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Numbers, words and anonymity in 360-degree feedback:
a qualitative study

by

Amanda L. Harrington

Doctoral Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of
The Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
Loughborough University
Abstract

Academic research in 360-degree feedback continues to be dominated by a positivist approach with analyses of the feedback ratings. In contrast, this qualitative study explores how people make sense of 360, across the ‘chain of meaning making’ involving not only raters and feedback recipients but also HR managers, facilitators and external consultants. Two corporate case studies in the pharmaceutical sector show how 360 evolves as a social process and carries a variety of meanings in different organisations and management contexts. Quasi-scientific rituals are revealed, demonstrating the existence of pseudo-anonymity and of complex use of numerical ratings and narrative comments. Woven alongside these corporate case studies is an autoethnography, which examines emotional and cognitive responses to two rounds of 360 asking for feedback on coaching performance. The autoethnographic thread allows insights into the dynamic relationship between academic and practitioner perspectives, as the researcher moves between both worlds. This PhD makes three contributions: the conceptualisation of 360 as a social process; the questioning of taken-for-granted customs within 360; and a methodological contribution to the development of autoethnographic practice.

KEYWORDS: 360-degree feedback; multisource feedback; anonymous ratings; narrative comments; qualitative; McDonaldisation; encoding; meaning-making.
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Many moons ago, I went to Laurie Cohen to ask whether we could carry out some research together. She said she had no time, but that she would be happy to supervise me to do a PhD. That started me thinking, and this thesis is the result.

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1 – Introduction

The term “360-degree feedback” is commonly used to describe a process for gathering feedback on a manager’s performance, using ratings and text comments from line managers, peers, direct reports and the individual manager being rated. Later in this introduction is an outline of that process. Following that outline, there is an overview of this PhD and its structure. To start though, there is an explanation of the terms used to refer to 360-degree feedback and brief comments on its origins and development.

Terminology in this area is not uniform. Earlier academic researchers used the term Multi-Source Feedback (MSF). Strictly speaking, this term suggests that sources in addition to colleagues’ opinions may be used, for example performance against annual objectives. However, MSF has come to mean feedback from people the manager works with. Other terms that have been used include: multirater assessment, multirater feedback and full-circle feedback (Bracken, Timmreck and Church, 2001). The use of “MSF” within academic research is changing more recently, perhaps in recognition of the fact that this term is one that practitioners do not use, and often do not recognise. In more recent research papers, academics have adopted the term prevalent within industry, namely 360-degree feedback. A little-known fact is that “360° feedback ®” is actually a registered trademark of TEAMS, Inc., a company that did some pioneering work on the theory and its application (Edwards and Ewen, 1996). This PhD uses the term ‘360’, abbreviated in that way to reflect the common usage in many practitioner circles (e.g. The 360 Handbook, Goodge, 2011). For the sake of consistency, ‘360’ will be used throughout, unless quotes are used which refer to MSF or other terms.

Interest in 360 continues to grow both amongst academics and practitioners. It has been used as a tool within performance

Richardson’s (2010) summary of the stages in a 360 process is outlined here. Firstly, the organisation should identify its purpose in using 360, broadly whether it is to be for assessment or development, as this will impact on the level of ratings that are given. It is common to employ an external specialist consultancy to design the 360 questionnaire, deliver training and assist with the implementation and evaluation. The designer works with internal people to develop the questionnaire, based on competencies. No personality traits or styles are included, instead the questions centre on specific behaviours. From the perspective of an individual manager, the process begins with a decision to carry out a 360. The minimum steps the individual follows are:

1. Select their own raters, typically 3-5 in each of the relevant groups: peers, direct reports and possibly customers (although sometimes the process is then known as 720-degree feedback).
2. Submit rater names and email addresses to the system. The system is often automated so that requests for feedback will be automatically emailed to the named raters.
3. Wait while the feedback is gathered, collated, and presented in a report, usually with ratings and text comments – within 3-5 weeks.
4. Attend a meeting with a feedback facilitator to discuss the report. This document is usually automatically generated and includes graphs and numerical ratings against each specific behaviour with

---

1 Competencies are “abstractions from actual behaviour—they are generalizations drawn up for the administrative purposes of the HR function, which are intended to provide a common language in the organization with which to describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes thought to relate to high performance.” (Tyson and Ward, 2004: 209).
graphs summarising the ratings against each main competency, usually followed by narrative comments.

5. Create a development plan with the facilitator.

These steps describe an online 360 as experienced by most of those interviewed within the current research project. Within his description, Richardson (2010) makes no reference to individuals setting their own objectives neither for the feedback process, nor to selecting raters who might help achieve the understandings and learning relevant to those objectives. This omission is not unusual. Indeed, most research focuses on analysis of the numerical ratings, rather than exploring how individual managers make sense of 360 for themselves. This PhD addresses that gap.

It is interesting to note that many research papers do not specify in any detail the format or process of the 360 they are researching. There are therefore some taken-for-granted characteristics of 360. These include those specifics identified at the beginning of this chapter, namely that a 360 gathers feedback on a manager's performance, using ratings and text comments from line managers, peers, direct reports and the individual manager being rated. In addition, a 360 increasingly involves an online questionnaire, based on competencies which may be part of a framework that is generic, across organisations, focused for example on leadership, or it may be more specific such as a framework that is professional or organisation-specific. The items on the questionnaire are either worded in exactly the same way as the behavioural indicators\(^2\) on the competency framework, or are edited versions of those indicators (when more accessible language is wanted). Competencies are, therefore, at the heart of a 360 approach.

\(^2\) A behavioural indicator is a specific description of effective behaviour. For example, the coaching competency 'Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client' includes the behavioural indicator 'Establishes clear agreements and keeps promises' (Appendix 7).
At the outset, the primary aim of this PhD was to complete a qualitative study that explored the meaning(s) of 360 within a corporate setting, and considered the perspectives of other participants in the process beyond the raters and recipients. As an occupational psychologist and coach who uses 360, my interest is in understanding how people work with the meanings of 360. Therefore this PhD draws on two main data sources. Firstly, an analysis of interview data from two corporate case studies, from within the pharmaceutical sector, shows the work that people invest in creating meaning out of numbers, text comments and anonymity, three core characteristics of 360. The particular contribution of the case studies lies in the inclusion of interviewees in different roles within the 360 process; the highlighting of the tactics and strategies that they devise to interpret numbers, words and anonymity; and an analysis of how individuals are adapting 360 to suit their own preferences. Secondly, the chapter “An autoethnography of a coach receiving 360” draws on my own experience of two 360’s on my performance as coach. As with the corporate case studies, the purpose of the autoethnography is to explore how meaning is made out of the numbers, text comments and anonymity within my two 360 reports. Specifically, it addresses my reactions to having expectations of myself challenged; reflections on the investment I made in interpreting the content of the 360; the lack of follow-up action; and the role of context and embeddedness.

As would be expected with autoethnographic writing, I use the first person and at times write personally. There was an option to write in the third person for the corporate case studies and the first person for the autoethnography. This threatened a schizophrenic relationship for me with my research. The PhD offered, and has delivered, a rare opportunity for me to bring together the academic and practitioner elements in my life. In addition, “[u]se of the first person… does not suggest that the research, or conclusions drawn, lack rigour” (Horsburgh, 2003: 308), rather it acknowledges that I am integral to the process and product and not “a disembodied bystander with the capacity to provide ‘uncontaminated’ account” (Horsburgh, 2003: 308). For these reasons, I chose to use the
first person throughout.

I will argue that this research incorporates three case studies: two corporate case studies and one autoethnographic case study. In presenting this argument, I seek to encourage a further development of autoethnography, woven alongside more traditional research methods.

The current research shows a tension between on the one hand the drive to simplify 360 and make it efficient; and on the other the drive to take account of complexities in 360 and involve people more actively. Ritzer’s McDonaldisation theory (1996), derived from Weber’s work on bureaucracy, is used within the literature review to demonstrate the ways that 360 follows Ritzer’s four principles: calculability, predictability (or standardisation) and use of technology.

Moving to the issue of complexities in 360, this research analyses some of the complex ways that raters and others build meaning into their feedback messages, and that recipients interpret those messages. Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1973, 1999) is presented as one way of understanding this complexity. Developing this, I conceptualise 360 as a chain of meaning-making.

The overarching aim of this thesis is to provide a different perspective on 360 from that offered within existing research, specifically, the aim is:

*To challenge the dominance of positivism in current 360 research and practice, and develop fresh insights through an interpretive perspective.*

In pursuing this aim, the research centres around four main questions, which are: How do participants, with different roles in the 360-degree feedback process, make sense of and talk about:

1. The purpose and value of 360?
2. Anonymity?
3. Numerical ratings?
4. Text comments – and their relationship to numerical ratings?

To address these questions, the following structure is used.

Chapter 2 discusses the methodology for this research. Placing a discussion of methodology before the literature review signals the centrality of methodology to this PhD. Beliefs about what constitutes knowledge of performance, and what is meant by ‘accurate measurement’ of performance are core to the challenges made in the current work. These challenges concern both the practice of 360 and research about 360.

Chapter 3 is the literature review. After summarising the history and development of 360, there is a critique of the contributions from the research in addressing each of the four research questions. Quantitative methods have dominated 360 research and a section on research methods discusses the reasons for this and the implications. Two further sections introduce theories not previously used in 360 research. These are Ritzer’s theory of McDonaldisation and Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model.

Chapter 4 details the research design, specifically two corporate case studies and an autoethnography, and then the methods, which include interviews and reflexivity. Evaluation criteria are also discussed.

Chapter 5 and 6 analyse the data from the two corporate case studies.

Chapter 7 is an autoethnography based on my own experience of receiving 360 on my performance as coach.

Chapter 8 identifies the three contributions I lay claim to as being unique, two relating to the processes involved in 360 practice and the final contribution relating to research methodology.
2 - Methodology

We should not be driven by the research method we want to use, but first need to figure out our philosophical stance.

(Cunliffe, 2011: 411)

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The current qualitative study adopts an interpretive methodology. In a study of 360, this represents a departure from the current methodological orthodoxy in the field, where to-date positivist perspectives have dominated. Symon and Cassell (2006) suggest that an overly dominant research paradigm can lead to stagnation in the development of research. However, stagnation, lack of progress and inertia are not the challenges facing current 360 research. Indeed, a lively proliferation of research offering interesting insights and development of theory continues to bubble within this field. Instead, applying Symon and Cassell's (2006) ideas about dominant paradigms to 360, the challenge facing this area of research is its lack of attention to the meanings created by the managers and others engaged in 360 practice. 360 research has become blinkered, viewing the topic from one stance, and proceeding along a research path built on a univocal understanding of the nature of 360. Taking novel stances, and adopting different methodologies or perspectives can result in fresh insights (Mabey, 2012), due in part to the different beliefs on which those methodologies are founded. Consequently, replacing a positivist view with an interpretive one might be expected to lead to distinctive understandings, removing over-used blinkers and opening up new possibilities.

This chapter clarifies the stance taken in this PhD. Following an explanation of terms, there is a discussion of the prevalence of numbers and measurement within 360 research. This is contrasted with an interpretive approach to numbers. A section on triangulation is included to demonstrate how researchers draw on different methods to ensure accuracy of measurement. Triangulation is contrasted with an alternative
metaphor, more relevant to interpretive research. Following these discussions on measurement and numbers, I then explain in more detail my own theoretical position, addressing four principles proposed by Caelli, Ray and Mill (2003).

### 2.2 RELATIVISM AND INTERPRETIVISM

A frequently made distinction is between realist and subjectivist assumptions about what constitutes ‘reality’ (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012: 17). Realist assumptions include the idea that, for example, a manager’s performance is “real and it is there potentially awaiting inspection and discovery by us” (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012: 17), so that 360 reports present the results of such inspection. This contrasts with subjectivist assumptions, which see the idea of a manager’s performance as something that is created through others’ and self-talk, it is a “projection of our consciousness and cognition” (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012: 18), the consciousness and cognition of the individual concerned and whichever raters they selected.

Cunliffe (2011) prefers ‘relativism’ to ‘subjectivity’ as “the extreme end of subjectivism assumes reality lies in the consciousness of an individual. Relativism is more encompassing, assuming that experience is historically, culturally, socially and/or linguistically situated, and can be relative to a particular moment, context, individual and/or group of people” (p412). This emphasis on the relationship between experience and a range of factors and people is relevant and useful to the current study. Therefore, the contrast that will be made here will be between realism or positivism and relativism.

Interpretive researchers are interested in the sense making engaged in by not only those being studied, but also by the researcher. Therefore, reflexivity plays an integral role within interpretive studies (Johnson and Duberley, 2003), where it is “an embedded practice that plays out
through every aspect of our research relationships” (Cunliffe, 2011: 411). Indeed, a reflexive approach entails “recognising that our research conversations (or interviews) are part of a process of making sense, where researcher and organisational members negotiate and shape meaning about our experience of what might be going on” (Cunliffe, 2011: 407, original emphasis). At the same time, the intention of the interpretive researcher is to “represent others’ life-worlds as sensitively as possible” (Cassell and Symon, 2006: 308). Reflexivity is not evident in 360-research to-date, thereby allowing the possibility that its inclusion in the current work might contribute new insights.

The role of theory within interpretivism is one of sensitising the researcher and reader to possibilities, rather than one of directing attention (Symon and Cassell, 2006). Therefore, theory development within interpretive research assists both academics and practitioners by encouraging consideration of different possibilities, and by offering ways of making sense of a situation that others may further experiment with. The meanings given to, for example, Human Resource Management (HRM) practices, will in turn impact on how those practices are played out (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). Whilst no claims are made about generalising from specific cases to the whole population, much good interpretive research makes a contribution to practice (Cassell and Symon, 2011).

The beliefs underpinning any researcher’s work are important. They impact on everything the researcher does: what is considered ‘real’ and ‘accurate’; how best to find out the information we need; and what methods we use at every stage of the research endeavour (Travis, 1999). This is clearly shown in the topics studied within positivist 360 research. From a realist perspective, once account has been taken of individual differences, and any kind of bias, then it should be possible for raters to give identical ratings when assessing the same manager: there is only one accurate assessment. This then is the underlying ontology of current positivist 360 research, or beliefs about the nature of reality, and has
resulted in many studies into how to decrease rater inaccuracy (Brett and Atwater, 2001) and how to increase the validity and reliability of the ratings (Hooft, Flier and Minne, 2006; LeBreton, Burgess and Kaiser, 2003; Kulas and Finkelstein, 2007; Hensel, Meijers and van der Leeden, 2010). Also evident within 360 research is the use of large data sets and frequent comparisons relating 360 ratings to other measures of performance (Beehr, et al., 2001). This demonstrates a belief that better knowledge about someone’s performance can be developed if more measurements are gathered from many sources. This is the underlying epistemology of current 360 research, of beliefs about how knowledge is acquired. Write-ups of positivist research tend to proceed straight to a description of research methods, without addressing issues of ontology and epistemology. Methodology based on positivism will be approached as if it is an objective process, designed to gather accurate measurements that can be tested to prove causality, and from which generalisations may be drawn.

360 designs exhibit a realist ontological view of performance. The challenge is to discover the true performance. From a realist’s perspective, knowledge about true performance is built from objective assessments. Such realist epistemology (knowledge about knowledge) accounts for the differences in ratings on the basis of rater-error attributed to individual differences, prejudice, and influence of recent events, amongst other issues. What is known as rater error is regarded as obscuring the true unbiased measurement of performance (Murphy, 2008). Individual subjectivities are seen as inaccuracies, the impact of which has to be taken account of and controlled.

Although there are occasional examples of qualitative methods, mostly in the form of semi-structured interviews (e.g. Mabey, 2001), 360 researchers retain a realist view, whereby they describe and take account of subjectivity and bias in order to clean the data. Whatever research methods are chosen, 360 researchers have not so far stated their stance. The act of omitting any discussion of their research perspective, allows
the taken-for-granted assumption that performance exists as an entity and can be measured objectively. The neat ‘fit’ between 360 design and 360 research arguably results in each reinforcing the numbers-focus of the other.

Interpretive research takes a different perspective. Ontologically, interpretive researchers believe that there is no one accurate measure that encapsulates, for example, a manager’s performance. Rather, that there are layers of meanings and interpretations. What constitutes knowledge (epistemology) are the many voices and different ways of knowing. Based on these beliefs, the relevant methods are more explorative than testing.

2.3 NUMBERS: COUNTING PERFORMANCE

Within 360 research, there has been a strong emphasis on the use of the numerical ratings as research data. Access to such data in real work situations is facilitated by the fact that the data already exist. A researcher does not need to establish a design for the production of ratings; they are already available. Consequently, in terms of field studies, once a researcher gains entry to an organisation, they can access rich data sets, which have been created in real work situations. With the escalation of online questionnaires, 360 ratings are increasingly available on electronic files. Longitudinal studies can be carried out retrospectively, by analysing the stored numerical ratings. The predominance of statistical methods is not positioned within any articulated philosophical view of the world, of what constitutes ‘performance’ and ‘reality’; the relevance of the ratings is assumed. What counts are the numbers.

In contrast, from an interpretive viewpoint, the relevance of ratings cannot be assumed. Instead, an interpretive researcher might be interested in ratings in so far as they carry particular meanings for those that assign
them and for those that interpret them. Ratings do not therefore provide 
an objective measurement of performance, rather they contribute to 
interpretation of performance. Indeed, from this perspective, there is no 
single correct entity that is a manager's performance. A manager’s 
performance is observed, discussed and narrated so that it is at least in 
part a construction from people’s different views and experiences, within 
a specific cultural, historical and organisational context. Or rather, 
people’s experience and understanding of that context contributes to how 
they construe a manager’s performance and their evaluation of it 
(Höpful). There are therefore layers of meaning encoded within any 
verbal, or indeed numerical, account of a person's performance. The 
layers of meaning are created by people influenced in part by organisational practices such as competency frameworks, 
performance management systems and 360. Therefore, an individual's 
performance in one environment or culture may be judged positively, yet 
in another it may be criticised. There are no objective measurements. 
There is no one performance. Conceptualising performance in this way 
engages with its complexity. Wherever any single perspective is 
privileged above others, the act of privileging also carries meaning.

Moving from numbers to 360, and building on the above discussion, it 
becomes clear that, from an interpretive viewpoint, 360 can be seen as a 
complex construct that is created in a myriad of ways: the formally stated 
purpose and value; individual intentions; the ratings and how people 
make sense of those ratings; the presentation of the 360 report; and its 
use alongside other HR practices. In realist 360 research, the very 
limited attention that has been paid to these issues has concerned 
measurement, testing and numbers. Interpretive research turns to the 
meaning making involved in 360.

2.4 TRIANGULATION
Central to 360 is the gathering of feedback from multiple perspectives, in 
order to provide a more accurate view of performance. This builds on the
idea of triangulation. In geography, modern day ‘triangulation’ refers to the process of receiving satellite signals from multiple sources to pinpoint precise locations using the global positioning system (GPS). When used within research, triangulation also refers to taking measurements from different sources. Its use implies that more sources will help to pinpoint the exact nature of the subject of research, that whatever is being observed can be accurately tracked and identified from outside. Triangulation is used to demonstrate the ‘truth’ of research findings through their replication or close similarity in more than one source. This idea of taking measurements from more than one source is core to 360.

The term ‘360-degree feedback’ emphasises the status of each rater to the individual. Often shown graphically, the multiple sources of feedback are shown so that at 0°, at the top of the page, is the line manager, at 90° and 270° are those at the same level such as peer colleagues and customers and at 180° are the direct reports. Representation of all the angles is believed to produce more accurate measurement, as is the case with other examples of triangulation. The raters’ view of the individual’s performance is dependent on the angle or status of their angle, or status, of their relationship to the individual. Here it is the status of the relationship that matters. In this way, individuals’ identities are removed from the 360 process. Apart from membership of a particular status (or rater) group, all other information is considered irrelevant to the ratings as far as a 360 report is concerned. The raters’ role is to rate the individual’s performance from their own particular angle, thereby furnishing numbers, which can be averaged and generalised. In this way triangulation emphasises the importance of perspective, the number of degrees from which a rater views the individual’s performance, and divests each individual of any other detail of their identity.

It is not only quantitative researchers who use triangulation. Citing triangulation as their method, qualitative researchers also use different data sources, data analysis and theory “as a method of reducing ‘systemic bias’” (Aguinaldo, 2004) and therefore as proof of increased
validity. It is not therefore the nature of the data (numbers or words) that identify the researcher’s perspective, but rather the beliefs underlying the use of the data. In 360 research, qualitative data are included either to develop constructs, or to provide further depth in order to be certain of what the ‘truth’ is. The aim here is to establish specific and accurate measurement. The use of triangulation emphasises that aim, whatever the sources of information that are being used. From this discussion, it is clear that triangulation involving quantitative and qualitative data, best denotes a realist, positivist perspective, as is evidenced in such studies as those by Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2006) and Davies et al., (2008).

As outlined above, inherent within the use of triangulation in 360 research (and practice) is the idea that a viewpoint held by many is more accurate, valuable and worthy of responding to than a viewpoint held by one person or a minority. Some views are discounted on the basis of inaccuracy, bias or prejudice. However, it could be that those views offer fresh and insightful outlooks. Wanting to give voice to those ‘outlier’ views some interpretive researchers follow Richardson (2005: 963) who proposes that

the central imaginary for ‘validity’ for post-modernist texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes…and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose – not triangulation but rather crystallization.

The metaphor of a crystal does not prioritise any one facet, instead each facet adds to the wholeness of the crystal’s beauty. This metaphor might also be applied to 360 in either of two ways. Firstly, an individual manager’s performance is multi-faceted, such that it is challenging to
view them all at once; however, together there is a sense of wholeness. Secondly, no one person’s feedback takes precedence, but all opinions have equal value.

The contrasting metaphors of triangulation and crystallization provide helpful insights into different approaches to research. They highlight, for example, the distinct purpose and processes of positivist and interpretive research. In summary, triangulation (positivism) may draw on many forms of qualitative and quantitative data in a quest to establish the one correct point, and might arguably be described as ‘univocal’. Crystallization3 (interpretive research) on the other hand brings to mind proliferation of meanings depending on our angle to the multi-faceted crystal along with refraction (reflexivity), in a quest for understanding, which might be described as ‘plurivocal’. To-date, 360 research has been entirely in line with the metaphor of triangulation. In contrast, the current work is interpretive, interested in plurivocal understandings of 360 and of a manager’s performance, and using those understandings to gain insights to the many meanings of 360 for different people: a multi-faceted crystallization.

2.5 CREDIBILITY

360 researchers do not make a practice of stipulating their research perspective. Nor is this expected in positivist research on other topics, when using quantitative methods. However, for those using qualitative methods, there are different expectations. The credibility of qualitative research depends on clearly addressing, according to Caelli, Ray and Mill (2003), four areas:

1. “The theoretical positioning of the researcher;
2. The congruence between methodology and methods;
3. The strategies to establish rigor; and

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3 Qualitative and quantitative data can both be used within interpretive research. Numbers carry symbolic meaning and different people will interpret them differently.
4. The analytic lens through which the data are examined” (p9).

