Subordination C_Developing Reflective Perceptions C_Developing Relations with Others C_Developing Social Expectations C_Dynamics of the Challenging Process C_Eliminating Communicative Barriers C_Ellated Emotions C_Emotional Response C_Emotional Response to Sensitive Questions C_Empowering Participants C_Empowering Students C_Empowering the Self C_Enabling Alternate Thinking C_Encouraging Socially Interactive Insight C_Familiar Relations reduce fear of contribution C_Familiarity Triumphs Gender C_Family Expectations C_Family Perception C_Family Pressure C_Family Upbringing C_Fear of being wrong (Judgement) C_Fear of Expert's Knowledge C_Fear of Handling Learning Interactions C_Feeling Insignificant C_Feeling Left out

<b>Sample Categories</b>		
Dealing with Emotions	Being Silent or Vocal	Respect and Deference
Social Exchange (dialogue, discussion or events of interaction)	Collective Reflection (Organizing Insight)	Positioning the self (role)
Facilitation in Sets	Degree of Openness and Trust	Social Barriers
Negotiating with the Critical Process (Questioning Insight)	Socialization (Bonding)	Managing Social Expectations
Pedagogical Authority and Obedience	Real Life Learning	Life-Experiences
Set Processes (Routines)	Learning Design Elements	Comparing AL with MBA
Group Learning	Autonomy to Learn (Empowerment)	Resentment towards MBA