2.5.1 Theoretical position
According to Caelli, Ray and Mill (2003), qualitative research should state the theoretical positioning of the researcher. This means clarifying the researcher’s personal history, motives and presuppositions, which may explain the researcher’s interests in a particular inquiry. Theoretical positioning, therefore, refers to what a researcher brings into their study.

The personal history of the researcher has an impact on not only the choice of research topic but also the perspective from which it is explored. Before I started this research, I had already worked for some years as a coach, a Learning & Development specialist and consultant, a facilitator of 360 and a trainer of 360 facilitators. In addition, I had experimented with two corporate clients using what I called f2f-360 (face-to-face 360, see Appendix 10). With the first company, one coaching client, his raters and a senior manager had all been enthusiastic about the model of f2f-360. With the second company, a consultancy firm, reactions were more mixed following the pilot of a performance management process, which included f2f-360. Across both companies, almost everyone welcomed the lack of anonymity. Everyone that is except for three Occupational Psychologists in the consultancy firm, who argued vigorously for anonymity as a necessary prerequisite for any 360 process.

These experiences, along with the work with 360 facilitators, contributed to a set of presuppositions I had developed about 360. Researchers are not neutral observers. Furthermore, there is a debate as to the practicality and desirability of a researcher putting on one-side personal values and prior knowledge of the research topic. I brought to the research some questions and concerns about the assumptions underpinning 360. I was struck by the difficulties experienced by 360 recipients and facilitators as they interpret a 360 report, and wanted to understand more about the tactics they used in that process. I questioned the extent to which 360
was contributing to greater openness and enhanced working relationships. Just before I started this PhD, I was interviewed for a training video with the now defunct Einstein Network\textsuperscript{4}. The session title was: \textit{360-degree feedback – can it improve the way we handle daily feedback?} This enabled me to bring together my thoughts and concerns about the use of anonymity, ratings and de-contextualised narrative comments.

This summary of my personal history and presuppositions shows that my motives were, and are, to challenge the prevalent anonymous and quantitative approaches to 360. My interest lies in improving the use of feedback to develop the quality of working relationships, in the belief that this will benefit individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole. So that I could better understand the current processes, which I will call ‘traditional 360’, I shelved the idea of f2f-360. Aware of at least some of my own biases, I wanted to analyse and learn from people’s accounts of their 360 experiences, believing that we “can become conscious of our prejudices only when we encounter a text whose meaning challenges the truth of our prejudices” (Prasad, 2002: 19).

As a practitioner, I was also motivated by the opportunity for receiving 360 myself, and possibly the opportunity for developing a 360 tool for coaches. I wanted to gather feedback on my performance as coach and to analyse my own emotional and cognitive reactions. I recognised the potential of a research design that would enable me to develop both my academic and practitioner skills. Therefore, I was motivated to shape my research inquiry in such a way as to build research and analytical skills, as part of building collaboration with my coaching clients.

In summary, what I brought to this research were a number of concerns and questions based on my practical experience, coupled with a desire to

\textsuperscript{4} This company made and distributed corporate training videos in the UK, featuring interviews with subject matter experts.
extract from the PhD experience opportunities for my own development as an academic and practitioner.

2.5.2 Congruence between methodology and methods
There should be congruence between methodology (reflecting the beliefs about knowledge that arise from the philosophical framework being employed) and the methods or tools of data collection and analysis.

Beliefs about knowledge creation are particularly relevant when considering what feedback is and its relationship to the performance that is discussed in that feedback. I believe that we are active agents in the construction of knowledge, through our thinking, conversation and reflexivity. Consequently, feedback about someone’s performance will contribute to a shared understanding of a person’s performance and will influence the construction of knowledge about that person’s performance. This describes an interpretive methodology, concerned with how people make meaning out of their experiences:

*The goal of the researcher, therefore, is not to capture some pre-existing or ready-made world presumed to be available out there but to understand this process of symbolic “worldmaking” (Schwandt, 1994) through which the social world is ongoingly accomplished. This ontological and epistemological commitment is at the heart of interpretive research.* (Prasad and Prasad, 2002: 7).

Interviews are approached in different ways within different methodologies. An interpretive methodology holds that an interviewer’s questions and presence do influence, but do not determine, what is said along with what and how the other person thinks. A broken silence, the choice of one word over another, may open or shut down the creation or sharing of a thought. This view of epistemology includes therefore the idea that a researcher does not behave objectively when analysing data. Instead, an interpretive epistemology incorporates the belief that a
researcher’s views will impact on every stage of the research process. Therefore, the way that interviews are carried out, the approach to the analysis and presentation of interview data, all demonstrate an interpretive perspective.

Reflecting on the impact of the researcher is not about reducing it, rather it is about using the reflections as data. In the research design for this PhD, therefore, reflexivity (reflecting on the reflections) played a central role in the choice of methods for both data collection and data analysis. Furthermore, as researcher, I recognise that my “interpretation and representation of reality through [my] research …actively creates reality” (Haynes, 2012: 74). An iterative process of gathering data, analysing, synthesising and re-checking, reflexivity and self-awareness contribute to the researcher’s role within an interpretive framework. A growing interest in reflexivity throughout this research has meant I have questioned my assumptions about 360, methodology and the role of analysis. This choice of an exploratory and reflexive approach to interviews coupled with the inclusion of reflexive writing is congruent with an interpretive methodology.

My first degree in linguistics incorporated significant work in the psychology of language and qualitative methods. However, within my current community of practice (occupational psychology), I am aware of a cautiousness regarding interpretive work. But since methodology is “inevitably interwoven with and emerges from the nature of particular disciplines” (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 191), it is hoped that the current work will be received within the field as a helpful contribution to the growing emergence of interpretive work. Indeed, it is this hope that forms the secondary text (Guba and Lincoln, 2005), namely a desire to build acceptance of interpretive work within occupational psychology.
2.5.3 Rigour
The third area, which Caelli, Ray and Mill (2003) argue needs to be addressed for qualitative researchers to achieve credibility, concerns strategies to establish rigour. This important topic is addressed within the section on evaluation criteria in Chapter 4 – Research Design.

2.5.4 The analytic lens
This brings us to the fourth area, namely clarifying the “analytic lens through which the data are examined” (Caelli, Ray and Mill, 2003: 5). The theoretical positioning of the researcher was about “the researcher’s motives for pursuing a particular area of inquiry” (Caelli, Ray and Mill, 2003: 17). The congruence between methodology and methods was about establishing methodology before presenting the research design. The analytic lens concerns how the researcher engages with the data. This is partly to ensure that the approaches to gathering, analysing and presenting data are consistent within the methodology. It is also to ensure that choices about analysis are justified: there are some “reports where the researchers claim to use a particular qualitative approach, but the methodological depth and interpretation of the data demanded by the stated approach are missing” (Caelli, Ray and Mill, 2003: 18).

Perhaps inevitably, my epistemological understanding changed during the course of the current research. Initially, I saw interviews in terms of gathering data that pre-existed my intervention: the ideas existed in people’s minds; they were engaged in talking about 360. This resulted in transcripts that I now read as somewhat mechanical and shallow. I developed a more interpretive stance, where I learnt to engage more with the person I was interviewing, interested in the data we were creating together, albeit this co-creation was not conscious and begs the question of the respective power roles of the researcher and the person being interviewed. Nonetheless, my perspective is that data were created within the interviews, that I then reflected on to identify themes that helped me to make sense of the data. Similarly, within the
autoethnography I wrote reflexively, thereby creating knowledge about how I, as one person, engaged with the 360 process. In this way biased assumptions were used as data to be reflected on and employed as a basis for theorising.

Caelli, Ray and Mill’s (2003) four areas offer helpful guidance to qualitative researchers in articulating their perspective.

2.6 DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Traditionally, journal editors advise qualitative researchers to demonstrate gaps in earlier research and to state why it is important to fill those gaps (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). Although gap-spotting appears to result in greater likelihood of being published, consensus-challenging research often produces more interesting articles (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). The starting point for the current research was that the practice and research of 360 were based on unquestioned assumptions. From this starting point, the development of research questions was iterative, that is the research questions were written, reflected on, used as a basis for early interviews and continually refined: 

*The selection of innovative research questions is not a single act or decision. Significant research is a process, an attitude, a way of thinking.*

(Campbell *et al*., 1982 cited in Robson, 1993: 25)

Research questions are an important research tool. They provide a useful base to return to throughout the research, to prompt new thoughts, to challenge current ones. Reflexivity informed the development of both the research aim and the research questions. I do not experience this as an easy or straightforward process. The following quote from my journal is included to demonstrate the extent to which I found myself trying to work in a straight line, trying to be true to the beliefs outlined above, and yet at times relying more on the sense I was bringing to the research rather than understanding the sense-making of the research participants:
I am searching for a clear ‘research aim’. This is proving challenging, largely due to the fact that I sit in interviews wondering what on earth I will be able to give voice to, once I transcribe that person’s words. The process of qualitative research both intrigues me and leaves me feeling quite physically ill. It brings me right back to epistemological questions about what really constitutes ‘knowledge’, and about the role of a qualitative, interpretive researcher in ‘shaping’, ‘uncovering’, ‘suggesting’ meaning. I feel such a deep sense of disquiet as I catch myself thinking mid-interview, “That will be a great quote”, “Ah, those words are out of his mouth now, so I can legitimately call them data”. The disquiet unsettles my desire to do more honour to the participants, to their meanings and their sense-making. I wanted to understand more about their sense of MSF, to be able to weave together their respective transcripts so that they would recognise the final result as incorporating their views. Instead, and in strong contrast to my over-ambitious ambitions, I find myself repeating research practice that I find questionable. I sit. I ask questions. I record. I transcribe. I analyse. I behave like a photographer who decides on the picture they want, often of unknown people who don’t appreciate that interpretive practice will highlight and expose their ‘being’ according to the photographer’s own sense-making; and so many of those truly wonder-ful photographs are never even seen by their ‘subjects’.

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In retrospect, it is clear that the development of the research questions was facilitated specifically in three ways, as described by Robson (1993: 27). Knowing the area was important. Having worked with 360, I was able to develop research questions, which encapsulated some of the discussions amongst colleagues. Presenting conference papers gave me opportunities to test my understanding of the research issues. The second method for developing the research questions involved widening
Work by Hall on En/Decoding and by Ritzer on McDonaldisation broadened the context within which I researched 360, and deepened my interest in process, rituals and ways of making sense. None of this appears in the actual wording of the questions, but as I kept returning to them, they meant something different to me. This is a key part of my learning as a researcher: that thinking about the questions, interpreting them and reinterpreting them has significance for how I think about them and the research. The third method involves techniques for enhancing creativity. Reflexive writing assisted me to get ‘unstuck’, as did mind maps and brainstorming, identifying the advantages and disadvantages of each option.

Including this chapter on methodology before the literature review emphasises the critical perspective, which I have taken regarding 360 theory and research. The particular research questions highlight my interest in how participants, with different roles in the 360-degree feedback process, make sense of and talk about:

1. The purpose and value of 360,  
2. Anonymity,  
3. Numerical ratings,  
4. Text comments – and their relationship to numerical ratings.
3 – Literature Review

3.1 INTRODUCTION
This chapter analyses 360 research, concentrating on the work that addresses the four principle research questions. Therefore, after a brief history of 360, the following four sections review the literature relating to purpose and value of 360, anonymity, numerical ratings and narrative comments. This discussion highlights some of the areas to be examined in the case studies. Next there is a critique of the methodology and methods applied within 360 research, which evidences the exclusively positivist perspective so far adopted. I argue that an interpretive perspective is better-suited not only to explore how people make meaning from 360 but also how the conflicting desires for simplicity (the use of numbers) and complexity (the use of text and context) are played out. The last two sections of the chapter address this conflict. Firstly, the apparent simplicity of 360 is analysed against Ritzer’s (1996) four principles of McDonaldisation: calculability, predictability (or standardisation) and use of technology. Secondly, the complexities of making meaning from 360 are examined: Hall’s (1999) encoding/decoding model shows how participants in 360 are active in different ways through the stages.

3.2 HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF 360
There are different ways of contextualising the development of 360. One way describes 360 as developing within the world of psychometric measurement (Campbell, 2001). There was also early work on the psychometric properties of self-appraisals (Thornton, 1980; Mabe and West, 1982) and interest in comparing self-ratings with peer and supervisor ratings (Harris and Schaubroeck, 1988). The involvement of raters in addition to the line manager was seen as promising greater measurement accuracy.
In contrast to emphasising the measurement of performance, another way of contextualising the development of 360 is focusing on its use within learning. Following early work, in the late 1950’s Maloney and Hinrichs developed and used an upward feedback tool for supervisors, called “Rate Your Supervisor” (Hedge, Borman and Birkeland, 2001). Rather than targeting assessment, this tool prioritised self-development. It is interesting that the introduction of upward feedback was linked to development rather than to assessment. A possible engrained message here can be read to mean that managers might benefit from subordinate voices in order to learn how to manage teams more effectively, whereas they need to pay attention to their superiors’ views to achieve higher assessments that lead to higher compensation. However, such a division between different voices and their respective influence is not always as black-and-white. The first “multisource feedback” survey is attributed by Bracken, Timmreck and Church (2001) to Dorn and Bailey in the mid 1970’s, who were committed to finding better ways to give feedback to participants in CCL’s5 leadership training programs (Campbell, 2000: xix). On the topic of developing leadership, both junior and senior voices are seen to provide useful input.

With wider use of personal computers in the 1980’s, 360 also spread and once online questionnaires were designed, the use of 360 increased further. Advances in technology impacted on how data was gathered and analysed in other areas, such as employee attitude surveys and performance appraisal. According to London and Tornow (1998) developments in these areas, alongside the need for managers to adjust to constant changes, were three main contributors to the development of 360.

The first of these contributors, employee attitude surveys, has influenced assumptions and practice in 360, with a shared emphasis on numerical

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data, anonymity and averaging. Employee attitude surveys report data for each department, for the organization as a whole, or for both, with an emphasis on analysing needs for change at an organizational level. The organization own the data and the survey is organizationally focused. There is not therefore any provision of individualized data for managers. An interest grew in developing a tool that would rectify this absence, and assist managers to understand their individual change needs.

The second of the contributors was performance appraisal. Accurate assessment was sought to increase reliability of promotion decisions along with the fairness of compensation decisions that were based on ratings. (More is written about this later in this section.)

The third contributor was the need for managers to adjust to constant changes. As London and Tornow note, the “complexity of jobs requires that employees have feedback from a variety of constituencies, not just their supervisor” (1998: 2). This feedback was expected to assist individual managers to appreciate the need to change. Therefore, 360 was developed partly to provide individual managers with more comprehensive feedback data that would focus their minds on the need to change and to meet the requirements of different stakeholders, and partly to improve the accuracy and reliability of administrative decisions. In contrast to this view of 360 as an enabling tool, it has been described as a mechanism for management control, for example by Townley (1995) whose work is discussed in a later section.

In the middle of the 1990’s, there were a number of papers and conferences presenting research results on upward feedback (several of these papers are referred to by Atwater et al., 2000). It was argued that feedback from subordinates would give insights into how an individual performed as a manager of people. Concurrently, there was interest in peer feedback (reviewed in Walker and Smither, 1999), as peers too have a particular perspective, and are argued by some to have more frequent opportunities to observe the recipient. During this same period,
360 research increased, for example with a special edition on ‘MSF’ in the journal *Human Resource Management* with an introduction by Tornow (1993).

The medical profession in the UK has paid particular attention to 360. Different consultancies, each targeting different professions and roles within the NHS, have developed different 360’s. For example as part of developing leadership, and based on NHS leadership competencies, over 20,000 people with line management responsibilities have used a 360 tool developed specifically for the NHS\(^6\). In addition, the GMC (General Medical Council) has made 360\(^7\) a requirement for doctors to gain revalidation (GMC, 2011; Mahmood, 2010).

### 3.3 PURPOSE AND VALUE OF 360

Behaviour change is the main goal of 360. Whether used as part of assessment (selection; appraisal; reward management) or development (management development; training programmes; coaching), 360 is used to increase the credibility and acceptance of ratings. This ensures clear messages are delivered about where changes are needed to demonstrate behaviours desired by the organisation. From the discussion above, it is clear that there are two main purposes for 360: assessment and development.

#### 3.3.1 Assessment

As stated in the previous section, a contributor to the development of 360 was performance appraisal. The dominant interest in 360 within the USA has been and continues to be in its use for assessment. An interest in

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\(^6\) Approximately 18,000 participants used a 360 tool, based on what was then the NHS Leadership Qualities Framework (LQF), between 2004 and 2011 (email exchange with Right Management, using data from the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement). Nearly 3,000 further participants have used the new Leadership Framework 360 between October 2011 and October 2012 (same email exchange, but using data from the NHS Leadership Academy).

\(^7\) Although referring to the process as 360 or MSF, there is no feedback from someone more senior, therefore strictly speaking this is not a 360. The term the GMC use is ‘Colleague and Patient Questionnaires’
increased accuracy prompted early work to expand assessment beyond that carried out by the supervisor (Hedge, Borman and Birkeland, 2001). In 1947, Williams and Leavitt’s study with Marine Corps officers tested the predictive validity of peer ratings, and concluded that “peer evaluations were more valid predictors of success in officer candidate school than several objective tests, and were more valid predictors of future performance than were supervisor ratings” (Hedge, Borman and Birkeland, 2001: 19). Other studies supported this view. However, in 1955, Berkley published a study “comparing supervisor, co-worker and self-ratings of air force enlisted personnel and found no differences between supervisors and co-worker mean ratings; self-ratings showed only a small relationship to ratings by supervisors or co-workers” (Hedge, Borman and Birkeland, 2001: 19-20). Similar studies, with a range of contradictory findings, were carried out within the commercial sector (Hedge, Borman and Birkeland, 2001).

In the earlier period of gathering assessments from a range of colleagues, the person being assessed was not shown the results, even though decisions were based on them (Hedge, Borman and Birkeland, 2001). The rationale was that individuals would not be able to understand their results, so they were better off not seeing them. This changed in the early 1960’s, for example when volunteers for the USA Peace Corps were given their results, with the expectation that this would help with their personal preparation for new assignments.

Depending on only a line manager’s ratings when assessing skills is fraught with difficulties. The line manager is not present in most of the situations that the individual navigates and only gains a partial view of events. Furthermore, the organization needs their people to attend to the requirements and preferences of a range of stakeholders, not just those of their line manager. There is therefore a belief that “multiple sources are better than one when it comes to assessing behavior” (Church and Bracken, 1997: 150).
Use of 360 to assist reward decisions influences the level of the ratings given (London and Smither, 1995) insofar as raters will give higher ratings if those ratings impact on the recipient’s compensation. Despite this, 360 is widely used in the USA for administrative purposes (performance appraisal, compensation, succession planning). And there is now some evidence that practice within the UK\(^8\) is emulating the USA’s application of 360.

3.3.2 Development
There has been a tradition within the UK of using 360 primarily for development, not assessment. This is largely based on concerns about the reliability of raters’ observations and ratings. The core belief underpinning use of 360 is that increased self-awareness leads to improved performance. Comparing self- and other-ratings, recipients are “forced into a cognitive process of reflection that ultimately results in greater levels of awareness of their own actions and the consequences those actions have on others across various levels in and out of the organisation” (Church and Bracken, 1997: 150, citing nine earlier studies).

With this belief at the core, an increasing number of applications have been found for 360, including “not only executive development, feedback, individual development planning, and coaching, but also career development, training, … and team-building” (Rogers, Rogers and Metlay, 2002). 360 has been used as part of development programmes, administered before and after the period of development. CCL is one consultancy using 360 to contribute to training needs analysis and increased self-awareness before the programme starts, and also to evaluation of individual and group learning afterwards (London and Tornow, 1998).

\(^8\) Conversation with David Cooper at Lumus: several of their corporate clients are asking what changes will be needed to use 360 to assist decision-making.
3.3.3 Organisational development

Although the main research interest has been in 360 for individual development (Smither et al., 1995; Walker and Smither 1999), there is also interest in its use for organisational change (Bracken and Rose, 2011). Although the value of 360 at an organisational level is promoted on consultancy websites, there continues to be relatively little academic research on this topic. Van Rensburg and Prideaux (2006) carried out a case study in a firm that offered accounting, finance and law services, and found that 360 was “an influential catalyst for organizational change and assisted to build a more collective organizational culture” (Van Rensburg and Prideaux, 2006: 568). This was achieved in part by linking 360 to the organisation’s values, which “had the effect of reinforcing them in a powerful way” (Van Rensburg and Prideaux, 2006: 568). In addition, the authors write that 360 “also enhanced the firm’s business planning and educational process by helping to provide more reliable data about overall organizational development and management needs, especially for self- and people-based development issues” (Van Rensburg and Prideaux, 2006: 568).

There is little research to look at the effectiveness of 360 in improving performance of the organisation overall. Even within the research that does exist, the findings are not encouraging. For example, DeNisi and Kluger (2000: 130) found that 38% of the effects of 360 were “negative”. Furthermore, they point out that there are different opinions about whether 360 can contribute to culture change or whether the culture has to be open and trustful with team structures in place before using 360 (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000: 667). In spite of a lack of clarity within academic research about the specific contribution to organisational performance, there is a continuing increase in the use of 360 both in the USA and the UK (Silverman, Kerrin and Carter, 2005). Perhaps even more surprisingly, 360 is often implemented as an initiative in its own right, separately from other HR processes. Bracken et al., (2001) argue
that a more strategic application of 360 would assist both its implementation and the chances of its contributing to improved performance. Such a considered approach, rather than disjointed use, is advocated on many consultancy websites.

Whyte and Lawrence (2012) interviewed over 50 clients, coaches and participants to develop an understanding of what distinguishes effective from ineffective 360 processes. They found that participants were not always clear about why their organization wanted them to use 360. Indeed, they suggest that at times there may be no organizational purpose, “rather just a belief that 360° feedback is a ‘good thing’”. Interestingly, this study was carried out by practitioners rather than by academics and places a strong emphasis on context and sense-making.

More is known about the purpose and value of 360 according to researchers and consultants. However, perhaps as Fletcher and Baldry note (1999: 163): “This widespread adoption seems to have reflected faith rather than proven validity”.

### 3.4 ANONYMITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Research interest in anonymity has concentrated on the impact of anonymity on the level of ratings and on rater and recipient accountability. The overriding argument for rater anonymity is that without it, raters would not give ‘honest, open feedback’, (although never stipulated, ‘honest, open feedback’ means feedback that contains criticism or suggestions for change, not feedback that contains honest, open appreciations).

#### 3.4.1 Disentangling the terminology

The words anonymity, confidentiality and accountability are at times used in the same sentence. Therefore this section disentangles the three
terms and discusses their relationship to one another, before examining evidence of the impact of anonymity on recipients and raters\(^9\), particularly with respect to the interplay between anonymity and accountability and its impact on participants’ understanding of the content and process of 360.

3.4.1.1 Anonymity

Rater anonymity promises that specific comments cannot be linked to specific raters. Anonymity is guaranteed to all raters except for the line manager: “Bosses’ ratings, of course, are not anonymous, but should be kept confidential, shown only to the feedback recipient” (Jones and Bearley, 1996: 19). This separate treatment of the line manager highlights the specific role they play in relationship to the recipient. Indeed, this is the basis of 360 design, that raters are grouped according to the angle of their relationship to the individual. Furthermore, it is expected that the line manager will be saying nothing new in their feedback to the individual, given that she or he has accountability for giving specific, supportive and constructive feedback to all team members throughout the year. Therefore, because the individual should know the line manager’s opinions, anonymity is not deemed necessary. Although not specifically stated in the literature, the lack of line manager anonymity suggests an organisational expectation that the line manager will have given clear feedback without depending on a 360 process. Interestingly, there is no such attitude about other work colleagues, so there is no expectation that individuals should already know the content of their feedback.

\(^9\) There is less research on the impact of anonymity on other 360 participants, and therefore the case study chapters explore the consequences of anonymity throughout the 360 process for the organisation, HR and facilitators.
Confidentiality is not the same as anonymity. Instead, it “requires that the results (i.e. data, reports, comments) are shared only with those who have access according to predetermined and communicated policies” (Bracken et al., 2001: 14). Confidentiality is principally therefore about access to an individual’s 360 report. Indeed, ownership of a participant’s data is an important issue in the 360 process. CCL (Centre for Creative Leadership) believes that a 360 report should not be shared with a participant’s organisation unless the participant decides to do so themselves (Fleenor, Taylor and Chappelow, 2008: 4). However, although 65% of respondents said that individuals were not required to share their data with the organisation, this left 35% of organisations who have some level of expectation that individuals will indeed share their 360 data (Fleenor, Taylor and Chappelow, 2008: 4).

There are two problems with keeping 360 data confidential. The first concerns achieving the primary goal of 360, namely behaviour change. The line manager as part of their role in managing a team is expected to nurture the development of its members, however the “very privacy of the feedback has a cost: it can serve to relieve the line manager of a responsibility to support development” (Mabey, 2001: 47). And from the individual’s perspective, they are unlikely to demonstrate behaviour change unless they are required to “share results and action plans with some significant party (i.e. supervisor, direct reports, peers)” (Bracken et al., 2001: 14). To accomplish both confidentiality and the sharing of results with others, the individual recipient needs to be in charge of deciding who they share those results with, possibly with a pre-agreement about how this will be done.

A second problem in keeping 360 data confidential lies in the use of data by the organisation, in order, for example, to produce such data as
norms. Organisations such as the NHS (National Health Service), where 360 is widespread\(^{10}\), calculate norms (averages) for each band and distinct group of managers. The resulting norms become a basis against which managers can compare their own performance. Raters and recipients know that the data is stored by an outside consultancy, thereby separating it from the organisation itself. It is the consultancy that produces norms and other calculations from the data. 360 data potentially offer rich data for the organisation. A clear understanding about confidentiality is demonstrated when the consultancy holds the data, and stays separate from decision-making within the organisation. Consideration has to be paid to whether, and how to give management access to collated and depersonalised data.

3.4.1.3 Accountability

The third term that often appears in the same sentence as anonymity and confidentiality is ‘accountability’. Accountability is about liability to account for and answer for actions and performance. It is about responsibility. The basic accountability of raters is to complete a questionnaire. However, they are not held to account for how they complete it. That is, they may be requested in the instructions to answer fairly and accurately, but there will be different ways of interpreting such instructions. In what has become a standard approach to 360, there is no requirement for the raters to be responsible for involvement in the recipient’s development, or in assisting with any behaviour change, beyond completing the 360. The implications of this have not been studied.

The impact of anonymous ratings on the organisation, feedback facilitators and the line manager is largely ignored in research. Instead,

\(^{10}\) Over 20,000 managers have received 360 reports in the NHS between 2004 and 2012 (according to personal email communication). See Chapter 1 – Introduction in this PhD for more information.
research attention concentrates on recipients and raters. For both of these roles there are questions about the relative importance and value of confidentiality, anonymity and accountability. For the recipients, there are questions about ownership of the feedback, the degree of confidentiality of the results and the individual recipient’s accountability for taking action on the results. For the raters, there are questions about their need for anonymity in order to give honest and open feedback, and about their accountability for giving ‘accurate’ ratings and for assisting the recipient to address development issues. With these issues in mind, academics seem to suggest that there has to be a choice between either confidentiality and anonymity, or accountability, as the existence of either is considered to limit the other (London, Smither and Adsit, 1997).

3.4.2 The recipient
According to Bracken et al. (2001: 42) in the vast majority of 360 practice, “the feedback receiver has no accountability to use the intelligence gathered at non-trivial cost” (Bracken et al., 2001:42). However, although there is rarely any specific requirement for recipients to use their feedback, there is certainly an expectation that they will. In addition, the inclusion of ratings from different sources communicates the recipient’s range of accountabilities: “using a 360 system creates greater accountability to a variety of parties, including peers, subordinates and possibly customers.” (Bracken et al., 2001: 424). The assumption here is that an increase in accountability to the employees’ various ‘customers’ is a good thing. Indeed, this mirrors the language across many competency frameworks and training programmes about meeting, and usually excelling, the needs of both internal and external customers.

Recipients may value feedback from a wider variety of colleagues, however, “obtaining honest and direct feedback may be difficult for them” (Brutus, London and Martineau, 1999: 690). It could be argued that recipients can feel vindicated in their belief that direct feedback is hard, if not impossible, to gather, when there is such a strong emphasis on the
importance of anonymity in 360. When consultants and senior managers insist that it is just too difficult to gather direct feedback without the promise of anonymity, this could have the affect of increasing the caution with which recipients approach the option of open, shared and non-anonymous feedback. The majority of both academics and practitioners argue for the “long-standing assumption that 360 programs connotes rater anonymity and it is precisely the protection of this anonymity that leads to the honest feedback that participants provide” (Bracken et al., 2001: 411).

Recipients' perceptions of feedback are affected by whether or not the feedback is anonymous. In one study, recipients who knew the identity of their raters “viewed the upward feedback process more positively than did managers who received feedback from anonymous … raters” (London, Smither and Adsit, 1997: 166). This difference was explained on the basis that feedback recipients would assume that their direct reports would be more objective if their identities were known. However, other researchers argue that raters will be less objective if their identities are known resulting in more lenient ratings, for example if decisions about pay or promotion are based on those ratings (Antonioni, 1994; Bracken et al., 2001), or if the raters are trying to influence their managers' impressions of them (London, Smither and Adsit, 1997).

Anonymity of ratings makes it more difficult for an individual to decode messages, to understand them and therefore to take responsibility for acting on them. Even though there are potentially valuable messages within the 360 report, managers may feel frustrated in their attempts to take these forward. In a study looking at participant views of a 360 programme, Mabey (2001: 47) reports that some managers thought that “the process might be improved by being more open in contrast to the closed nature of appraisal discussions with one’s line manager”. Mabey concentrates here on confidentiality or the sharing of 360 data:

*From a faculty perspective of training and staff management, I would find it better if it was not confidential. We would be forced to address issues if the exercise was not private and if*
there was some answer to the question ‘what is the implication if I do or don’t do it?’

However, most 360 programmes keep the report confidential to the individual and the facilitator. Indeed, one consultancy is reputed not only to keep confidentiality at this level but also to dissuade recipients from sharing the report with their manager when producing an action plan (Bracken et al., 2011).

There are several aspects of the 360 process over which the recipient could demonstrate greater ownership. Specifically, by clarifying the organisation’s and his/her own objectives, the recipient could make more informed choices about: the choice of raters with perspectives relevant to the individual’s objectives; choice of target behaviours; discussion of feedback; sharing of action plans; and an invitation of further feedback. Managers have been shown to improve their ratings more in those years when they discussed the previous year’s feedback with their direct reports than in those years when they didn’t (Walker and Smither, 1999).

In reporting this study, Smither and Walker (2004) suggested that recipients might need to be furnished with different approaches or skills to tackle discussions with their peers and line manager.

Smither and Walker (2004) reported a study of 5,335 recipients in a large global organisation, who completed two 360 reports in autumn 1999 and 2000, with a mini-360 in between. For this mini-360, some of the recipients were asked to state the development goals they had set in autumn 1999, and their raters then gave feedback on the progress they had observed against these specific goals. This required more of both the recipients and raters. The researchers found a small improvement in ratings for 2000, which was statistically significant. However, this statistical significance perhaps meant less given the large size of the group. Nonetheless, these findings do suggest an opportunity for further research to examine the effect on the extent of follow-up action and behaviour change by recipients, in response to requirements for them to
share their plans and invite specific, more focused observations by their raters.

Recipients usually choose their raters. This freedom to choose has implications both for anonymity and for accountability. Typically a requirement that there be at least three in any one of the rater groups (sources) is claimed to protect anonymity. Given that recipients know who they have chosen, and given the small numbers that are often in each rater group, the extent of anonymity is questionable.

There is a clear relationship between anonymity and accountability. More has been written about how anonymity and accountability are related for raters. However, what is not known is the impact of rater anonymity on the accountability of recipients to take action in response to the feedback. Recipients are not held accountable for declaring, or operating on, a rationale in their choice of raters, nor for implementing follow-up. Indeed, the process(es) that recipients use to select their raters has not been a topic of much exploration: Becton and Schraeder (2004) were not able to identify any research on the impact following different methods of selecting raters. There are some who advocate recipients having the responsibility for selecting their raters (Van Velsor, 1997), and there are others who advocate a mixed approach, whereby both the recipient and their line manager have input to the final choice of raters.

One aspect of the process of rater selection will be the recipient's own objectives in using 360. When they are more concerned with impression management, even though the results will not be shared with others, they are more likely to control for the possibility of negative feedback (Morgan, Cannan and Cullinane, 2005). Research carried out with student populations showed that those with a Learning Goal Orientation were more likely to seek feedback, whereas those with a Performance Goal Orientation were less likely to do so (VandeWalle and Cummings 1997, cited Fletcher 2001: 476). There are opportunities here for the recipient to consider a range of issues when selecting their raters, for example to
capture the opinions of those stakeholders they value, to invite a range of views, to target both positive relationships and those they “may have difficulties connecting with” (Morgan, Cannan and Cullinane, 2005: 671) and to link the choice of raters to specific projects or individual development goals; that is to look forward rather than backward.

3.4.3 The raters
The tension between accountability and anonymity is most pronounced when researchers concentrate on the role of the raters. There is an assumption that raters need to be guaranteed anonymity to be ready to give ‘truthful’ feedback (Brutus, London and Martineau, 1999; Coates, 1996; Hurley, 1998; Silverman, Kerrin and Carter, 2005). This assumption is based on a belief and some evidence (Bracken et al., 2001) that the manager being rated may harass, or single out, those giving low ratings. Indeed, the possibility of harassment remains the primary argument for rater anonymity in 360. However, there have been challenges to anonymity, most notably in a widely-quoted article by London, Smither and Adsit in 1997: ‘Accountability: the Achilles heel of multisource feedback’. Although widely cited, the ideas in their work have been surprisingly little-developed since then. Their main recommendations were to increase the levels of rater accountability by having raters write items for the 360 questionnaire, give more direct feedback to the recipient, help the recipient formulate development goals and help them to track progress. These recommendations are reflected by several writers in the Handbook of Multisource Feedback (Bracken et al., 2001).

Anonymity absolves raters of accountability. In addition, anonymity separates the rater from their ratings, thereby communicating that the rating has meaning on its own. It is freestanding. Details, including the identity of the rater, are considered unnecessary. For a positivist, raters’ assessments are either accurate, or inaccurate (for example, due to bias). From this perspective, an argument against anonymised rating is
that raters cannot be held accountable for the quality or ‘accuracy’ of their
ing ratings and comments. Arguably, clarity about identity could engender a
sense of responsibility for learning to rate performance in ways consistent
with the organisation’s expectations. For an interpretive researcher, the
ratings are the result of a number of dynamics, related amongst other
things to raters’ perceptions and individual preferences for style. From
this perspective, anonymised ratings closes off the opportunity for the
recipient to gather more detail about different, unique views.

There is also no requirement for raters to assist the individual to make
sense of the feedback, to explore it or to take forward development based
on it (Antonioni 1994; London, Smither and Adsit, 1997). Typically, the
only involvement of raters in the 360 process lies in the provision of
ratings and written comments – an involvement which is expected to last
between 15 and 30 minutes, although there is no research as to the time
actually taken.

It is the measurements, in numbers and text comments that are required
by the 360 process. It is therefore not surprising that in 360 research, the
views of raters have largely been ignored (Mabey 2001). But what raters
think about the system as well as about any individual 360 report matters,
as the perceived “efficacy and face validity of the system” (Morgan,
Cannan and Cullinane, 2005: 665) impacts on the level of involvement of
both raters and recipients. Those who have received 360 are likely also
to have previously rated their own managers, so experiences in one role
may impact on expectations in the other. This dual-role aspect of 360
warrants further attention.

Line manager feedback is “typically not anonymous since it is collected
from one person” (Bracken and Timmreck, 2001: 495). As explained
above, there is an expectation that line manager feedback should not
come as a surprise to any of their team members, and therefore
anonymity is not necessary. However, given the range of rater errors
evidenced in the performance management literature (Fletcher, 2001), it
seems likely that there will be inconsistencies between on the one hand, the feedback messages given by the line manager within a 360 that is carried out as part of a management development programme; and on the other, their feedback messages within a traditional appraisal. Therefore, whilst some might hope for consistency from the line manager, the actuality of this is uncertain.

In those organisations where there is an ongoing investment in 360, raters experience decreasing levels of interest and involvement in completing 360 questionnaires, over a period of time (Silverman, Kerrin and Carter, 2005). Indeed, some individuals may be asked to complete several questionnaires in the course of a year. The indications are that raters become less focused and operate more ‘on automatic’, the more questionnaires they complete. If questionnaires take only 15 minutes or so to fill out, they do not place high demands on raters in terms of time requirement. However, in order to engage raters with repeated 360’s, it may be necessary to place higher, not lower, demands on them. That is, there may be benefits to be gained by increasing their accountability and real involvement in assisting colleagues to improve their performance. Brutus and Derayeh (2002) describe a 360 programme, which required recipients to select their raters one year prior to collecting the ratings. The purpose of this advance notice was to increase the raters’ awareness of their ‘evaluative duties’, alerting them to the behaviours they would be asked to rate, and thereby increasing the attention they paid to observing these behaviours around the year. The expectation was that the quality of the feedback would be enhanced. Unfortunately, there were no details about the outcome of this programme.

If the emphasis is on development, rather than on assessment, then there is a potential ongoing role for raters in reviewing the recipient’s results, thereby building some sense of accountability beyond that of merely completing a questionnaire (London, Smither and Adsit, 1997; Bracken et al., 2001).
3.4.4 The impact of anonymity on participants’ understanding of the content and process of 360

What is clear from the literature is that there are two important influences on the level of ratings given. Firstly, the declared purpose of the 360: if the ratings are to be used as a basis for decision-making (for example, decisions impacting on salary), then the ratings tend to be higher. Secondly, the presence of anonymity: if the ratings are anonymous, then the ratings tend to be lower (Antonioni, 1994; Bracken et al., 2001). Higher ratings are often described as less accurate or less honest, although there is no basis for such claims (Bracken et al., 2001). In addition to the level of ratings, London, Smither and Adsit (1997) ask whether anonymity creates or increases mistrust. This relates more widely to the development of organisational culture and attitudes to open communication. Garbett et al. (2007: 344) questioned, “whether anonymization was necessary for individuals to provide authentic feedback and whether overt provision of feedback could be ultimately more beneficial in promoting ‘improved organizational communication and teamwork’”. What requires further understanding is how anonymity impacts on raters’ and recipients’ views of feedback, and their views of the organisational context within which 360 takes place.

Anonymity, accountability and confidentiality are intertwined. How these issues are addressed within the design and practice of 360 impacts on the level of ratings and attitudes to follow-up. Beyond this, it is as yet unclear what meanings raters and recipients give to, and take from, the use of anonymity.

3.5 Numerical ratings

The 360 research into the use of ratings is significant, addressing the relationships between the ratings within any one report; between self- and other-ratings; between ratings before and after development programmes; and between 360 ratings and other numerical measurements such as annual appraisal scores, ratings from assessment
centres (Atkins and Wood, 2002; Hagan et al., 2006) and personality measures (Hooft, Flier and Minne, 2006); and between ratings and gender (Fletcher, 1999; Millmore, Biggs and Morse, 2007) and ethnicity (Varela and Premeaux, 2008). Researchers have taken the numbers from the questionnaires and worked with them.

This section does not attempt to review or summarise this literature. Instead, I examine two areas most centrally relevant to the work in progress. Firstly, I analyse the use of numbers within 360 research, specifically concerning ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’, performance improvement, self-awareness and averaging. Secondly, building on ideas about how numbers are used, I discuss the relationship between performance and performance ratings, which highlights the influence of rater goals and intentions.

3.5.1 Reliability and validity

On a theoretical level, 360:

stems from the argument that, in terms of reliability (reduction in measurement error) and validity (greater coverage of the individual performance domain), assessment of individual performance benefits from using multiple evaluators. One could argue that the popularity of MSA [multisource assessment] is due, in large part, to the intuitive appeal of this argument. However, empirical support for the impact of MSA on the reliability and validity of performance evaluations has been somewhat mixed (for example, Mount et al., 1998; Greguras and Robie, 1998)

Brutus and Derayeh (2002: 188)

This view is based on an underlying rationale that the larger the number of raters who contribute to the feedback, that is to say the larger the sample is of the total population of people who interact with the recipient, the more reliable the ratings become. This rationale is challenged by van
der Heijden and Nijhof (2004: 493) who argue that as “assessment occurs ‘in the head’, it is always, necessarily and by definition, subjective”. Furthermore, they go on to say that adding subjectivities together does not produce objectivity:

\[ \text{Subjectivity} + \text{Subjectivity} + \text{Subjectivity} \neq \text{Objectivity} \]

It is indeed strange that while users of 360 are encouraged to remember that individual ratings are subjective and represent perceptions, there is also a leap from that position to one where the sum of multiple subjectivities become objective. This is particularly evident in the aggregating of ratings within each rater group (peers, direct reports). 360 is based on the idea that an accurate measurement of performance can be triangulated, with measurements taken from raters viewing the individual from different angles. That is, it is not the individual perspectives within each group that carry meaning, but rather the stakeholder’s group perspective as a whole. However, a few writers do express the view that different people even within the same rater group observe and experience a manager from different vantage points with different levels of emotional involvement leading to different perceptions (Gillespie, 2005; Wilkie, Robertson and Allan, 2006). However, in spite of such arguments against the rationale of rendering aggregate subjectivities ‘objective’, the practice usually goes unquestioned.

3.5.2 Performance Improvement

Quantitative research is concerned with identifying patterns, similarities and differences between numbers. Indeed, much of the 360 literature centres on identifying what leads to a statistically tested difference in performance. Interestingly, when researchers lay claim to their work identifying characteristics of, or approaches to, 360 that results in ‘performance improvement’, the measure of improvement is not always made explicit. When the measure is clarified it is either of two options.
The first option is when the 360 ratings from two consecutive reports are compared. Although also infrequently explained, at times researchers (not practitioners) make this comparison on the basis of aggregating (adding) all the ratings within each report and comparing the aggregated figures across the different reports. Therefore a performance improvement is claimed when the second set of ratings is higher than the first (Fletcher, 2001). Not only are there problems here with adding together subjectivities, but also research articles are vague as to whether the same raters supplied feedback in both years, and if not whether the spread of raters across the rater groups remained the same. In addition to these difficulties in measuring performance improvement through a repeat 360, it is important to consider other influencing factors on the ratings. For example, it is possible that raters want to offer recognition of the recipient’s attempts to improve, and may rate higher than they believe is ‘accurate’. Alternatively, raters may feel frustrated at the lack of behaviour change, and therefore in an attempt to send a louder message, they may give lower ratings than they believe are accurate. We still, therefore, know too little to be able to judge whether a comparison of consecutive 360’s is sufficient evidence of behaviour change.

The second way of comparing performance improvement between two time points is by comparing ratings given by the line manager in a traditional appraisal process. Once again, researchers typically present each individual’s performance measurement as one number, which summarises performance across dimensions. However, the use of 360 is based on the argument that line manager ratings alone are less reliable or valid than a collection of ratings from multiple sources. Therefore, within that argument it is not logical to rely on supplementing 360’s with line managers’ ratings as a way of increasing the reliability of the final measurement.
3.5.3 Self-Awareness

The measurement of Self-Awareness in 360 is not uniform and in many papers remains unexplained. However, a widely accepted operational definition of Self-Awareness within 360 is that it is the difference between self- and other-ratings, the complex calculations of which appear in Fletcher and Bailey (2003). What is discussed here are the assumptions that underlie such a definition.

A 360 questionnaire asks the feedback recipient to self-rate against each item on the questionnaire. They are not asked to predict what others will say. There are two main difficulties with the idea that agreement between self-ratings and other-ratings demonstrates Self-Awareness, neither of which is evident in the 360 literature. Firstly, this definition assumes that agreement between self and others means that the measurement has objective accuracy, the questionable existence of which has been discussed earlier. Indeed, the raters work together in the same organisation and arguably may have co-constructed a perception of performance that they themselves agree with but that is not shared more widely, for example by customers.

Secondly, if we proceed on the basis that the individual may manage in different styles with different people, one self-rating for a specific behaviour will not reflect those differences. Taylor (2010) cites his own earlier research in arguing that the ability to anticipate other-ratings is an important characteristic of leadership. He therefore argues for the merit of adding a third set of assessments alongside the self-ratings and other-ratings. Specifically, he proposes that the individual predicts other-ratings. Whilst this could provide some interesting data, what is being suggested still ignores the possibility of the individual giving different ratings for their behaviours with different rater-groups.

Greater self-other agreement in repeat 360’s is taken both as an indication of increased Self-Awareness as well as a measure of the
success of 360 (London and Smither, 1995). However, such changes do not themselves indicate an improvement in performance. Instead, changes could be due to impression management (Fletcher, 2001); an increase in shared understanding of either the behaviours that are described in the competencies or of the rating scale (that is, what is meant by ‘frequently’ or ‘better than average’); or wider discussion of the competencies and their relationship to the company’s strategic direction, leading to greater observation, encouragement and development of the target behaviours (London and Smither, 1995). As Fletcher and Bailey (2003) say, in spite of the widespread reference to Self-Awareness, the “general nature of the construct and its relationship with performance also needs more exploration” (p402).

3.5.4 Averaging

A fundamental characteristic of 360 is that it gives space for multiple views. It is therefore intriguing that within 360 research there is such widespread use of averaging, which by definition loses the difference between individual ratings and furthermore may serve to silence the voices of those whose ratings are classified as ‘outliers’ (falling outside the range of the majority of ratings) (Fricker and Hornsby, 2000; Hiley, 2004). In recognition of the valuable insights that managers may gain from such outliers, current 360 practice has evolved to show the total of those raters who choose each of the possible ratings against each behaviour. Thereby making clear how many scored the individual with each rating against each behaviour.

Within 360 research, the details of a study are not always explained and the rationale for aggregating scores is at times questionable. A study by Bono and Colbert (2005) did however provide a clear outline of the procedure and is analysed here as just one example of how ratings are aggregated and averaged. The purpose of this longitudinal study was to examine the role of core self-evaluations (specifically self-esteem, generalised self-efficacy, locus of control and neuroticism) in responses
to 360. Participants received six surveys, which they were asked to distribute first to their direct reports. In the event that they had fewer than six direct reports, they were then asked to distribute surveys to “colleagues who had an opportunity to observe them in a leadership role” (p180). Six reports is an unusually low number. In addition, this research is ostensibly about ‘multisource feedback’, whereas those participants with six or more direct reports, received feedback from only one source group. This then was more about upward feedback. Although a useful area of research, the lack of diverse rater groups fails to take account of multiple sources. Interestingly, to preserve anonymity, Bono and Colbert say that raters were “notified that the target leader would receive a report only if two or more surveys were returned” (p180). This suggests that some of the participants may have had reports with ratings from only two direct reports, which most people would not consider ‘360’. The resulting data did not, therefore, represent an even spread of ratings across different source groups.

What is then perplexing in the context of 360 research, is the use of aggregation. Arguing that because “not all participants had feedback from each source…, and to form a reliable “other” score, all colleague responses were aggregated to form a single score” (Bono and Colbert, 2005: 180). Indeed, aggregation of scores is central to the design of not only this study, but also others:

*Based on this evidence and consistent with practices of other researchers (Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999; Ployhart, Lim & Chan, 2001), we formed an overall composite of transformational leadership for each participant. We first aggregated the items to form a scale score for each of the dimensions and then aggregated the dimensions to form a single transformational leadership score for each respondent. We then combined the reports from all colleague surveys (average N = 5.49) to form an aggregate other rating score for each participant.*

Bono and Colbert (2005: 181)
What is so useful about Bono and Colbert’s study is that, unlike many others, they outline their approach step-by-step. It is not always as easy to identify the feedback-gathering process or the details of the calculations. Bono and Colbert translate an entire 360 report into one number, what they call an overall composite of transformational leadership. Indeed, “the feedback report for each participant included a transformational leadership self-rating and a transformational leadership other-rating” (p182). A report with just two numbers does not resemble a 360-report with multiple graphs and ratings against each of 40 or more items. However, this study does confirm a positivist perspective on performance: that there may be multiple views of performance but what is important is the final single-view, one final number, summing up the entire performance across many dimensions. This view is further evidenced in the practice of estimating “the level of agreement between raters…intraclass correlations”, which in their study Bono and Colbert report as being “consistent with past research (e.g. Brett and Atwater, 2001)” (p182). That is, the ‘accuracy’ of the raters is being tested here. Presumably, if the consistency had been low, then this may have been seen as evidence of raters who were poorly skilled, paying poor attention or who were just a-typical, rather than that the recipient had behaved differently with them. Bono and Colbert’s study is unusual in its clarity, offering a helpful example of how averaging and aggregating are used within 360 research.

However, given that each rating is subjective, and arguing that it makes no sense to add together subjectivities, Van der Heijden and Nijhof (2004: 504) challenge the practice of aggregating ratings from different sources of raters “from a statistical point of view”. With such an emphasis in research on aggregating and averaging, it is unclear what information the feedback recipients are actually extracting from the ratings.
3.5.5 The influence of rater goals and intentions

From the discussion above it is hopefully clear that the central role of numbers in 360, both in practice and in research, incorporates many questionable assumptions. This critique now continues by addressing what is commonly called ‘measurement error’ or ‘rater error’. Indeed, much attention is devoted to “why there often seems to be a discrepancy between the ratings [the raters] give and the performance they (supposedly) are trying to assess” (Murphy, 2008: 200). In the earlier history of personnel psychology, researchers and practitioners treated raters “as if they were measurement devices” (Murphy, 2008: 198), that it was assumed that managers were applying cognitive processes to measure the performance of their team members, uncontaminated by any less rational influences. Once again, such assumptions were based on the idea of there being a ‘true’ or ‘objective’ performance that is available to be rated, if only the raters can be trained and otherwise assisted to make accurate assessments.

Recently, however, there has been more interest in understanding how raters use numbers to serve their own purposes, citing “intentional distortions as an explanation for the weak link between job performance and performance ratings” (Murphy, 2008: 156). Examples given by Murphy and Cleveland (1995, cited by Murphy, 2008) include: a manager giving higher ratings based on a belief that positive feedback will enhance performance; other raters inflating ratings based on a belief that giving low ratings will damage “the ability of the workgroup to function”; or raters pursuing “internalized goals” such that raters who believe that the individual needs a picture of their relative strengths and weaknesses, rather than comparing them against a company standard (p156). Murphy continues by saying that “performance ratings are often poor measures of job performance because raters are not willing to act as neutral measurement instruments” (p157), making clear that it is neither reasonable nor possible to expect raters to behave in this way. Consequently, Murphy’s mediated model of the performance-rating
relationship identifies two primary influences on the performance rating: the goals and intentions of raters, and what he calls ‘measurement error’.

According to Murphy (2008), rater goals and intentions mediate the impact on performance ratings of system characteristics, performance and individual characteristics. This means that a change in 360 design alone will not directly impact on the performance rating, rather the rater will interpret the details of the system as they establish what it is they want to achieve. For example, one characteristic of a 360 system is the competencies on which it is based. Although recommended, rater training does not uniformly take place, and therefore it is unclear whether raters are adopting similar understandings of the competencies as they translate their observations into ratings, or whether their ratings display “measurement error”. Similarly, performance only has an indirect influence on performance ratings, because, whatever the performance, the goals and intentions of the rater will affect how that performance is rated. And finally, individual characteristics of the rater, such as
personality and social identity impact indirectly on performance ratings, mediated by rater goals and intentions. Raters’ goals may result in concentration on particular areas of a question, which have immediate meaning for them, while ignoring others. This means that different raters may be rating in very different, even contradictory, ways. Indeed, rather than highlight and explain these differences, 360 reports and graphs tend to obscure them.

In the same issue of Industrial and Organizational Psychology as Murphy’s article, there are strident rebuttals from Woehr (2008), Putka, Ingerick and McCloy (2008) and Ones, Viswesvaran and Schmidt (2008), arguing in favour of current practice in performance measurement: “There is no evidence to support Murphy’s assertion that the performance-ratings link is weak – other than the universal fact that no measure, including ratings, has perfect construct validity” (Ones, Viswesvaran and Schmidt, 2008: 178). Although persuasive arguments in these articles attend to the practical value of current practice, the basic principles of Murphy’s paper offer a useful direction for future work.

Indeed, Smither, London and Reilly’s (2005) earlier meta-analysis of findings relating to the impact of 360 on performance improvement proposed a model summarising some main areas of possible research including ‘Feedback orientation and personality’ and ‘Beliefs about change and perceived need for change’.
In summary, within a positivist view, the translation of performance into accurate ratings is theoretically possible, once the weaknesses, differences and biases of each rater have been managed, or eliminated. However, from an interpretive perspective, there is no ‘one performance’, and no neutral rater(s), thereby making the idea of ‘accurate ratings’ nonsensical. Instead, there is value in understanding how different people see and make sense of an individual's range of behaviours, from various standpoints, and from the narratives they employ. Numbers are not entities in their own right. Their meanings are the meanings we create.

3.6 NARRATIVE COMMENTS

In strong contrast to the impressive volume and detail of research into 360 ratings, the research into narrative comments is very limited. The lack of attention is interesting given earlier work highlighting the potential of such research (Antonioni, 1996; Peiperl, 2000), and anecdotal and empirical evidence indicating that “feedback recipients pay a great deal of
attention to raters’ narrative comments” (Smither and Walker, 2004: 575). Indeed, text comments are attended to by individuals at all levels, and real-world decisions that have a substantial impact on employees’ livelihoods, like promotion, are made with the help of spoken and written narratives (Stetz and Ford, 2010).

This section discusses the use of text comments by recipients and raters, and summaries three studies which (i) examine the impact of the number and favourability of comments (Smither and Walker, 2004); (ii) compares managers’ reactions to text and ratings (Atwater and Brett, 2006); and (iii) presents a qualitative approach to 360 Ratings (Garbett, et al, 2007).

3.6.1 Recipients’ use of narrative comments
Although it is standard practice to include written comments within 360 reports, there is no clear evidence about the value of doing so. However, it is clear that numerical ratings cannot capture the nuances and subtleties that written comments can (Toegel and Conger, 2003). Indeed, managers have a strong desire for feedback in the form of written comments because it helps them interpret the numerical ratings (Antonioni, 1996). There is, therefore, a relationship between the ratings and text comments, where text comments play an important role in facilitating understanding. In addition, written comments communicate in a more individual way: feedback recipients favour narrative comments, which have been written specifically for them (Brutus, 2010). However, some researchers express concern that narrative comments can be a distraction, so that “feedback recipients might focus too heavily on comments that do not adequately represent their evaluation as a whole” (Dalessio, 1998; and Van Velsor, 1998; both cited by Brutus, 2010), suggesting that ratings from a wide range of raters, measuring a wide range of behaviours, will provide a more holistic picture of performance.
3.6.2 Raters’ use of narrative comments

Ratings and comments appear to play different roles, whereby ratings feed into decision-making processes, while narrative comments aid the individual and their manager to discuss development, and are retained by the individual. Indeed, raters “are quite sensitive as to the purpose of evaluations … and they may use comments to ‘speak’ to the evaluatee while using ratings to ‘speak’ to decision makers” (Brutus, 2010: 49). In this way, comments become more focused perhaps on specific appreciations, and certainly on ‘constructive criticism’. Gillespie et al. (2006, cited by Brutus, 2010) reported that nearly a third of the 500 analysed comments contained specific recommendations for the recipients. This suggests that one reason that may motivate raters to include narrative comments is in order to make suggestions for improvement. In another study, 44% of the 360 recipients reported using narrative comments to help them draft their development plans (Burke and Garylord, 2005, cited by Brutus, 2010). This is perhaps surprisingly low, given that it is the text comments that provide detail, which can help inform any development plan.

On a practical level, Toegel and Conger (2003) recommend that raters explain and justify every numerical rating with qualitative, written comments. They also suggest positioning items that require the most extensive qualitative responses early in the questionnaire, so raters can complete these before respondent fatigue sets in. Arguably there is less work required for a rater to complete ratings compared with text, more especially in those instances when consultants say that forty or more ratings can be completed in fifteen minutes. Such time estimates are based on an idea that the use of ratings as “analogous to a matching task” where the rater selects a number that represents “an appropriate equivalent for his or her valuation of the target’s performance” in “an organized and efficient search” (Brutus, 2010: 148). In addition, the ‘rating stimulus’ facilitates “recall and centering raters’ attention on desired behaviors” (p148). In contrast, raters receive little structure or guidance when invited to write text comments. Consequently, writing
The work of generating comments may also influence subsequent behaviour of the raters themselves. Brutus (2010) suggests that writing comments may influence how raters give feedback in other situations. For example, someone who has had to structure their feedback in their minds in order to write it down, is probably better prepared and able to engage in follow-up discussions about that feedback. Indeed, it seems probable that there are a number of dynamic processes in operation involved in the production of narrative comments. For example, it seems likely that the organisation’s feedback culture will influence both the number and quality of narrative comments (Brutus, 2010); and possibly the use of narrative comments within 360’s may impact on wider feedback practice. For example, if there is widespread day-to-day use of a particular feedback model, this could impact on the structuring of written comments. And secondly, the reverse may also be true, such that the act of providing narrative comments influences day-to-day feedback practice. The work involved in producing narrative comments requires further attention.

3.6.3 Number and favourability of narrative comments

Smither and Walker’s (2004) study examined upward feedback ratings over a one-year period for 176 managers, identifying the number of comments received, whether they were favourable or unfavourable and whether they were behaviour/task focused or trait-focused. After coding the comments, they reported that supervisors received an average of seven ‘narrative units’ from their direct reports and close to a third of them received at least thirteen. The various comments sometimes included contradictions across the rater groups, which then presented a large amount of less organised information for the recipients (Brutus, 2010). However, analysis of the content of over 1000 upward feedback comments showed that 4% of the improvement in upward feedback
scores could be explained by the favourability of comments and the overall number of comments. Interestingly they found that managers who received favourable comments tended to improve more than managers who received unfavourable comments. They found no evidence of behaviour/task-focused comments leading to greater improvement than did trait-focused comments.

Although not producing strong findings, Smither and Walker’s (2004) article does identify characteristics of feedback that may impact on future performance. It should be noted however that performance changes are measured by comparing ratings across two consecutive years (the weaknesses of this approach were discussed earlier in this thesis).

3.6.4 Managers’ reactions to ratings and narrative comments
Atwater and Brett (2006) compared managers’ reactions to both numbers and text. In doing so, they established two groups of managers: one group received numerical ratings, and the other group received the text version of those numerical ratings. For example, one manager would receive the numerical rating of, say, ‘8’, and another with the same level of performance would receive the text ‘high strength’. Therefore, they were comparing reactions to numerical ratings as usually presented in 360 reports: in contrast to text comments employing standardised phrases or coding such as ‘high strength’ or ‘average’ – i.e. a different format to 360 reports which offer free text responses for raters to word their own narrative comments.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Atwater and Brett (2006) found more positive responses to the numerical ratings. One reason for this could be that the formulaic use of set phrases in the text version offered insufficient variety for the reader, where the repetition of numbers may have been more easily processed. Atwater and Brett’s own explanation was that “the ambiguity created in the absence of the numeric scores may have actually heightened its negative effects” (2006: 529). However, it is
unclear how the lack of numeric scores created ambiguity, given the unambiguous, standardised coding used in place of full text comments. Nevertheless, it may be that the apparent certainty of numerical ratings is more favourably received. What is unknown is how recipients think about text comments, and their relationship to the ratings.

3.6.5 A qualitative approach to 360

The third study was carried out in the health sector, where there appears to be some new initiatives in 360 design. Garbett et al.’s (2007) article ‘Developing a qualitative approach to 360 to aid understanding and development of clinical expertise’ was referred to in the section on anonymity as an example of a challenge to the need for anonymous ratings. Garbett et al.’s (2007) study does not test narrative comments as such. Instead, it presents an alternative approach to gathering feedback, which forms just one aspect of a five-year multicentre action research study to develop an accreditation process for clinical nursing expertise.

The study involved 32 experienced clinical nurses who engaged in critiquing and refining 360 as a process to help them examine their own practice. Feedback was gathered in different ways. In most cases, ‘critical companions’ gathered feedback in interviews. Alternatives were either for the critical companion and recipient (called ‘expert participant’ in the paper) to work together in gathering the feedback, or for the feedback to be gathered with an anonymised questionnaire. The recipients used their own judgement about what would secure useful data, which meant at times one recipient selecting a mix of methods. The interviews involved probing and challenging, as discussed by one critical companion:

(I have) done five interviews so far and got on with the analysis, people are being really positive but (we are) not getting the critique, not getting areas of development, there is some stuff, but its so subtle... so we have had to move to more interrogative interview style to get at the actual experiences.

Garbett, et al. (2007: 346)
The analysis of the feedback was carried out in either of two ways: the critical companion analysed the themes and presented them to the individual or the critical companion and individual analysed the data together. Either way, feedback was usually spoken by the feedback giver, written down by the critical companion or the recipient themselves, and then analysed. The data were entirely verbal. As such this study is an example of several (Franco et al., 2004) which highlight a qualitative approach to accessing and analysing verbal comments.

Although not evidenced in academic research papers, management consultants have also been experimenting with more qualitative approaches. Indeed, as Harris and Heft (2001) describe, there can be a reaction against over-formalisation of feedback processes and a desire for more informal processes. “When a major problem arises, for example, the consultant might use an approach where narrative comments are gathered from various constituencies and then fed back to the relevant parties. Rather than using formal ratings, a series of open-ended questions to key parties might produce more useful information.” (p425). This suggests that, particularly in complex situations, depth of understanding may more easily be found in narratives that in numbers.

Drawing particularly on the work by Smither and Walker (2004), Brutus (2010) is the first to offer a specific theoretical contribution relating to narrative comments. He theorises that narrative units vary along four dimensions: valence (positive – negative); performance domain coverage; specificity; and the extent to which they do or do not provide suggestions for improvement. Empirical work is needed to test and develop this theory.

After a long period of no research attention on narrative comments, this is now changing, stimulated by three factors (Brutus, 2010).
Firstly, technological advances have made it easier to gather, analyse, aggregate and report qualitative comments, and as such the material becomes more accessible and interesting for those wishing to code and count the content of comments. Secondly, most researchers acknowledge that there is a limit to how well performance ratings can capture individual performance. As Brutus (2010) says, “because of their qualitative nature, narrative comments are better equipped that standardised ratings to capture … context” (p146). Thirdly, there is evidence “that executives reported attending to narrative comments more than they did to the quantitative in the feedback reports” (p146).

This discussion shows that different participants in 360 may have different views about the value and role of narrative comments compared to ratings. However, whilst there is value in examining the impact of different aspects of narrative comments, the current research takes a more explorative approach to understand how participants encode and decode the text.

3.7 RESEARCH METHODS

As discussed earlier, throughout the development of 360 research, it is the use of quantitative research methods that dominates, analysing numerical 360 data. Academic research on narrative comments has also been positivist, with the exception of some research within the health sector. To render narrative comments researchable, quantitative researchers have to make them countable. Therefore, Smither and Walker (2004), Atwater and Brett (2006) and Brutus (2010) all count narrative comments. Brutus (2010) uses ‘narrative unit’ to describe each separate “meaningful and distinguishable performance-related theme found in narrative comments (p147), in an attempt to “isolate its effect from those related to format”. That is, he describes each narrative unit as “equivalent to that found in a well-designed quantitative item and its
accompanying rating scale” (p147). In this way, numbers and rating scales are used as the fundamental and most meaningful code into which words are translated. Smither and Walker (2004) report the numbers of narrative units in any one report and recommend that there is more work to be done to “grapple with the challenges of coding narrative comments” (p580). This recommendation is made within a view that transforming narrative comments into countable units is a necessary step in researching this area.

To-date, there has been little questioning amongst academic researchers as to the assumptions underlying the research methods employed. A concentration on qualitative data, within an interpretive framework, might reasonably be expected to shed new light on 360, and participants’ attitudes to and sense-making of 360. Although there is a dearth of interpretive work on 360, there have been some researchers using qualitative methods within traditional positivism, or “qualitative positivism” (Prasad and Prasad, 2002: 6). Below are three examples of such research.

Mabey (2001) carried out a qualitative and quantitative field study to explore participant views of a 360 programme. He used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to “investigate those aspects of the programme and ensuing management development process which were most helpful or problematic” and then used quantitative methods “to examine these emergent themes more systematically” (p46). That is, he was exploring how participants viewed the effectiveness of 360. Although there was some coding, it is clear that Mabey considers the value of qualitative methods to be as a preparatory phase for a more rigorous (quantitative) stage. Methodologically, Mabey uses a positivist stance in his use of interviews and focus groups.

Thach (2002) examines the role of coaching in the use of 360. She describes action research as her overarching methodology. This description is due to her involvement of the senior team in the agreement
of goals for the use of 360, and the alteration of the ensuing management development programme in response to participant comments. The evolving nature of the programme might lead the reader to expect that Thach might be interested in exploration and, possibly, even reflexivity. However, in her concluding comments, Thach says that “the positive results demonstrated in this study [which she quotes earlier as percentage improvements in leadership effectiveness] are hampered, however, by its action research design. No effort was made to isolate variables, since a “complete process” was being implemented.” She reveals here a (realist’s) concern over the unavailability of sufficient quantitative measurement as a means of establishing the validity of her research.

Van Rensburg and Prideaux (2006) presented a case study focused on an accounting firm to explore whether the senior professionals would accept and use the 360 programme, and whether this programme would be useful in terms of the development of their managerial and organisational skills. The study was carried out over a period of three years, during which time the researchers gathered qualitative data through interviews, focus groups and a survey, as well as a (participant-observer) ‘personal research diary’ kept by one of the researchers. What is particularly interesting in this research design is the range of qualitative data collected, and the interpretive analysis applied to them. Techniques advocated by Moustakas (1990, cited by van Rensburg and Prideaux, 2006) were used, including “self-search”, “self-dialogue” and “self-discovery” which assisted “to discover the meaning and nature of the 360 experience as it related to” the researcher as a participant (van Rensburg and Prideaux, 2006: 564). Disappointingly, rather than recognising the explorative potential of their design, van Rensburg and Prideaux focus instead on what they describe as the ‘weaknesses of a qualitative design’: “being essentially a qualitative study, it focussed on the experience and perceptions of the participants, including a participant-observer researcher. Its aim was to explore 360 from the standpoint of
those engaging in it. Consequently, it faced issues around objectivity which had to be carefully managed" (p564).

3.8 McDONALDISATION OF FEEDBACK

As stated earlier, the intention within this literature review is to introduce two models that may contribute to understanding two different drives in 360. The first is a drive for simplicity, and is examined in this section in relationship to Ritzer’s (1996) McDonaldisation model. This work is based on Weber’s theory of rationalisation, so this section begins with some key Weberian concepts. Ritzer’s work has a narrower focus than Weber’s and is used here to provide a more straightforward and modern focus to thinking about 360 design using the four principles of Ritzer’s McDonaldisation: calculability, predictability (or standardisation) and use of technology. These principles are outlined with reference first to the Higher Education sector and then to 360. The section ends with a discussion of the extent to which Ritzer’s model offers a useful explanation of current theory and practice in 360, highlighting some remaining questions.

3.8.1 Weber and Ritzer

Weber described rationalisation as being the process that underlies Western history, and that is focused on achieving a rational goal. Bureaucracy, typified by a set of principles, serves to co-ordinate what Weber described as the rational pursuit of profit and motivation of work efforts. Calculation enables this rational pursuit, and is applied to the division of labour, accounting methods and technology. Some texts present Weber’s work as only this ideal-type construct of bureaucracy. However, Watson (2012) argues that this was an intentionally one-sided presentation by Weber. Weber was indeed interested in the potential superiority of bureaucracy as an administrative instrument but he also recognised the internal conflicts within bureaucratic systems, which revealed irrationalities (Weber, 2011, written in 1904-5). Indeed, he
noted that unintended consequences tend to occur, often disrupting the 
original rational goal\textsuperscript{11} and thereby displaying the dysfunctions of the 
system. Particularly relevant to the current research is this idea of 
unintended consequences and irrationalities of 360 design.

Ritzer was interested in applying Weberian principles within a modern 
context. He used the idea of McDonaldisation to describe “the process 
by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate 
more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the 
world” (1996: 1). Weber wrote about the disenchantedment of the world 
(\textit{Entzauberung der Welt}) and this too might describe the fast-food 
environment. Neither Weber nor Ritzer proposed a uni-directional trend 
towards efficiency, nor are they advocating the systems they describe 
(Watson, 2012). For example, Ritzer went on to discuss the development 
of slow-food parallel to fast-food. For the purposes of this section, the 
focus will stay on Ritzer’s four principles of McDonaldisation.

3.8.2 Applying Ritzer’s four principles
Higher Education is one of many sectors, which could be described as 
undergoing a process of ‘McDonaldisation’, as reflected in each of 
Ritzer’s four principles (Rumble, 1998). Efficiency is sought through 
larger classes, machine-grading of multiple choice questions and greater 
reliance is placed on resource-based learning. Calculability is 
demonstrated with selection based on exam grades, module feedback 
forms to evaluate lecturers and, in the USA, use of Grade Point Averages 
to summarise in one figure a student’s achievement. Predictability is 
perhaps more evident in the USA with increased use of the format and 
guidance on marking multichoice questions. Control through technology 
is found through automated marking on e-learning systems, peer marking 
online and monitoring of online presence. In “organisational terms this 

\textsuperscript{11} In \textit{The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism}, Weber shows how Luther and 
Calvin developed ideas that contributed to an increasingly rationalistic view of the world 
and had the unintended consequence of reducing religious practice.
reflects the shift from a communal model of organisation based on personal relationships… to a bureaucracy based on the rational definition of office” (p133).

Designed to gather ratings against a wide range of behaviours on a competency framework, 360 aims to give a holistic picture of performance. However, feedback messages are reduced to individual ratings for each separate behaviour. Text comments are written in response to each separate behaviour or competency. This reductionism might be argued as leaving recipients with what they experience as incomplete messages and hard to decipher. Thus, 360 might be described as an impersonal and reductionist approach to feedback. 360 removes control from the individual manager for the process of feedback, that is consultants take over the planning, the structure and the ‘control of production and delivery’. Mirroring the division of labour evident in other rationalisation processes, decision-making powers about 360 are held by HR managers or senior managers; the design and delivery are carried out by expert external consultants; and trained facilitators explain the report to the individual manager. Anonymisation depersonalises feedback usually removing any expectation of face-to-face discussions of feedback.

Theorising 360 as an example of McDonaldising feedback demonstrates Ritzer’s four basic components of a rational system.

3.8.2.1 Efficiency

Efficiency is achieved through the use of a questionnaire that covers a much wider range of behaviours than face-to-face feedback normally would. Whereas in face-to-face feedback some aspects of performance may receive more attention and others may be left aside, 360 ensures that the entire competency framework is addressed. Furthermore, raters select a number to summarise their feedback against each behaviour, which is expected to require a process of matching a number against their picture of the individual whose performance they are rating. This is
faster than constructing verbal feedback. In ensuring efficiency, contact between humans is minimised (Ritzer, 1996: 132); completion of an online questionnaire at the rater’s own work place eradicates the need for travel and reduces administration time; and in addition recipients may be encouraged to follow up with their raters, but there is little indication that this happens. And finally, 360 secures ratings from different sources: arranging feedback discussions with the same number of people would require substantial time. 360 is an efficient method for gathering an impressive quantity of feedback.

3.8.2.2 Predictability

Predictability within 360 ensures that there is a process, which is standardised across the life of the competency framework. In those situations where the company’s own competency framework is used, the behaviours are known across the organisation as they are used for selection, performance appraisals and at times management development. Raters, most especially those who are managers, will be accustomed to use the competency language so that the encoding of their observations into that language will be straightforward. The presentation of the 360 reports is also predictable and standardised, which makes it more efficient for the facilitators to prepare feedback and to work through the document with the recipient. The predictability in the report format means that the recipient knows that everyone goes through the same process and that they are not being singled out for any particular treatment.

3.8.2.3 Calculability

Calculability is core to 360. In McDonald’s, the exact quantities of food and time-to-deliver are carefully calculated. While the customer may value the speed, it is unlikely that they pay attention to the exact quantities in each serving. Similarly, in 360 calculability of performance, through ratings, is the focus for researchers, consultants and the
organisation, whereas recipients may have less of a drive to prioritise the numbers. In addition to ratings against each behaviour, 360 reports often average the behavioural ratings against each competency. Comparisons are made between 360s, using norms. These are calculated by calculating the average ratings against each behaviour of those completing the process, for example in the NHS where the large numbers of completed 360s facilitates more calculations and comparisons. In promoting their 360’s, consultancies showcase the number of graphs, the ease of comparing results, the number of questions and even the number of pages in the report. In this way the quality of feedback is redefined as quantity.

3.8.2.4 Control through technology

The fourth of Ritzer’s principles, control through technology, is clearly evidenced in the use of online questionnaires and automated production of reports. These facilities make the process more time-efficient and enable a large quantity of data to be processed and presented to the individual recipient. The automation of the process from beginning to the delivery of the report removes any expectation that the individual manager will be involved in the work of gathering feedback. There are recommendations in some processes that the individual has personal contact with their raters at the beginning of the process, to explain why they are being asked for feedback (Antonioni and Woehr, 2001). However, the process can work with or without this contact, as, once the individual recipient has typed their choice of raters and their email addresses onto the system, invitations and follow-up reminders are sent out automatically. Wherever possible technology is substituted for human labour. In this way, current 360 practice represents a move away from

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12 During my time working as an Associate at Right Management, I trained facilitators to deliver feedback. This included ensuring that they were able to explain the use of norms.
personal contact and the building of relationships towards efficient management of feedback for larger numbers of people.

As with the McDonaldisation of Higher Education, there are benefits to this rationalisation of feedback. For example, it makes structured feedback more available to larger numbers of managers in a more convenient way and with more uniform quality. At least some managers get feedback that is of a higher quality and delivered more quickly than with other approaches, offering an efficient process to managers who have less and less time to spare. Economies of scale emphasise the cost attraction when compared with customized options. Because of quantification, managers can compare their ratings to norm groups so measurement is more easily accessible. In rapidly changing work environments, a feedback process that offers a degree of regulation and control, might be seen as offering safety when inviting input from colleagues.

3.8.3 Irrationalities of a rational system

As Ritzer reminds us, “rational systems inevitably spawn irrationalities” (1996: 13), and 360 is no exception. The following could apply to 360: the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures. Individuals are not left to their own devices in searching for the best means of attaining a given objective (Ritzer, 1996: 18).

Most 360 designs preclude managers and their colleagues from interacting. Indeed, it is the absence of such time investment that is presented as efficiency, both for the managers receiving feedback and for their colleagues giving it. With little time investment, the manager receives their own, detailed 360 report incorporating many graphs and ratings. With even smaller time investment, colleagues voice their opinion, and may feel that opinion is valued by virtue of being asked for it. Indeed, the brevity of rater input is prioritised, with practitioner articles
stating that questionnaires “can be completed in 15 minutes of less …
approximately 45-55 questions”, arguing that this will result in less rater
fatigue and therefore more “accurate information” (Maylett, 2009: 7). In
this way, both the manager and the raters invest small amounts of time to
generate large amounts of data. Indeed, the 360 report demonstrates
that it is possible to gather feedback without any interaction. Herein lies
an inherent irrationality regarding 360 since the goal of 360 is to improve
management performance, including managers’ interpersonal skills and
ability to understand and respond to feedback.

However, rather than seeing 360 as deskillng managers in their feedback
skills, a counter-argument could be made that 360 leaves managers more
curious so that they follow up 360 by seeking and using informal
feedback more often and more effectively. If this is true then 360
becomes a tool to build, not reduce, feedback skills. These aspects fall
outside the scope of the current work, but serve to identify an area of
potential misfit when applying McDonaldisation to 360.

Furthermore, simplification of feedback messages within 360 means that
feedback recipients feel frustrated when they are unable to make sense
of the feedback and feedback givers feel frustrated when they witness too
few behavioural changes. 360 may therefore seem efficient but for whom
and to what effect?

Ritzer describes his idea of the irrationality of rationality as the fifth
dimension of McDonaldisation (after his other four principles). For
example, he describes the irrationalities of IKEA, with furniture promoted
as easy-to-assemble that is mostly considered “impossible-to-assemble”;
and time-efficient shopping that requires a long drive, long queuing,
followed by fraught self-assembly. In the same way, 360 is presented as
time-efficient completion of questionnaires that repeatedly land in raters’
email inboxes and face them with long tasks; and clearly analysed data
that present interpretation challenges requiring a skilled facilitator.
Although this fifth dimension of Ritzer’s can be applied to 360, there is insufficient evidence as yet as to the fit of the model. My own current interest lies in the extent to which irrationalities and contradictions might become clear in the empirical data.

3.8.4 Simplification and Complexification
We can see here that there are two processes at work: the simplification of feedback in 360 through a process of McDonaldisation; and the complexification of feedback for managers as they try to manage both formal and informal feedback processes in demanding and fast-changing environments. Ritzer’s view is that both “complexification and rationalization will prevail but in different sectors of the economy and the larger society” (1996: 150). Specifically, Ritzer comments that the “general (unwritten) rule for most organizational higher-ups seems to be to impose rationality on others while keeping their own work as nonrational as possible.” (1996: 196). Within 360, senior managers with greater power are more likely to receive personalised attention, bearing in mind the complexities of their situation; while the most junior managers are more likely to receive simplified, cut-down versions of 360. Indeed, more recent research within the health sector exemplifies the use of more personalised attention for those with complex roles (Garbett et al., 2007, discussed earlier in this chapter).

The drives for simplification and complexification are both recognised within Ritzer’s model, specifically in relating the former to those with junior roles and the latter to those with senior, or complex, roles. However, it is also possible to observe the drives for simplification and complexification within any one individual’s relationship to 360. It is here that we find a limitation in the explanatory power of Ritzer’s model for 360. An individual receives averaged ratings and summaries of a large amount of data. This apparent simplicity is attractive. However, the recipient also needs to interpret this data. As outlined earlier, the simplification of ratings can obscure meanings, and the recipient is usually offered a
facilitator to assist with the interpretation. Such individualised attention falls outside McDonaldisation.

The complexity of the 360 report lead van der Heijden and Nijhof to advocate that more time be spent analysing the meaning of data, otherwise “we are in danger of conducting ‘sophisticated’ analyses before understanding the exact nature of perceptions” (2004: 504), especially since “a genuinely shared understanding of the meaning … is very rare” (2004: 494). Brutus comments on the “tension between precision in assessment and communication proficiency” (2010: 151), whereby numbers are seen as offering efficient precision and comparison while comments facilitate contextual and more complex understanding along with a fuller picture of development needs. In an attempt to go beyond the numbers, there is an increased use of facilitators and coaches to help recipients work through their reports (Antonioni, 1996; Luthans and Peterson, 2003; Smither et al., 2003).

3.8.5 Critique of McDonaldisation

Central to criticism of Ritzer’s thesis is the idea that McDonaldisation is necessarily negative. Taylor and Lyon (1995: 65) argue that it can also “release staff to concentrate more on service quality”. Indeed, this could also be said of 360, although the more usual argument is that 360 releases managers to concentrate on specific aspects of their performance.

Writing about mass customisation, Taylor and Lyon (1995) question Ritzer’s assumption that consumers want predictable sameness and consistency. Although there are assumptions about the sameness in 360 design, any actual uniformity across organisations is questionable. Weaver (2005) observes that while some people are attracted to McDonaldised environments, others are not: the extent to which organisations and individuals within those organisations want sameness and consistency in 360 design is unknown.
Ritzer also assumes that uniformity will increase. This might be argued to be the case in terms of the sale of 360 by consultancies, where new adaptations become uniform across the industry. However, what is happening within organisations is unclear and this is explored in the case studies contained in the current work.

In summary, conceptualising 360 as the McDonaldisation of feedback draws attention to the contradictions at play within its design and implementation, contradictions, which Ritzer argues, are inherent in other examples of McDonaldisation. Practitioners and researchers show interest in the efficiency, predictability, calculability, and automation offered by current approaches to 360. Ritzer’s analysis of the conflicting drives for simplicity and for complexity sheds light on the ways that 360 design incorporates possible design contradictions. The findings chapters explore how participants make sense of 360, investigating examples of how they navigate both the simplicity and complexity of this process.

3.9 STUART HALL’S ENCODING AND DECODING THEORY

Marketed as efficient and focused\(^\text{13}\), 360 has complexities that have yet to be fully appreciated. Indeed, as explained in the previous section, the complexities of 360 vie with its apparent simplicity, in the design, the implementation and also interpretation of results. With positivism as the prevailing epistemology in 360 research, there are no published papers that help understand this tension. Given this absence, Stuart Hall’s work

\(^{13}\) A list of 360 software can be found by searching for ‘360-degree feedback’ on www.capterra.com that shows the emphasis on speed, efficiency and straightforwardness.
provides a basis for creating a conceptual framework for the current research. Therefore, the first part of this section outlines one aspect of Hall's work that is his encoding-decoding theory. Following this, Hall’s ideas are used in combination with quotes from 360 research to present 360 as a chain or spiral of meaning-making. The dynamic nature of 360 is emphasised, along with the roles of the different participants in the process. All participants are seen here to be active in the production, and consumption, of meaning.

3.9.1 The making of meaning in 360, with reference to Hall

Stuart Hall (1932- ) is a cultural theorist and sociologist. Interestingly, although his work has had profound impact on media studies and sociology more widely, there has been little use of his ideas within organisational psychology. Hall is interested in language and meanings, reconceptualising all practices as working like a language:

\[
\text{Since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do … all practices have a discursive aspect } \quad (\text{Hall, 1992: 291})
\]

In their discursiveness, practices involve the making and re-making of meaning. Discourses define what can be talked about, and arguably what can easily be brought to mind:

\[
\text{Just as discourse “rules in” certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write or conduct oneself, so also by definition, it “rules out”, limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it} \\
\text{Hall (1997: 32)}
\]

There are now traditional practices in 360, such that ratings and text comments are used within a range of recognized methods. There are accepted ways of talking about 360 and taken-for-granted practices that are rarely questioned, such as the use of anonymity and averages. The
discourse about anonymity as necessary for raters to give feedback safely is an example of the “ruling in” of certain ways of talking about a topic. The prevalence of one dominant form of 360 (an online, anonymous questionnaire based on numerical ratings) is visible in both research and practice, seemingly restricting other ways of talking about feedback. Similarly, the prevalence of positivist, quantitative research seems to have restricted the entry of interpretive researchers to the 360 area, or indeed for there to have been any significant discussion about 360 from any perspective other than positivist. Discourses about 360 have centred on measurement, objectivity, safety and accurate use of ratings. The limiting and restricting of other ways of talking is achieved not through coercion, but rather through consent. This is clearly the case in 360. There is no coercion acting to enforce certain practices or methods. Instead, academics, consultants, and those that give and receive 360 appear to talk about 360 in similar ways. However, this does not make the current beliefs about 360 practice or research ‘true’. As Salaman argues, in discussing Hall’s work:

> the perceived ‘truth’ of a body of ideas does not follow from its correspondence with objective reality or other truth tests but from its dominance within a particular regime. In organizational matters, ideas are not powerful because they are true; they are true because they are powerful.

Salaman (2001: 355)

3.9.2 Encoding/Decoding

Power is given to meanings in both the process and content of 360 through what Hall describes as encoding and decoding. Hall’s encoding and decoding theory (1999) describes four stages in communication: production, circulation, use (called by Hall ‘distribution’ or ‘consumption’) and reproduction. Each stage is relatively autonomous. Therefore, while the way that a message is encoded will influence how it is decoded, the details of this are not transparent. Each stage therefore has its own limits and possibilities. For example, it is not possible for the receiver to
interpret a message in just any way he or she might choose. Each stage limits the number of possible interpretations.

This four-stage theory challenges less interactive models of sender/message/receiver. Instead, a more dynamic model shows how frameworks of knowledge impact on encoding, and through that encoding the frameworks of knowledge also influence how, for Hall as a media theorist, a television programme is perceived as meaningful. When viewing a television programme, the audience is not passive. Rather, they make their own meaning, albeit within the limits placed by the television programme. In this way, the audience decodes the programme. As part of the process of decoding, the viewers evolve their frameworks of knowledge, which are communicated to others, such as reviewers, writers, and quiz panels, and which continue to evolve. These interpretations and evolved frameworks impact on the making of future episodes or programmes. At each stage, there is a “complex structure of dominance” as messages are “imprinted by institutional power-relations” (Hall, 1999: 507). Indeed, these processes of production and consumption of meaning impact on and transform social practices.

A further layer of Hall’s theory concerns the “articulation of connected practices” (1999: 508). ‘Articulation’ plays on two senses of the word: to speak something out (not necessarily clearly), and to be connected as in
Hall uses articulation to refer to the connections that are created, at times forced, between different ideas that might not otherwise be connected, in order to serve the interests of those wanting to send a message. Articulation provides a focus on practice. Each stage of the process is articulated with the next, justifying the connection, and the manner of that articulation impacts on encoding and decoding. Although each stage is necessary for the cycle as a whole, no one stage can guarantee the meanings that will be carried through the stage with which it is articulated. The connections themselves encourage an understanding of particular meanings. Articulation of ideas across stages build practices. The ways that, for example, 360 as a practice is articulated with the use of surveys to gather data, with performance management practices or with management development programmes all affect the reactions of those receiving messages within or about 360. In addition, the articulation of numbers in different forms (graphs, averages, norms) across different competencies gives voice to connections that impact on how feedback recipients interact with numbers within 360.

Translating these ideas to the field of 360, the ‘text’ of 360 at any of its stages (questionnaire, report, discussion of the report) does not in itself provide meaning. Meaning is created through a process of defining and interpretation. Numerical ratings do not carry any universally agreed meaning. The message has life breathed into it by the bellows of those reading it. But there is no single message waiting to be recognised. There is always subtext – which may or may not be breathed into existence. Different readers will breathe a different life into the text. The work of facilitating feedback based on a 360 is individual, and the interpretations may be many.

Hall emphasises the connections between the different stages as meanings that are encoded and decoded. The different stages are important in both the production and consumption of television programmes, as researched by Hall, as well as in the production and consumption of 360. As London and Tornow (1998: 4) say:
One way of picturing work and work relationships is through the concept of connectivity. Individuals are connected in that they derive meaning with and through other people about what is expected of them and how well they’re doing. The 360-degree process allows individuals to become connected.

According to London and Tornow (1998: 5), the feedback recipient’s multiple customers or constituencies “need to be connected so that they can give meaningful, comprehensive feedback”, ideally with all the different participants taking responsibility and co-managing the process.

3.9.2.1 Preferred reading

There is a further aspect of Hall’s encoding and decoding theory that is particularly relevant to the current research, namely the three reading positions he identified. These each describes a specific approach to interpreting the message.

The first of these is the preferred reading position. This is the reading that the producer prefers. It is the code used within the television programme, which “skews and restricts its audience’s possibilities for interpreting the material it claims to present without bias” (During, 1999: 8). When the reader or decoder “takes the connoted meaning … full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we may say that the viewer is operating inside the dominant code” (Hall, 1999: 515). Clearly, those who produce a television programme are not free of influences themselves. Indeed, it could be argued that there is no starting point for the generation of meanings. However, for the sake of offering an accessible model, Hall presents the initial encoding as being carried out by the programme producers. This first reading position is the one where the viewer works to decode the message in the way intended.
Applied to 360, the preferred reading position explains the situation when the participants in the 360 process interpret the meaning of the questionnaire and report in the way intended by the designers and those managers who agreed the design. The choice of behaviours and rating scale restricts the choices available to the raters and feedback recipients: the list of behaviours constitute what the organisation (or whoever represents it) sees as desirable or effective; similarly, the rating scale demonstrates how the organisation wants performance of behaviours to be assessed, and communicates a belief that this is an acceptable assessment method. The articulation of a specific set of competency-based items delivers the message that together the list constitutes a picture of the ideal manager for that organisation. In the report, the articulation of different data encodes the message that this is an accurate summary of the individual manager.

The 360 process “constructs the individual as an object of knowledge” (Townley, 1995: 278). The very design of the process communicates that the individual can better know themselves by seeing themselves as others see them, so that the “individual is offered an ‘accurate’ assessment of themselves, their identity, a particular understanding of themselves” (Townley, 1995: 278). Townley cites Foucault, and relates the following words to 360, that it “categorizes the individual, marks him in his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Townley, 1994: 278). Townley (1995: 279) argues that the process of 360 is “a mechanistic and functional view of the self, an object to be worked on and changed” based on the rationale that “you need to know who you are”. Townley goes further by describing a discourse of ‘needs’, where ideas from motivation theories such as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and from HR discussion of organisational and individual development needs, are articulated to depict individuals as “comprised of ‘bundles’ of needs” (Townley, 1995: 279). Furthermore, by adopting survey practices that are widely recognised, 360 articulates the overarching idea that the subject of
the survey has a responsibility to meet the needs of those completing the survey. Our own interest in increasing our Self-Awareness and our need to develop ourselves becomes articulated with the requirement to meet the needs of others.

In 360, there is a dominant reading of what is ‘needed’ from the individual managers. Raters are restricted in their expression of what they need, or want. They can only express their view within the code offered by the 360 questionnaire. Raters and feedback recipients may devote some effort to decoding the language and numbers in their attempt to work in line with the organisation’s intentions. The very effort expended in decoding 360 messages ensures that the competencies are read more carefully resulting, it is hoped, in transforming social practices. 360 is used in organisations to contribute to culture change (Bracken and Rose, 2011; Lepsinger and Lucia, 2009; Mamatoglu, 2008); and this again demonstrates a dominant reading of 360 practice.

Chapter 3 discussed the need to explore further the construct of self-awareness (Fletcher and Bailey, 2003). Indeed, articulations between Self-Awareness and ‘need’ emphasise that the “general nature of the construct and its relationship with performance … needs more exploration” (Fletcher and Bailey, 2003: 402). Hall’s notion of the dominant or preferred reading helps to do this. The preferred reading for self-awareness is that it is “the extent to which an individual sees themselves as others see him or her”, measured in 360 by “self-other congruence” in ratings (Fletcher and Bailey, 2003: 397). In other words, the preferred reading of self-awareness is: “I view myself as others view me”. This is however different from: “I understand how others view me”. Indeed, individuals may give themselves a high rating against a particular behaviour, even when they anticipate others giving them low ratings for that same behaviour. Defining self-awareness as “I view myself as others view me” places a requirement on the recipient to adjust their self-assessment to align with others assessment of them. This emphasises that the correct view of performance is the one outside the self. It is
others who have the accurate view. Such a perspective encourages attention to others, but not to the self. In contrast, defining self-awareness as “I understand how others view me” would require attention to others, whilst not viewing others’ view necessarily as the more correct one. Alternatively, some contexts and cultures may have an underlying imperative to ‘fit in’ with what is considered appropriate, and in those situations, the individual may decide that their self-rating needs to reflect others’ views of them. This then becomes the ‘right view of self’. 360 researchers have examined at some length how to statistically measure self-other congruence (London and Smither, 1995), but have not questioned the underlying assumptions within that concept. The dominant reading in 360 is, therefore, that the view of others is the accurate one – the ‘preferred reading’.

3.9.2.2 Oppositional reading

The second of Hall’s reading positions is that of oppositional reading. An oppositional reading of 360 describes the position of someone who redesigns a 360 to suit their own purposes; who gives their raters particular instructions that focus their minds differently from what was intended within the original design; or who ignores the feedback they are not personally interested in, favouring instead the areas of the report they think more pertinent for their own purposes; or who uses feedback to justify their current behaviour. An example of this last oppositional reading might be when recipients reinterpret feedback about them being “too forceful” as evidence that they are appropriately assertive.

3.9.2.3 Negotiated reading

The third position is the negotiated reading, where the readers work with the preferred message to accept some elements of it and reject others. This would most typically describe the reading that is negotiated between the facilitator and individual manager during the feedback session. Seifert, Yukl and McDonald describe the role of the facilitator as being to
“help recipients interpret the feedback and understand why it is relevant” (2003: 561). In their study, Seifert et al. tested the influence of a facilitator on behavioural change following feedback. The emphasis in the facilitation process lay on setting action plans in response to the feedback. However, it could be argued that such a focus is closer to the preferred reading position than the negotiated one.

An alternative view is to see the different stages of preparing and delivering 360 feedback as possible examples of Hall’s three reading positions. Firstly, the facilitator prepares for the meeting and decodes the report, perhaps in line with the training and guidance that they have received. The facilitator therefore is expected to work with the preferred reading. Secondly, the recipient reads the report (usually on their own), before going through the details with the facilitator. The recipient may adopt either the preferred reading or an oppositional one. Thirdly, the facilitator and recipient engage in discussion of the report. At this point, the facilitator juggles their own meaning-making, while also interpreting the organisation’s expectations of them, the organisation’s preferred reading of the competencies and ratings and the recipient’s reactions to and interpretations of the 360. Meanwhile the recipient goes through a similar process. Together, the facilitator and recipient create meaning from report, working on several levels. Through a process of two-way discussion, the facilitated feedback session exemplifies Hall’s negotiated reading.

3.10 SUMMARY
360 literature has concentrated on measurement of inputs and outputs of 360 that impact on changes in, primarily, individual performance. Smither, London and Reilly’s (2005) theoretical model incorporates a useful summary of empirical findings, all of which have been the result of positivist research. There has been a lack of exploration of the meanings that individuals give to, and take from, 360. By prioritising the meaning-making involved in 360, attention moves away from attempts to be
objective about the process and content and instead towards an understanding of subjective views. Indeed the social nature of 360 means that it continues to evolve, as it both reflects and influences the intentions, interests and perspectives of the various stakeholders. However, to-date, researchers and practitioners have ignored the social nature of the 360 process, instead prioritising those aspects which are seen as more removed from subjectivity of social interactions such as competency-based items, online questionnaires, numerical ratings, so as to present an approach that is apparently more objective.
4 – Research Design and Methods

“The way we think the world is (ontology) influences: what we think can be known about it (epistemology); how we think it can be investigated (methodology and research techniques); the kinds of theories we think can be constructed about it; and the political and policy stances we are prepared to take.”

(Fleetwood, 2005:197)

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In contrast to earlier 360 research and central to the current thesis is the idea that meaning is created, rather than inherent. Chapter 2 outlined the interpretive methodology that underpins the research design for this current work. A case study design was chosen, incorporating methods that are consistent with the methodology, namely semi-structured interviews and autoethnographic writing, supported by observations, reflexivity and a piece of self-research that forms part of the autoethnography. Thematic analysis was carried out of the transcribed interviews and autoethnographic writing.

This chapter explains the research design and methods. First of all, the rationale for the two corporate case studies is outlined, along with the approach to interviews and the roles of the research participants. After an explanation of the ethics involved, the corporate case studies are introduced. The third case study is an autoethnography. The history of this approach is described, before supplying details of the methods used in this particular design. The last two sections explain the data analysis and proposed criteria for evaluating the empirical work in this thesis. As is common in other qualitative studies, more attention is paid to the issue of evaluation criteria that might be the case in quantitative research.
4.2 THE RESEARCH DESIGN: THREE CASE STUDIES

“The case study is a research design and not a method” (Buchanan, 2012:355). Myers (2008) suggests that Yin’s much cited 2003 book on case study research is not entirely relevant for all qualitative researchers in business. Myers makes three important points about case study research: the studies almost always involve an organization although Gillham (2000) argues that a case can be a profession; most of the empirical data for case studies come from interviews and documents, distinguishing it from ethnographies which involve participant observation or fieldwork; and case studies are used by positivists, interpretive researchers and critical theorists. Interpretive case studies seek to “understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them” (Myers, 2008: 38). According to Robson (1993) what distinguishes a qualitative case study from other designs is that it is “an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence”. However, not all case studies use multiple sources. Within leadership research, Bryman (2004) identified that of 66 qualitative case studies, published between 1979 and 2003, 24% used qualitative interviewing as the sole method, while others usually had other methods alongside qualitative interviews such as documents and observations. An interpretive case study design was chosen for the current research as it puts attention on: organizational context; an exploration of meanings that people give to 360 data and process; and the application of different methods.

The research design is a multiple case study, incorporating two corporate case studies and an autoethnographic case study. Each case is instrumental (Stake, 2005), used to provide insight into 360, with the companies themselves being of secondary interest. The corporate case studies are in line with Myers’ (2008) three criteria detailed above. The autoethnography is not. It is not situated within an organisation, and although it does centre on the coaching profession, it involves me as just one exemplar of that profession. The empirical data is gathered from
reflexive writing, recordings and transcripts of two feedback discussions I had with each of two facilitators, and the 360 reports I received. These are ethnographic practices, which as Myers (2008) points out are distinct from case study design. However, there are numerous examples of researchers describing their autoethnographies as case studies, where the case is the individual researcher (Gibbs, 2011; DeNora, T. 2012). Many of these refer to their work as autoethnographic writing, where the emphasis is on reflexivity, drawing on diaries (DeNora, 2011), or autoethnographic accounts where the emphasis is often on the use of other sources in addition to diaries, such as informal conversations with others (Cohen, Duberley and Musson, 2009), formal conversations and analysis of official documents (Gibbs, 2011).

The current autoethnography plays an important role within the overall research design. It offers an interpretive device through the use of reflexive writing that accesses emotions and cognitive responses not easily available within the corporate interviews. Temporally, it is the mainstay of the research: before the corporate interviews, reflexive writing on my own experience assisted with formulating, and re-formulating, both the research questions and the interview questions; during and after the interviews, comparisons between what I had heard and my own experience assisted with interpreting, and re-interpreting both the interview data and the data from my own 360’s. Conceptually, the autoethnography is the backbone of this thesis: having an autoethnography at the core of this study emphasises its interpretive nature.

Increasingly research designs combine autoethnography with other methods, such as ethnographic interviews of other immigrants (Bhawuk, 2010; Maydell, 2010) and service-users (Gibbs, 2012) or less formal conversations (Cohen, Duberley and Musson, 2009; Essén and Värlander, 2012). Bhawuk (2010) explores her own identity partly through analysing the identity of others. Scott-Myhre et al. (2012) reflect on their experience as providers, alongside attending to the perspectives
of service-users. Some prefer conversations as a way of developing more relaxed and collaborative exchanges (Cohen, Duberley and Musson, 2009; Essén and Värlander, 2012). Authethnographers also co-write the final research report with those that they interview (Dana and Pitts, 1993). In all of these studies interviews and conversations were chosen as methods of providing data for the autoethnography, and were integrated together in the final presentation. In contrast, as described in more detail later, the current research design involves the collection of primary data for the autoethnography from sources other than the corporate case studies.

Between them, the three case studies address the two main environments for using 360: organisations, usually based on the in-house competencies; and professions, based on a professional body’s competencies. The two corporate case studies exemplify the first, and the autoethnography the second. “A case study is both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry” (Stake, 2005: 444): this chapter presents the procedures used in the inquiry, and the later chapters present the products.

### 4.3 CORPORATE CASE STUDIES

The two case study companies were in the East Midlands pharmaceutical sector and were selected on the basis that they were in the same region, the same industry, seemed promising in terms of gaining access and were using 360. Implementation of research is somewhat messier than the planning of it (Robson, 1993) and more details are given in Chapters 4 and 5. However, the original two companies remained the focus of the research.

The choice of the pharmaceutical sector was largely pragmatic, in that this sector is well-represented in the East Midlands. By staying within the same sector, it was hoped that there might be some similarities in approach to 360. In addition, there were two further unexpected benefits
in selecting pharmaceutical companies. Firstly, in the pharmaceutical sector around 70% of the workforce is educated to at least degree level, 40% of who are educated at postgraduate level (Cogent, Semta and Skills for Health, 2009). Furthermore, the GVA (Gross Value Added) generated per employee in the sector in 2010 was £206,000 (ABPI, 2011). This means that the value of the workforce to employers is high and therefore that the companies are likely to invest in interventions such as 360. Secondly, according to the Office for National Statistics, in 2010, of the 67,000 people directly employed in the sector, 25,000 worked in R&D, over half of whom were scientists or engineers (ABPI, 2011). It was hoped that this concentration of scientists and scientific outlook might influence the ways that 360 is used within these companies.

4.3.1 Case study guidelines

The last part of this chapter discusses in more depth the evaluation criteria proposed as relevant for the current research. This section, however, discusses the status of the current empirical work as business case studies. Myers (2008: 83) proposed guidelines for business case studies, specifically:

a) The case study must be ‘interesting’
b) The case study must display sufficient evidence
c) The case study should be ‘complete’
d) The case study must consider alternative perspectives
e) The case study should be written in an engaging manner
f) The case study should contribute to knowledge

The interest value of the current work lies in taking an approach that is different from earlier 360 research methodologically and conceptually: this, I hope, meets the criterion of being ‘interesting’. The second criterion is met through the analysis of three case studies, thereby displaying ‘sufficient evidence’ to build and substantiate the thematic analysis. Moreover, the particular combination of case studies presents evidence from within a corporate setting as well as from an individual’s professional
practice, the analysis of which should be sufficient to encourage academics and practitioners to pause and reconsider some of the taken-for-granted characteristics of 360 research and practice. The third criterion of ‘completeness’ is met in three ways. Firstly, each of the two corporate case studies involves 360 participants engaged with 360 at different stages, thereby offering a ‘complete’ view of the 360 process. Secondly, the autoethnographic case study is longitudinal, including two consecutive rounds of 360 on the researcher’s own performance as coach, thereby offering insights over a period of more than a year. Thirdly, together the case studies encompass experience of 360 within a corporate setting, focusing on managerial competencies, and within an independent consultancy setting, focusing on professional (coaching) competencies. The case studies are therefore presented as ‘complete’.

As is found in qualitative research, there is not always agreement across those interviewed, or indeed agreement within the autoethnographic writing where I analyse my own unexpected and contradictory responses to numbers. Furthermore, the choice of an interpretive approach and the specific explorative research questions, demonstrate that the current work ‘considers alternative perspectives’. The claims to ‘contribute to knowledge’ are presented in the final chapter. The legitimacy of those claims, and whether or not the case studies have been ‘written in an engaging manner’, is for the reader to decide.

Myers’ guidelines were followed in compiling the case studies in the current research. However, it is in the critique of the methodology (Section 4.7) that I discuss the criteria against which the research as a whole is evaluated.

4.3.2 Choice of methods within the corporate case studies
The choice of methods is in part dependent on the kind of empirical material (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2012) that might be expected to provide a source of inspiration, and facilitate “critical dialogue”, rather than being “a guide and ultimate arbitrator” (Alvesson and Sandberg,
Taking the view that empirical material is constructed, or that researchers make data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) allows a different relationship between it and theory: rather than being used to prove or disprove theory, empirical material “can be used to develop theory that is interesting, rather than obvious, irrelevant or absurd” (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2012: 19). The notion that researchers create data relates to an interpretive view that the researcher is actively engaged in interacting with the material, will interpret that material in ways that reflect their own identities and perspectives. Indeed, “interpretation is always at work in the act of knowledge production – the ‘facts’ never speak for themselves” (Kincheloe, 2004: 28). What is written in any research records, and what is omitted, is part of making data.

I wanted to understand how people talk about 360, how they describe their interactions with the process and with 360 ratings and text. Therefore, I wanted to hear people speak. So, interviews were chosen. Participant observation, for example observing a live 360 facilitated discussion, was considered but rejected after failed attempts to negotiate access. The two methods promised different material. Participant observation would give insights into how people engage with making sense of their 360 report for the first time. In contrast, interviews gave insights into how people post-rationalise their approach, and how they talk about the experience. With the development of the research, the talking about experience became increasingly interesting to me.

The way that people talk to a researcher is different from the way they talk to each other within the work environment. It could be argued that the interviewees saw in me a researcher and therefore a person in authority, and this possibly impacted on their talk. For me, it was an opportunity to access how people present their ideas about 360 in a semi-formal situation, to someone they may have viewed as an expert. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews allowed a mix of focus on areas that would help answer the research questions, whilst also providing openings to follow the interests of the person being interviewed. The
interviews provided the majority of the empirical material for the two corporate case studies. Additional material was in the form of observations of the work environment and less formal conversations with the contact people.

4.3.3 Interviews
The approach to interviewing was respondent interviews, asking research participants “to share their own perspectives and experiences” (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012: 241). Interviews were semi-structured to allow sufficient flexibility to follow the interests of the interviewee, while still having a clear interview schedule to guide the discussion. There are different epistemological stances in the use of interviews. The interview approach in the current research tends towards that of ‘reflexivism’, described by Alvesson and Ashcraft (2012: 244). Specifically, interviews were used to generate knowledge about the use of 360 in a company context, recognizing that I as researcher am also “a situated cultural subject…negotiating with other cultural subjects (i.e. participants)” (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012: 244). Therefore, no claims are made about producing ‘facts’ from the interviews about how things ‘are’, but rather how participants describe their experiences and reactions. Likewise no claims are made about creating an “authentic dialogue that can draw out (inter)subjective knowledge through attempting a relationship” (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012: 242), but rather the interaction provided context and empirical material to reflect on and analyse.

As the researcher I tried “to grapple with the fact that knowledge is invariably produced from where [I] already stand” (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012: 242). And, as outlined earlier, the position where I already stood when doing the interviews was in the position of a mature PhD student (I am 56 as I write this) and consultant experienced in the use of 360. Furthermore, I had informally experimented with different approaches to 360 and had opinions about it. Rather than try to remove these
influences, I attempted to acknowledge them and take account of them in the analysis and reporting. I describe my interview approach as ‘tending towards that of reflexivism’, because it does not delve in any depth into the political and power aspects of the interviews.

The research participants talked about how they experienced and reacted to 360. In so doing, they were engaged at least in part with impression management that is, they were consciously or subconsciously presenting the favourable ‘truth’ they wanted to communicate (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012). Increasing awareness of this led to a change in the research questions in order to target the talk about 360, rather than what people actually do. I am interested in what people say they do. Furthermore, some of the interviews took place a few weeks after giving ratings or receiving 360, which provided the opportunity to hear the meaning people had constructed.

In each of the case study companies, access to interviewees was made easier when the key informant themselves wanted information about current practice with 360 in the organisation. Company A was conducting a review of performance management practices and the HR contact was to report on increasing the role of 360. She scheduled six interviews on the same day, including one with a Vice President. I agreed to submit a report using this data (Appendix 9). Acting as both researcher and consultant required me to make specific agreements with the interviewees, explaining that I would be using data both in a report to the company as well as in my own research. Discussion of the report with the key informant provided further material, offering insights into the company’s expectations of 360.

In a similar but less formal way, my key informant in Company B also wanted information from the interviews. He had been recently promoted and had taken on the responsibility for managing the external providers of 360. He wanted to understand what was happening with 360 throughout the company, and wanted to use me as a subject matter expert.
Throughout the research we had six telephone conversations, two of which I agreed with him would take the form of interviews. We continue to be in touch, whereas Company A’s informant has moved posts, the local site has closed and we are no longer in contact.

There are ethical and authenticity issues about balancing roles and managing research relationships. Ethically, it is important for the researcher to remain clear about their purpose and to clarify issues of confidentiality and anonymity in relationship to use of the data by the company. Whilst it is not unusual to combine the roles of researcher and consultant, I decided to keep the two distinct, especially as I am a “researcher-in-training”. Therefore, although others tried to place me in an expert role, I did not offer advice to the key contacts, nor did I assist them to arrive at improved 360 solutions. Issues about authenticity are relevant here. My experience in consultancy, and my age, were undoubtedly helpful in gaining access to the two companies. However, I wanted to boundary my contact with each company, limiting it to a research focus. This was much easier in the very formal culture of Company A, than in the relative informality of Company B, which I experienced as considerably more inquisitive. I wanted to achieve and sustain an authentic voice as researcher, and take this opportunity not to use consultancy processes, which were more familiar to me.

The interviews were carried out either by phone or face-to-face. Telephone interviews were chosen to reduce travel time, especially when interviews could not be batched. Rapport can be harder to achieve on the phone, however, I have coached and counselled people on the phone for years, including working on a helpline, and have therefore developed considerable skills in establishing rapport. In addition, for telephone interviews, there is “evidence of smaller interviewer effects and a lower tendency towards socially desirable responses” (Bradburn and Sudman, 1979, cited by Robson, 1993: 241). Furthermore, those interviewed were all experienced in remote working, including telephone conferencing. No difficulties were apparent with this communication mode. The advantage
of face-to-face interviews related more to the environment than to the specific interview. By observing the building, the informal interactions between employees and other cultural cues, it was possible to gain insights into the site.

An interview schedule was drawn up (see Appendix 6) and discussed with my two supervisors and two colleagues. Several changes were made throughout the research. For example, the emphasis on particular questions varied according to what the interviewee wanted to discuss and what I was at the time more interested in as far as generating further data. These were not regimented interviews. Rather I was engaged in exploring the different perspectives of each individual, particularly in relationship to their role.

4.3.4 Interview sample
The research aim is to explore how participants, with different roles in 360, make sense of and talk about 360. Therefore, my initial sample of interview participants was constructed on the basis of their roles in the process. I wanted to access designers, consultants, buyers (budget-holders), facilitators, raters and recipients. However, these roles were not that easily distinguished, nor did it prove possible to access as many people as I had hoped with roles across the whole process. For example, no 360-designers were interviewed, although the consultants I interviewed also played some role in design. This typified the way that individuals played more than one role in the process. Facilitators were also HR managers, in both companies. The recipients I interviewed had often also rated others, and the HR managers and budget-holder had also been rated. However, all that being said, the final list of participants reflected a range of roles within the 360 process. The chain of participants involved in the process played the same roles within each of the two case study companies. I describe those roles below.
Practical and unforeseen problems emerged with access. Having submitted the report in Company A as requested, it proved difficult to secure further interviews. A few months later, it was announced that the site would close in eighteen months’ time. Three further interviews took place, all with HR managers. In spite of the contact’s attempts, the interview count stayed at eight, with an average interview time of 35 minutes (omitting the longer interview with the consultant). In spite of the low interview count, the case study shows some consistency in themes across two companies. In addition, there are some cultural differences, which appear to impact on the attitudes to 360. For these two reasons, my supervisors and I decided to retain this case study.

Originally, all the interviews for Company B were to be at one site. However, the list of potential interviews here also dried up quickly. To increase the interviews, the key informant offered names from other sites. This resulted in a total of fifteen interviews, with an average length of 48 minutes (discounting the three interviews that each took over 100 minutes).

4.3.5 Roles in the 360 process

4.3.5.1 The consultant
In each case study, I met with a consultant from the organisation supplying the online 360. They described their roles as “managing the relationship” between the consultancy and company; helping HR managers “to build a business case for 360”; to persuade budget-holders. They had both been involved in setting up 360’s for use within leadership development programmes.

4.3.5.2 Vice President – Company A
As a very senior manager, Diane had a range of experiences with 360. She had not only received more than one 360 report on her own performance, but also she had experimented with different ways of using
360 within her team. In addition, she had been asked many times to rate others. She was a keen advocate of experimenting with, developing and learning from 360, at many levels within the organisation, the Vice President played the roles of decision-maker, team-manager, rater, recipient and as ‘360 coach’.

4.3.5.3 Central manager of the company’s 360 – Company B
This manager, Steve, was also my key contact for Company B. He interfaced with the 360 provider and maintained the training and support of the in-house 360 facilitators.

4.3.5.4 HR Managers
The HR managers I interviewed across both case studies had all facilitated 360, received 360 and been raters for other people’s 360’s. In addition, they advised senior managers about the use of 360 and how best to implement the process. In these respects, three organisational-level purposes for 360 were identified in the interview data:

1. To assist with the annual review of performance
2. To assess individuals as part of succession planning
3. To bring together results from the 360 with results from psychometric tools and assessed activities in development centres

4.3.5.5 Learning & Development Managers and Leadership Coach – Company B
These people were based on individual sites and worked with local managers. They adapted processes and evolved them.

4.3.5.6 Managers (who had received 360 and who had rated others)
In research to-date, the focus of 360 research has been on the raters and those being rated, although few if any interviews have been carried out with them. Instead, the data has been quantitative, collected by questionnaires or direct from 360 reports.
4.4 AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

In this section, after explaining my reasons for choosing this method, I outline how I adapted autoethnographic methods to suit my own purpose.

4.4.1 Reasons for choosing autoethnography

I had four main reasons for choosing autoethnography. Most importantly, it offered access to a deeper sense of how one person makes sense of 360. I wanted to explore personal reactions to 360 in more depth and over a longer period of time, in a way that would facilitate more “critical dialogue” within my reflexive writing. I became interested in first-person research (Torbert, 2001) as a method of looking deeply, mindfully into my own practice (Nugent et al., 2011).

Secondly, it fitted the epistemological basis of the current research. That is, autoethnography is based on the idea that researchers create and develop knowledge by drawing on different sources, through our own experiences and perspectives. By making the personal visible and clear, the research trail is demystified and is not presented as more than it is: a deeply reflexive account of one person’s experiences, that draws on, and aims to contribute to, theory. Consistent with this view of knowledge is that idea that research is “always carried out from the perspective of the researcher” (Muncey, 2005: 10). However, as Hiley says (2004: 562), there is a tendency in traditional business practice not to share our understanding of how we know things, or what we think we do know and even more strongly a tendency not to recognise our ways of not knowing. In preference, we make statements and judgements about how Others know, and what they appear to know, continuing a tradition of leaving the status quo unexamined, with its characteristics only apparent through contrasting them with the characteristics of the ‘Others’. I wanted the authenticity of using my own voice (Muncey, 2005), and not to hide behind the role of researcher (Rowan, 2001).
Thirdly, as an occupational psychologist, I wanted to contribute to the development of autoethnographic writing within the occupational psychology community. Initially, autoethnography saw greater acceptance outside of business and management, but more recently it has attracted interest within these fields (Boyle and Parry, 2007; Cohen, Duberley and Musson, 2009; Humphreys and Learmonth, 2012). Indeed, in 2007 a special issue of *Culture and Organization* was devoted to organisational autoethnographic accounts, described as where “the lens moves from cultural and social situatedness to the inner self and then back again to the situated individual” (Boyle and Parry, 2007: 186). I was interested in developing the use of corporate case studies alongside an autoethnographic case study, thereby demonstrating a creative dynamic between research ‘in the field’ and research on oneself.

The fourth reason for choosing autoethnography, as I explained earlier, was that it offered me an opportunity for my own skills development. I wanted to develop my practice as coach not only by gathering feedback from others but also by being seen to gather it, thereby mirroring the interests of many managers: to receive 360 and to be seen to be using the process. I was intrigued with what I might discover about my own feedback habits and perspective: I expected the process and the product to reflect back to me my own sense-making (Duncan, 2004). The choice of autoethnography promised to increase my skills not only as coach, but also as writer and researcher.

4.4.2 Boundarying the autoethnography

The desire to make a contribution to the occupational psychology community impacted on my decisions about boundarying the data. This community reflects a predominantly positivist approach to research, with some evidence of qualitative and interpretive research slowly gaining acceptance. Such an environment expects boundaries between different methods and data to be established and maintained. I decided initially to
keep any observations from my own paid work out of my autoethnographic writing and instead to focus on exploring my experience of receiving 360. The main way that this boundary is evident is that I do not analyse my experience of 360 as trainer, facilitator or designer. However, I do refer to this experience, and inevitably it does impact on my observations.

4.4.3 Development of autoethnography
Autoethnography is commonly described as a combination of “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004: xix). Since David Hayano's use of the term in 1979 (Anderson, 2006b: 455), several forms have developed. The most pronounced distinction lies between what has come to be known as ‘evocative autoethnography’ (Ellis, 2004) and ‘analytic autoethnography’ (Anderson, 2006a). I will outline here some important characteristics of the work by Ellis, Bochner, Denzin and others, before contrasting it with the work by Anderson.

Denzin argues that autoethnography is based on “an epistemology of emotion, moving the reader to feel the feelings of the other” (Anderson, 2006a: 377, citing Denzin, 1997), so that evoking emotion in the reader will lead to re-consideration of the world and action. Ellis (2006: 435) argues “evocation is a goal, not a type of autoethnography”, saying she “wouldn’t think of applying the term ‘autoethnography’ to texts that are not evocative”. Producing an autoethnography involves writing journals, conversations, observations, autobiographical notes and then reflecting on this material; an evocative style is “writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world” (Holman Jones, 2005: 765). The desire to change the world through ‘writing from the heart’ (Pelias 2004 cited by Denzin, 2006: 422) is evident in writing by Ellis, (2004), Holman Jones (2005), Richardson (2000) and Sparkes (2002). Ellis and Bochner “use stories to do the work of analysis and theorizing” (2006: 436), with a goal “to open up conversations about
how people live, rather than close down with a definitive description and analytic statements about the world as it ‘truly’ exists (Ellis and Bochner, 2006: 435). The two distinguishing characteristics about these authors’ work are the approach to theory, and the emphasis on evocative writing.

The current work follows what Ellis and Bochner call “personal autoethnography” (2003, cited by O’Byrne, 2007). Personal autoethnography involves the application of ethnographic methods to a personal experience, using an “exploratory process and its findings to infer typical (or possible) reactions by other members of his or her culture”, in this case, 360 culture (O’Byrne, 2007: 1383). As is the case with the current study, the researcher “is simultaneously the subject of study, has intimate relationships (friends and family) as well as regular social interactions (co-workers and acquaintances)” (O’Byrne, 2007: 1383). Rather than reflecting solely on the researcher’s reactions to his or her own experience, personal autoethnography attends to the researcher’s reflections on others’ experience and on the interactions between him or herself and others. Indeed, in the current research, colleagues, clients and friends were involved in both formal and informal conversations about the 360 process. The particular contribution of personal autoethnography lies in the identification and voice given to reactions and assumptions in the 360 process, which are harder-to-access using other research methods. Personal reflections on, and analysis of, these various interactions lead to proposals as to the possible reactions of others engaged in the 360 process: “the abstracted conceptual and theoretical formulations I am able to offer as a result of studying aspects of my own life have relevance beyond my own personal experience” (Vryan, 2006: 405-406). That is, the process moves from the personal to the other.

A criticism against personal autoethnography is that it relies too much on personal experience, using reflexive writing to explore and understand emotional and cognitive processes within the researcher, and then presenting propositions, generalising from those personal understandings
to a wider population. Anticipating such a challenge, the current research draws on not only the personal experience of the researcher, but also on corporate case studies. This use of external data departs from the practice of personal autoethnography and falls more within the analytic approach. Indeed, it is the researcher’s engagement with case study participants that contributes in large part to the reflexive work and from that to a more developed understanding about 360.

4.4.4 Principles of analytic autoethnography
Anderson’s (2006a) five principles of analytic autoethnography provide a framework for integrating corporate case studies with autoethnographic writing. The five features are outlined below, highlighting the relationship of each to the current research.

4.4.4.1 Complete member researcher (CMR) status
CMR status refers to the researcher’s active membership of the group being researched. The group being researched is the group of people participating in 360, and I am active in that group as part of my paid work. The current study typifies opportunistic CMR, such that I have “acquired intimate familiarity through occupational … participation” (Anderson, 2006a: 379). This autoethnography provides an example of a practitioner-researcher deepening an understanding of a work tool through the processes of creating an experience to receive 360 and writing reflexively about it (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

4.4.4.2 Uses analytic reflexivity
Arguably, analytical reflexivity is expected of all forms of autoethnographic writing, whereby the writer extracts and constructs meaning from experience, offering analysis rather than anecdotes, whether this be presented creatively as with some evocative forms, or more formally as with analytic autoethnography. Autoethnographers such as Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that it is the responsibility of the writer
to present work that is ready for the reader to analyse and interpret; and it is the responsibility of the reader to do so. This is markedly different from Anderson’s analytical autoethnography, where he argues that the responsibility for analysis sits with the writer and researcher. Analysis lies at the core of the autoethnographic writing presented in this PhD, and for that reason the autoethnographic chapter addresses the same research questions as the corporate case studies, and analyses my own self-insights in response to these questions.

4.4.4.3 Has a visible narrative presence in the written text
Stylistically this presented a challenge. After some deliberation, I decided to place the autoethnographic chapter after the case studies. This has the benefit of engaging with the reader once they already have the experience of 360 through the company data chapters. This positioning invites greater reflexivity on the part of me as writer, and of you as reader.

4.4.4.4 Engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self
In common with many autoethnographies, informants also included those people involved with my own 360 process as well as friends and colleagues. The current work incorporates three sources of dialogue beyond the self:

- Discussions with the consultants who facilitated my own 360 feedback; and discussions with some of those who gave me feedback;
- Interviews as part of the case studies; and further discussions with the main contact in each organisation;
- Discussions with other coaches and 360 practitioners as part of my professional work.
4.4.4.5 Is committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. The broader social phenomenon that interests me is the role of 360 in enabling understanding between work colleagues. This research represents a first step on that path.

4.4.5 Analytic versus evocative autoethnography

Based on the above discussion, the current autoethnographic work has elements of analytic autoethnography, whilst including also elements of the more evocative approach of personal autoethnography. Such a combination gives rise to debate about the epistemological foundations of each form (Anderson, 2006b; Ellis and Bochner, 2006). To explain this further, I now summarise the debate that appeared in an issue of the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, where Anderson (2006a) proposes ‘analytic autoethnography’, contrasting it with what he calls ‘evocative autoethnography’; this article is responded to by Denzin (2006) and Ellis and Bochner (2006), and followed by a further article by Anderson (2006b).

Anderson describes himself as “committed to pursuing theoretically informed, inductively oriented realist ethnography” (2006b: 453), thereby highlighting the two critical differences in approach. While Ellis and Bochner argue that “stories can and do theorise” (2006: 444) and that “good analysis can be evocative” (2006: 443), their goal is not theorizing or generalizing, and they are not realists. In their response to Anderson, they say, “We think of ethnography as a journey; they think of it as a destination. They want to master, explain, grasp. …. we want to dwell in the flux of lived experience; they want to appropriate lived experience for the purpose of abstracting something they call knowledge or theory.” (Ellis and Bochner, 2006: 431). Epistemologically, therefore, evocative autoethnography is ‘interpretive’, while ‘analytic autoethnography’ is realist.
As might be expected of an interpretive researcher, I do not see this as a black-and-white issue, but rather one that has shades of grey. Within the business and management field, those autoethnographies that have been published tend towards the analytic form, presenting good analysis that is evocative (Cohen, Duberley and Musson, 2009). Humphreys and Learmonth (2012) describe their own approach as blending the two forms. My own approach in the current work is indeed analytical, in that I use personal material, analysing and presenting it under the same four headings as used in the corporate case studies. This structure appears more analytical than evocative.

4.4.6 Design of the autoethnographic case study
To better understand my own reactions to 360, I chose to participate in two 360’s on my own performance as coach. The data I collected included: transcriptions of the two feedback sessions facilitated by different consultants; my two 360 reports (Appendix 13); and exploration of my reactions by using reflexive journal writing.

I designed my own 360. The process I used differed from that used by most 360 recipients in that I designed the questionnaire myself. Through this active involvement on my own part, I was able to consider which criteria I wanted to ask for feedback on. I worked through the list of ICF (International Coach Federation) competencies and chose what I thought appropriate. The act of choosing the areas that an individual wants to gather feedback about, gives a greater sense of being in charge of the feedback focus.

I do not have a manager and therefore strictly speaking it was not 360. I attempted to gather feedback from my coach supervisor and mentors who had observed my coaching, but they declined on the basis that they did not think assessment was part of their role. In the first year, I had feedback from all of those I asked, which included six peers, who had attended the same coaching programme as me, and three senior
managers whom I had coached. In the second year I had three peers, three senior managers whom I had coached from one organisation and four mixed level managers I had coached from another organisation. Sarah Dale, Creating Focus managed the first 360 and David Cooper, Lumus, managed the second one. Both 360’s were free-of-charge, both done because the consultant was interested in my research and wanted to support my project. The process mirrored the processes from each case study company: raters were invited by email to complete an online questionnaire; results were collated by the consultancy; I received a report by email followed by a feedback discussion with the consultant.

In this way, I was my own research subject. I engaged in reflexive writing so that I reflected on my reflections and made links between different material. I wrote in the moment, as I was processing feedback, I wrote round the edges of events, before and after, and I also allowed time to elapse, giving opportunities for reflecting with a sense of greater distance. I based my analysis on the same research questions as for the case studies, and carried out the formal analysis after the other two findings chapters had been written. I used the same themes and examined the various material for insights into the same topics.

I used the same headings as for the corporate case studies in order to give a sense of flow across the three chapters. I chose to write in a style that I hope is compelling (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011), whilst also taking account of the more traditional styles that business researchers may prefer. One further issue about the writing was an ethical one, namely that those mentioned in the autoethnographic piece should be given the chance to comment and possibly edit. To honour these “relational ethics” (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012: 88), I sent the draft chapter to the three people concerned (the two consultants and “K”). All were interested to read it, and none made any requests for changes in how they were referred to.
4.5 ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

4.5.1 Transcription of the interviews

I recorded and transcribed the interviews myself. I used the process of transcribing to help me think about and start analysing the data, aware that “[t]ranscription is an integral process in the qualitative analysis of language data” (Lapadat, 2000: 203). In transcribing the recordings, I was already working with the data, already ‘making’ data, in that I was deciding how precise to be at different times throughout each transcription. When I was unable to hear particular words, I noted at what time they occurred within a recording. When the individual started and re-started a sentence several times, I did not transcribe every single one of these. There were times when the participant talked in sentences that, when transcribed, appeared very unclear, even though within the interview they were clear to me. At these times, I faced the dilemma of what to do. Initially I attempted to transcribe “grunts, pauses, bursts of laughter, and repetitions” out of a desire to be ‘accurate’ (Mero-Jaffe, 2011: 243). I wanted to honour the voice of the speaker. Decisions about transcription need to support the research questions and the research perspective (Davidson, 2009).

Returning to my aim and questions, I decided that verbatim transcription (Halcomb et al., 2006) for my purposes meant typing the exact words of the interviewee and not changing them, transcribing all sections of the interview, and omitting small pauses, grunts and repetitions. This is in strong contrast to other transcription methods that address different forms of research question and different methodologies (Davidson, 2009). The resulting transcripts represent my “theoretical construction” of the interviews (Lapadat, 2000: 209), omitting such detail as when the interviewee and I spoke at the same time. Such details would have been crucial in an analysis of power, but not as relevant to the current research questions.
Transcription does not stop with the initial draft. It continues through the different stages of analysis and into the final report. At the point of including quotes in the final document, it seemed I could best honour the voice of the speaker, by altering the transcription to avoid them seeming incoherent (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Returning to the original recording was a helpful way to remind me as researcher that my transcription represents one interpretation of the conversation (Davidson, 2009).

4.5.2 Reflexivity
Having already worked with 360, I arrived at this study with a set of my own assumptions. Reflecting on my reflections and questioning my assumptions played an important role in the analysis of findings (Attard, 2008; Cunliffe, 2011; Cassell et al., 2009). This involved an iterative process, or a “hermeneutic reading, in which there is a circular move between part and whole, and the preunderstanding that what the researcher brings with her into research is actively used, qualified, challenged, and developed in the research process” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007: 713). By writing between interviews and writing during my own 360 experience, I was able to return to my own words and call into question my own perspective. Reflexivity helps to “identify ‘blindspots’ and provide space for alternative readings and new perspectives” (Janssens and Steyaert, 2009).

Reflexivity is not only an activity or process but also an attitude or perspective. In relationship to the autoethnography, reflexivity was perhaps more immediately visible in the writing style. With the interview data, reflexivity prompted questions and more questions. In doing so, there were moments of surprise as I met my own challenging questions. All was not how I had thought at the outset of the research, not even in terms of my own reactions to 360. And how I engaged with the data necessarily impacted on the sense that I made of them. Although every attempt was made to present participants’ views accurately, the sense I made of them is arguably “fictional in the sense of being the researcher’s
own interpretation and story of another's reality" (Cunliffe, 2011: 406). In keeping with interpretive traditions, interpretation was practiced in the current work “not as a mere acquisition of our mind (i.e. not as something produced by remaining ‘outside’ the text) but as participation in the ‘tradition’ to which the text belongs” (Prasad, 2002: 19)

A desire to retain credibility and trustworthiness impacted on decisions about presenting reflexive writing. I opted to keep to a more traditional style, presenting the analysed findings rather than examples of the writing that led there.

4.5.3 Thematic analysis
An interpretive approach to thematic analysis was used, that is I constructed themes from the data that captured “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning” across the different interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 81). Consistent with an interpretive epistemology, I did not search for themes waiting to be found, but rather I engaged with, and interpreted, the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) differentiate between semantic and latent themes. Semantic themes are “identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84) whereas latent themes start to “examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations…that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84). Development of these latent themes requires interpretation, so that the analysis goes beyond description to theorisation. Although also used by positivists, an interpretive approach to thematic analysis is a more recursive, rather than linear, process. This means that I moved between phases, to and fro, as I judged helpful throughout the research. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend six phases of thematic analysis, as shown below:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiarizing yourself with your data:</td>
<td>Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating initial codes:</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching for themes:</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing themes:</td>
<td>Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining and naming themes:</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing the report:</td>
<td>The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87)

To immerse myself in the data, I listened to the recordings in the car and when I was ironing or in the kitchen. This facilitated a lighter listening which allowed me to hear tone, interest levels and flow of thoughts, alongside identifying some comments which particularly drew my attention. I kept notes in my journal, for example between onsite interviews I wrote down details of the room I was in, my reactions to the surroundings and my first reactions to the interview. I transcribed the data myself and was very aware of transcription being an “interpretative act” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 88). Coding in the earlier interviews was
more data-driven, however reflecting on the interviews, my autoethnographic work and the literature, coding became more theory-driven as I started to be more alert to how people understood rituals in the 360 process, and how they developed their own.

I wrote notes on the transcriptions and at the end of transcriptions. In my search for themes I drew mind-maps to help me link ideas together and from this I developed the idea that people follow rituals, although nobody actually used that word. The iterations between my own experiences of 360, the literature and the interview material were important for my development of themes. Braun and Clarke’s table above suggests that the research report is produced after all the analysis. However, earlier they also emphasise that “Writing is an integral part of analysis, not something that takes place at the end” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 86). Indeed, analysis of the data continued during the writing of the conclusion and during the subsequent re-writing of earlier chapters. Writing, therefore, was a key analytical tool: “writing is thinking, writing is analysis… writing is … a tangled method of discovery” (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005: 967).

Using the research questions as a base, I worked with four key themes, namely:

1. The purpose and value of 360
2. Anonymity
3. Numerical ratings
4. Text comments – and their relationship to numerical ratings

I identified the subthemes, which I grouped under the key themes. Some of the themes repeated across the case studies, while others were found only within one of the three studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company A</th>
<th>Company B</th>
<th>Autoethnography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>KEY THEME 1: PURPOSE AND VALUE OF 360</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUBTHEMES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Relative comparisons versus measurement  
  • A trend towards measurement  
  • Development through challenge  
  • Individual use  

• Internally developed and owned  
  • A tool for relationship development  
  • A ‘snapshot’  
  • 360 for measurement  

• Conversations  
  • Relationships  
  • Credibility  
  • Practice  
  • Conversations with myself  

### KEY THEME 2: ANONYMITY

**SUBTHEMES**

• Safety  
  • Pseudo-anonymity  
  • Accountability  

• Safety  
  • Pseudo-anonymity  
  • Accountability  

• Frustration  
  • Changing raters  
  • Follow-up and accountability  

### KEY THEME 3: NUMERICAL RATINGS

**SUBTHEMES**

• Ease and emphasis  
  • Graphical representation of the data  
  • A message not a measure  

• Numbers drive clarity  
  • Graphical representation of the data  
  • The meaning of ‘3’  
  • Averaging  
  • The meaning of agreement  
  • The meaning of difference  
  • Interpreting the numbers  

• Graphical representation of the data  
  • Drive for simplicity  
  • Agreement and difference  
  • Interpreting the numbers  

### KEY THEME 4: NARRATIVE COMMENTS

**SUBTHEMES**

• Clarifying – explanatory power  
  • A message of respect  
  • The relationship between comments and numbers  

• The relationship between comments and numbers  
  • The meaning of agreement  
  • The meaning of difference  
  • A message of respect  
  • Interpreting text comments  

• The relationship between comments and numbers  
  • The meaning of agreement  
  • The meaning of difference  
  • A message of respect  
  • Interpreting text comments  

Each of these themes and subthemes will be analysed further in the findings chapters.
4.6 ETHICS

Ethics is an issue integral to any research design. Therefore, this section identifies how ethics informs the current research design, including data-gathering, analysis and presentation of results. Codes of ethics for “value-free social science” incorporate the fundamental principles of informed consent, no deception, privacy and confidentiality and accuracy (Christians, 2005). Informed consent refers to, for example, interviewees having “the right to be informed about the nature and consequences” of the research they are involved in (Christians, 2005: 144). In line with this protocol, interviewees were emailed a one-page description of the research along with a consent form to sign and bring to the interview (Appendices 7 and 8). In addition, the primary contact within each case study company agreed to material being used anonymously within the final thesis.

I was open about the purpose of the research and my own background in connection with the topic. However, it could be argued that only a single contact with each individual failed to provide the opportunity for questions that might occur as a result of being interviewed. Unlike some researchers (Maro-Jaffe, 2011), I did not return transcripts for interviewers to read and comment on. And I did not share with them my analysis of their material. Doing so would have had both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include trust-building, opportunity for the interviewees to develop and (re)word their thoughts (Maro-Jaffe, 2011) and recognition of the interviewees’ active involvement in creating data for the research. Disadvantages reported by Maro-Jaffe (2011) include the patchy return of transcripts resulting in inconsistency in data management and the extended time required. In addition, both company contacts made clear that time was limited for their people, and further requests were unlikely to be met.
Perhaps most importantly for the current research is the way that the empirical material was used. I do not present my analysis as ‘fact’, rather as my interpretations, and as material for further reflexivity. Whilst some might argue that ethical issues about ownership of the material are insufficiently addressed in the current work, the signed consent forms meet the standards of informed consent and of no deception as described in Christians (2005). Privacy and confidentiality for interviewees was also explained in the consent form: that anonymous quotes would be used. One of the companies required a further level of confidentiality, namely that their findings chapter would not be included in any published work. And this has been respected.

Accuracy was not discussed with interviewees. By omitting repetitions, and phrases that did not flow, the transcriptions certainly did not meet the accuracy standards of a conversation analyst (Greatbatch and Clark, 2012). However, they did meet the accuracy standards required for thematic analysis as used in the current research. No words were changed, and no meanings intentionally altered.

It is not helpful to evaluate the ethics in research by using a self-standing checklist. Instead, issues of power, control and interpretation remain through every stage of the research project. Therefore, these issues will be addressed at additional points throughout the current work.

4.7 EVALUATION CRITERIA

The debate continues about what constitutes useful and relevant evaluation criteria for qualitative research, both amongst qualitative researchers (Symon and Cassell, 2012) and amongst editorial panels for academic journals. Cassell and Symon (2011) propose that criteria include:

- some general criteria such as contribution to the literature;
- development of theory and epistemological integrity; some
- more specific to the data collection technique used such as
This section outlines the criteria used in this PhD to evaluate the current research. These are the criteria returned to in the critique of the methodology (Section 8.5).

4.7.1 Contribution to the literature
The current research, as stated earlier, contributes to the 360 literature by deepening our understanding of how participants make meaning from their engagement with the process. The application of an interpretive perspective contributes greater texture to the field, particularly with the inclusion of autoethnographic writing.

4.7.2 Development of theory and epistemological integrity
The adoption of a perspective that differs from others in the 360 field is expected to “enhance or cultivate critical intelligence” amongst 360 researchers and practitioners, in line with one of Schwandt’s ‘guiding ideals’ (Symon and Cassell, 2012: 219). Within the research project itself, there were also examples of ‘cultivating critical intelligence’. For example, discussing anonymity with one of the key informants has motivated him to re-assess the use of anonymity; one of the consultants has redesigned follow-up processes to encourage further discussion between recipients and raters.

This relates to what some call the ‘usefulness’ criterion: “does the work help us better understand or explain other people, experiences and/or contexts? Does it contribute to collective knowledge in some way?” (Vryan, 2006: 4008). Contribution to knowledge should result from the process and/or product of research. However, judgements about contribution are not straightforward. As Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997: 1026) write,
scientific contribution is a constructed phenomenon...the meaning of contribution emerges not from the presentation of brute facts..., but rather from the development of honest claims to convey knowledge intended for academic audiences...scientific texts persuade readers to view phenomena in a particular, and different, way. And finally, texts must relate to extant knowledge, negate accepted propositions, and invoke rhetorical practices to support their validity. (my emphasis)

The current work is aimed at academic audiences, with the intention of what Alvesson and Sandberg (2012) call ‘path-(up)setting’, disrupting the current thinking about anonymity, numerical ratings and the process of 360. It sets out to persuade readers to view 360 in a different way, as a social phenomenon that entails meaning-making processes. In so doing, the research builds on current knowledge about 360, challenges received wisdom about its practices and uses a combination of methods to persuade the reader of the validity of those challenges.

According to Rindova (2011: 20) an “original idea becomes the basis for a theoretical contribution when the authors can envision its place and role in current research debates”. This research is currently being discussed with researchers at CCL (Consultancy for Creative Leadership), and I am using the to-and-fro between theory and practice to continue honing the potential contribution(s). I envision its place as contributing to: the development of research methods used within 360; the further exploration of the use of numerical ratings across different fields; and the connection between use of online questionnaires and face-to-face feedback. These contributions are discussed further in the final chapter.

The analysis of existing 360 research, the research design and the theoretical contributions offered all fit with a view that knowledge is created and influenced by discursive contact. All three demonstrate, therefore, epistemological integrity.
4.7.3 Data collection and analysis
There are four criteria used in the current PhD that relate to data collection and analysis: validity and reliability; rigour; credibility and trustworthiness; and persuasiveness.

4.7.3.1 Validity and reliability
Validity “is a rhetorical organisation of (scientific) arguments. It is a feat of persuasion – and therefore a social construction” (Aguinaldo, 2004: 128). Aguinaldo goes on to describe validity as “policing the social sciences”, operating as “a form of power that is practised through its capacity to de/legitimise social knowledge, research practice and experiential possibilities” (Aguinaldo, 2004: 128). Certainly, I felt constrained by these criteria, and strained to understand how to meet them. Indeed, that straining helped me to uncover other viewpoints more relevant to interpretive approaches.

Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997: 1025) argue “a socially constructed view of science suggests that knowledge cannot be known separately from the knower”, with the researcher deciding what constitutes interesting material within their particular community: “The researcher ‘enacts’ the meaning-making activity of deciding what knowledge counts” (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997: 1025). They also cite Weick: “the contribution of social science does not lie in validated knowledge, but rather in the suggestion of relationships and connections that had previously not been suspected” (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997: 1026). Indeed, positivist, quantitative researchers use qualitative methods as a way of exploring and naming constructs prior to testing them. The idea of ‘validated knowledge’ is suspect within an interpretive framework, where “meanings are seen to be negotiated between researcher and researched within a particular social context so that another researcher in a different relationship will unfold a different story” (Finlay, 2002: 531). This is the case at every stage of the research process, with the researcher...
recognising that their choice of ‘interpretive, material practices’ privileges particular perspectives and subjective meanings and as a result ‘transforms the world’” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 3).

Accurate representation of data is also relevant here. Informing people prior to interview about the topic of study, answering their questions during interview and checking my understanding of their input helped to build a more reliable set of data. Transcription was carried out carefully, as was described earlier. During analysis, it was important to attend those examples that helped to build a consistent theme as well as those that differed from that theme. These practices all contributed to increasing the validity and reliability of data collection and analysis.

Based on the above, I suggest that the current work be judged as valid, to the extent that it is persuasive in its argument; and reliable, to the extent that these arguments are worth considering in other contexts.

4.7.3.2 Rigour

According to Donaldson, Qui and Luo (2012), rigour is the logical pursuit of an idea, with thoroughness enabling logical thinking that is the foundation for the development of sound theory. The current project is rigorous in making connections between the methodology, methods, literature, findings and conclusion, each chapter playing its role in the logical pursuit of one core idea: that 360 is a social process with rituals which involve complex encoding and decoding of anonymity, numbers and comments.

There are some who question the pursuit of rigour in research practice, such as Ellis and Bochner (2001: 349) who resist “the domination of imagination by rigor in sociological practice”. Nevertheless, my own experience was that aiming for rigour in theory and methodology contributed to creativity rather than impeding it (Donaldson, Qui and Luo, 2012), for example, testing the sense of claims with practitioners and
peer researchers required me to return to the empirical material at times to reconsider my interpretation. This in turn led to new realisations, such as the practical importance of numbers as, at times, a time-saving device.

Alvesson and Sandberg (2012) suggest that in order to encourage more innovative research, the emphasis on rigour might be relaxed and instead consider “interestingness” (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2012: 16) as one ideal for good research. There is value in researchers facing the challenge of taking a “broader outlook, curious, reflective, willing and able to question their own frameworks and consider alternative positions” (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2012: 16). The extent to which researchers and practitioners judge this project to be rigorous will influence their reception of the ideas.

4.7.3.3 Credibility and trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability and trustworthiness are the cornerstones of qualitative rigor. Without these standards, qualitative research becomes nothing more than journalism with a smattering of history … the manuscript must be grounded within a theoretical framework. We cannot publish good stories in an academic journal.

Holt (2003: 10)

Credibility and trustworthiness are built in several ways. For example, the researcher needs to “make clear where the data came from … and how such data were transformed into the presented findings” (Symon and Cassell, 2012: 208). Jenks (2002) in her autoethnography of a summer spent on camp with her son, used material from her notepad or journal, and quizzed herself about the extent to which this might grow credibility: “I am not sure I wrote down the right things … Did I write too much about my experiences and not enough about others? … How will I judge my field notes?” (2002: 171). Jenks’ work poses helpful questions, which warrant further consideration. Earlier in this chapter, I explained my
approach to carrying out, recording, transcribing and analysing the data in interviews and in my own facilitated feedback sessions. Clearly explaining process in this way helps to build credibility.

In addition, claims need to be clearly supported within the write-up: “[c]redibility of arguments … are enhanced by the implied authority of the scientist, ‘commonplaces’ in arguments, “dramatism” and arrangement” (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997: 1026). A combination of the literature and empirical data from the current work is expected to persuade the reader of my ‘authority’ in making the claims I do.

There are no claims made here for generalizability from the findings. Instead, focused on autoethnographic analysis, McIlveen (2008: 5) argues that there is “the potential to act as a stimulus for profound understanding of a single case and, moreover, act as a stimulus to open new intellectual vistas for the reader through a uniquely personal meaning”. Therefore, I aim for the reader to consider new perspectives about 360.

By explaining the methodology and methods, their fit, the research design and methods, it is expected that the trustworthiness of this work will be augmented. The test that has most bite for me is the reaction from readers as to the extent that this work will “generate credible and meaningful disciplinary knowledge” (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham and O’Flynn-Magee, 2004: 3).

4.7.3.4 Persuasiveness

Plausibility of the written account is critical to ensure persuasiveness. The story should be believable. In addition, persuasiveness is increased when the story is coherent across all its chapters. Coherence, for me, is about demonstrating clear links between the different ‘levels’ of my awareness as researcher. Therefore, the current work will be persuasive to the extent that the reader finds coherence across the selection of
methods, the claims being made and the choice of language whereby they are all in line with a clearly stated position about what constitutes ‘reality’.

But perhaps the most persuasive aspect of a research account is its success at telling a “compelling story” (Symon and Cassell, 2012: 216). And it is only the audience that can measure that success.
CHAPTER REMOVED BY REQUEST OF COMPANY A, AND AS STATED ON THE CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

Originally pages 130-167

This copy of the PhD has been repaginated, omitting the original pages 130-167, so that Chapter 6 now starts on p131
6 - ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDY B

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses the findings from Company B. As with the first case study, I outline my experience of the company’s attitudes to research, security and creativity before introducing the themes and subthemes.

The person who became my key contact was based at the head office, and is referred to as Steve in this thesis. We had several conversations and remain in touch. On occasions, he phoned me to discuss his latest ideas about 360, or to find out where I had developed my own thoughts. These informal discussions, and the semi-structured interviews, were all more relaxed than in Company A. Access was slightly easier and the people I engaged with appeared to have greater flexibility with their diaries.

As with Company A, 360 is included in leadership programmes to help build self-awareness at an initial workshop. The Learning and Development Manager held a list of 360 facilitators across the different sites and it was this list that I used to access interviews. The facilitators had been briefed, coached or trained in the use of 360. They were all HR or L&D (learning and development) managers. 360 was one of several tools for both HR and L&D communities.

6.1.1 Attitudes to research, security and creativity

Company B is, like Company A, a science-based company. Healthcare is one of its focuses and it was within this division that the case study was carried out. In the UK, across its divisions, it has over 3,000 employees, across nineteen locations. It is part of a global corporation, with customers in two hundred countries. As was explained in the Research
Design and Methods chapter, my original intention to interview people on one site was not successful, leading to interviews across different sites. The consistent characteristic across those sites was their independence in how they used 360. This resulted in individuals creating their own 360 processes and questionnaires for local use, while also engaging at times with the corporate online 360. These differences are explored in this chapter.

The security at the two companies could not be more different. In my initial conversation with my first contact in Company B, it was only when I pushed the topic of security that the HR Manager looked up what needed to happen. It seems possible that had I not done this, I would never have signed security forms. The reception areas appeared mostly to be staffed by internal staff. Even the one site where a subcontractor was employed, the atmosphere was relaxed and informal. Based only on my personal reactions, the reception areas of Company A felt designed to communicate authority, security, restricted access and separation from the main buildings; there were no social conversations there. In contrast, the reception areas of Company B felt open, easy and welcoming; there was often conversation. In Company A, my contact was with one HR Business Partner (Katherine) and her secretary, through whom I organised interviews. In Company B, my primary contact was Steve, the Learning and Development Manager, who supplied me with a list of people I could interview and invited me to organise my own interviews.

The company prides itself on innovation. At the head office there was a permanent exhibition of company products by reception, that I was walked around and told about on my visit there. The actual products and their innovative nature were important enough that apparently every visitor is taken on this tour. There was evidence of innovation also in the different approaches to 360. There was one company-wide 360 process, which everyone knew about, but which not everyone used. My key contact, Steve, took on responsibility for 360 just after I began the interviews. He described himself as not aware of all the different varieties
of 360 being developed across the company. He was mildly interested but took the attitude that people would employ whatever they experienced as genuinely useful to them.

6.1.2 Themes and subthemes

The four main themes continue from Case Study A. Following the same format as for the first case study, the themes and subthemes are given here, with the name of each subtheme appearing in italics.

As with interviews in Company A, interviews in Company B revealed that there was both an online 360 as well as a less formal approach to 360, which gathered feedback from different stakeholders within the performance management process. Also, as with Company A, the purpose and value of 360 was often described as being about measurement, however, there was more evidence in Company B of other perspectives. 360 was internally developed and owned, resulting in different formats and approaches. There was evidence of 360 being used as a tool for relationship development, and a view of 360 as a snapshot signalling that it provides a useful picture at the time of being taken, which may not be as useful if referred back to at a later point. And finally, there was a range of views on the use of 360 for measurement.

The second theme, anonymity, has the same subthemes as were used for Company A: safety, pseudo-anonymity and accountability.

The third theme, numerical ratings, has subthemes, which are either the same or related to those used for Company A. ‘A message not a measure’ in Case Study A, becomes numbers drive clarity in Case Study B, highlighting one role played by the ratings. Graphical representation of the data is a subtheme in both case studies. The remaining subthemes are about the interpretation of the numbers, specifically: the meaning of ‘3’, averaging, the meaning of agreement, the meaning of difference and interpreting the numbers.
In the fourth theme, **narrative comments**, the first subtheme is *the relationship between comments and numbers*, and related to this the next two subthemes are: *the meaning of agreement* either between ratings and comments or similarity between narrative comments; and *the meaning of difference*, once again either between ratings and comments or differences between different narrative comments. As with Company A, there is a subtheme concerning the time and effort that some raters invest in 360, which is interpreted as *a message of respect*. And the final subtheme is about **interpreting text comments**, which analyses data about reading meanings into the text, the use of specific facilitators and the perceived need for training.

This chapter refers back at times to Case Study A. It continues to explore different participants’ perspectives on 360, with some quotes depicting 360 as objective, scientific and numbers-based and others describing the subjectivities of 360. Perhaps even more than with Company A, the data in this chapter show that different participants have evolved ways of encoding and decoding 360 feedback.

### 6.2 PURPOSE AND VALUE OF 360

Both of the case study companies used online 360’s designed by an external consultancy and based on the company’s own competencies: both companies used these 360’s primarily for development purposes, with some indications of a move towards measurement for assessment. Similarly, both companies included within their appraisal process a version of 360 where the line manager incorporated feedback, gathered by email, within the appraisal document and considered the data when deciding how to rate each of their direct reports. In Company A, this was often the first version of 360 that people referred to in interviews, sometimes calling it ‘end-of-year 360’. In Company B, this version is similarly more widely talked about and more frequently used. It is not
surprising therefore that it is known by some as ‘the standard 360’, with the online version being called ‘the other type of 360 feedback’ and ‘extra 360 feedback’:

There’s the standard 360 and some people don’t feed back that much, you get very little from it. Or hopefully, people interact throughout the year, and give you some feedback. When someone’s done something well, or when they’ve not done something as expected, hopefully you get the feedback and can actually get some corrective action in there. Or you can actually get the praise at the right time, and people can understand that they’re doing the right thing. The other type of 360 feedback was … I was highlighted as high potential so I went on a course, but they did some extra 360 feedback for various people. So that was when I got this report, which was quite a few pages long

Gillian, Commercial Manager, Head Office

The ‘standard 360’ and ‘the other type of 360’ are quite distinct from one another, as can be seen in this quote where a recipient starts by talking about the ‘standard 360’:

It’s also customer feedback or individual feedback. It’s part of our performance management as well, it is key and I think people see it as definitely part of the [appraisal] process.

[and a few seconds later, about the online 360] It is completely separate. It is purely development.

Su, Scientist, Midlands

From this it is clear that the two companies share the same distinction between these two versions of 360. The end-of-year or standard 360, forms part of the annual appraisal process and therefore is used more frequently than the online, or ‘the other type of’, 360. This (end-of-year) 360 requests narrative feedback against objectives or projects and is used for measurement. It is a tool used for the benefit of the line manager conducting the appraisal, and is owned by him or her: it provides extra data that may be used to assist, justify or explain the decision to give a
certain rating. In contrast, the online 360 requests numerical ratings and text comments against behavioural indicators (competency-based questions). It is a tool primarily used for development and is owned by the individual.

A further similarity between the two companies is that ‘360’ is used as a generic term to refer to any formal or informal process, which asks different stakeholders for feedback. Formally, 360 referred to any commercially available questionnaire, or instrument, that involved gathering feedback from colleagues more senior, less senior and at the same level as the individual. Informally, I did some 360 (Ash), or My manager did a bit of 360 (Ruth) were typical comments.

A difference between the two companies was that it was only Company B where individual sites and particular managers on those sites had developed their own versions of 360. The relaxed and hands-off approach by head office management towards these developments reflects the way that innovation and creativity are valued. These locally developed 360’s are explained in the next section.

6.2.1 Internally developed and owned
The Learning and Development Manager, who manages the contract with the 360 consultancy, does not know the extent or range of internally designed 360’s:

They have just devised a spreadsheet-based system, within a particular bit of the business, which was news to me, and I found out about it by accident. I was speaking with someone yesterday in a plant in the northwest, and …they’re doing 360 reviews on their entire workforce there, to talk about standards. And I thought, “That’s an interesting use of a 360” ….So there is a bit of that individual stuff going on as well. So there’s the US 360, the UK-sponsored 360, there’s a factory 360, and there’s a business 360. There may be many more.
This demonstrates the openness to individual developments in 360, and the relaxed attitude about whether or not managers are using the centrally managed, externally designed 360. It also shows less concern about the scientific aspects in constructing the 360 questionnaires. Locally designed 360’s are not based on a tested competency framework. Instead, those designing the 360 choose the questions, which are not piloted nor are they put through any consultation exercise. Interestingly, within a community of scientists, when it comes to a tool concerned with human communication rather than with pharmaceutical research, issues of validity and reliability (Van Velsor, et al., 1997) are not tested. Although this lack of assessment for 360’s is not unusual in other sectors, and indeed it is recognised that there is no consensus as to one effective approach (Wood et al., 2006), it is however noteworthy that scientific values about testing do not extend to a more rigorous approach to 360 design.

The quote above identifies two different locally designed 360’s in addition to the corporate 360. In carrying out the interviews, I discovered a third development not known to the Learning and Development Manager, involving use of the Johari window. This section now continues with an outline of each of these three locally designed 360’s.

It was people in the production department, not the HR community, who designed the spreadsheet-based 360. Instead of basing the questions on the leadership attributes, according to the Leadership and Development Manager, it uses a different set of stuff, that is, writing their own questions. These questions are then loaded into a web-dialogue system, which is normally used for designing and processing customer surveys, and a report is generated as a spreadsheet. This demonstrates recognition of the similarity between 360’s and customer surveys. Considerable time and resource was invested in the development of this spreadsheet, with still more invested into the management of the process
and resulting data. Such investment communicates a strong preference for local ownership of the 360 process. If the investment of time were estimated, it would quite possibly be somewhat more costly to generate and manage such a local process, compared with buying into the corporate version. The resulting spreadsheet does not look as professional as the corporate 360, and this appears to be one of its attractions:

*Everyone … knows this [spreadsheet]. It’s ours…the other thing is just another load of stuff from … it’s consultants talk*

Barry, Operations Manager, N.E. England

The second example of an internally developed 360 was within a production facility. Its purpose was to assess performance on the production line, to generate discussion of what constitutes ‘the standard’ and to provide a benchmark against which future performance could be compared. There were just three ratings: below standard, standard and above standard. 360’s were carried out on everyone on the shop floor, so that everyone received feedback from themselves, their team members and their line manager. According to the Learning and Development Manager, such whole-group use of 360 is unusual in Company B. Certainly the emphasis on performance, rather than on development, differentiates it strongly from the other versions of 360 in the organisation.

The third example is more complex and requires a longer discussion. The previous two examples demonstrated some of the reasons behind investing time and effort in producing a local version of 360, namely ownership of the process and the ability to incorporate behaviours and questions that reflect the interests of those involved. These reasons are also reflected in the third example. However, in addition, Conor, the HR/L&D manager who designed the 360 explained that the corporate 360 carried a poor reputation as regards confidentiality, specifically the use and ownership of the data, along with questions about interpretation of the data:
We wanted to do something along those lines that didn’t trigger the defensiveness that maybe does come with these things. You know, these things tend to be kept on record, and then someone giving you feedback doesn’t necessarily mean it’s right. So everyone gets a bit paranoid about these sorts of things… because what someone said then stays there so to speak. And if you go for a job later on, someone says “Well let’s have a look at what the 360 says”. So people being confident that it’s confidential is the only way you get them to open up and accept what’s probably true.

Conor, HR/L&D Manager, S.E. England

The energy and commitment of both the Leadership Development Coach quoted above, and his colleague (the local HR/L&D Manager) is impossible to convey on this page. It is easy to dissect and lay bare the weaknesses of their 360, certainly as far as substantiating its reliability and validity. Furthermore, the time investment is considerable: each manager has about six one-hour meetings with the Leadership Coach, spread fortnightly over a period of about three months as they prepare for, and then process, their 360. The local management team fully support the Coach dedicating his time to the leadership team in this way. An outline of the process is given next.

There are two core elements to the approach: a Leadership Behavioural Questionnaire and the Johari Window. This first tool has 40 questions and is completed by 7-8 people. Data from the questionnaire gives a:

- percentage effectiveness in four areas. One: Leadership. Two: Being able to complete and finish things. Three: Ideas the person generated, solutions. Four: how you work in a team

Keith, Leadership Development Coach, S.E. England
This form of measurement differs from the online 360. In the latter, the measurement is a Likert scale\(^{14}\), whereas in this version percentages are used to indicate the raters’ view of the individual’s effectiveness in each of the four areas. All the other raters’ percentages are averaged and then compared with the self-rating. Calculating one figure from all the raters’ input means that there is no opportunity to compare ratings from different sources (line manager, peers, direct reports). Therefore, although involving colleagues of different statuses, by failing to contrast the numbers from different sources, this is not strictly speaking a 360 approach. The approach is also theoretically weak, although its simplicity has high face validity.

At this point, the second core element is introduced: the Johari Window (Roffey-Barentsen and Malthouse, 2009). In his explanation of the process, Keith emphasised the ‘cross-referencing’ that is done, searching with the recipient for commonality and differences. Once again, the focus of interest is the comparisons between scores, not the absolute numbers. ‘Cross-referencing’ leads to the placing of each question and score in one of the four quadrants of the Johari Window. For example, when the self- and other-ratings match for a particular question, then those data are placed in the Public quadrant, signalling that this aspect of the individual’s performance is recognised and agreed by the individual and their colleagues. There is nothing automated about this process. Instead, Keith in his role as Leadership Development Coach goes through each individual question with the manager, agreeing which quadrant should accommodate the data. Rather than discussing every detail of the raters’ feedback, Keith encourages the individual manager to pick the lowest rating, arguing that:

\begin{quote}
Well look, if you nail the worst one, all the rest fall into place
\end{quote}

\(^{14}\) A psychometric scale commonly used in research and named after its inventor. Typically, and in this case, the scale can have five levels: 1: Strongly disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neither agree nor disagree; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly agree.
Before beginning the considerable work of using the Johari window in this way, however, there is a lot of preparatory one-to-one work between Keith and the individual. As an introduction, Keith outlines theory about ‘the Self’ and administers other largely self-designed questionnaires such as one he called an Identity Component Questionnaire, engaging the individual in further reflective discussion prior to seeking out feedback from colleagues. This in-depth work is designed to build openness, establishing expectations of honesty within the relationship. What is particularly pronounced is the extent to which 360 is used to aid longer-term reflection and the building of trust and openness within the relationship. The individual manager develops a relationship of trust with Keith as his own coach, rather than trusting a faceless and computerised process.

These three examples of locally developed 360 exhibit some shared characteristics, which together explain their popularity. The first of these shared characteristics relates to the choice of questions. In each example, the questions are written locally. Each site preferred to use their own wording and choice of content instead of the centrally owned leadership attributes. The origin of the wording in 360 questions is rarely clarified within research, and there is no empirical research examining the impact on the local ownership of, and commitment to, the process of the choice of wording. A second characteristic shared by the three examples concerns the apparent eagerness, at least within such an engineering culture, to access the inner workings of the 360. Rather than leave the lengthy design to external professionals, there are several managers devoting considerable effort to taking apart the ‘engine’ of 360 and reconfiguring it to meet their needs. The final characteristic is a shared concern about confidentiality. Here, local storage of the data is seen as preferable to storage by an external consultancy. All three examples demonstrate a desire to own 360 locally. There is an interest in the process of 360, not just the output, such that those involved in the creation and development of the local process are interested and committed to making it work. In spite, or because of the time, effort and
finance that these local developments incur, faced with the efficient simplicity of a professionally designed and administered 360, potential users have elected to create their own processes two of which are arguably more complex, the third of which is undeniably so.

6.2.2 A tool for relationship development
Continuing on from the previous section, this next theme expands on the way that 360 was used within Company B as a tool for establishing and developing relationships, between the individual manager and either their feedback facilitator, their line manager or other colleagues.

As discussed earlier, Keith (Leadership Development Coach) described 360 as a “must-have” at the core of their work with each individual. The process of preparing for 360 and then discussing the results over a protracted length of time were important to him not to analyse the data correctly but instead to build an environment and relationship of sufficient openness and honesty to encourage the individual manager to be open and honest themselves. It was not the 360, but rather the relationship that was seen as the central contribution to the growth in self-awareness.

On some occasions, HR managers used 360 as a starting place, rather than spending time building the relationship first:

I’m seeing [360] as a really beneficial tool for me to start discussions with people: to get a feel for how people view them, how they view themselves.

Paul, HR Manager, Midlands

At whatever point the 360 was introduced, the person in the facilitator role sought to gain insights that would assist the growth of a longer-standing relationship, the purpose of which was to develop the individual manager.

When choosing raters, individuals demonstrated that at least sometimes the choices were based on a desire to improve relationships. In the
following quote, the recipient targeted those with whom she had difficulties:

*It was very much thinking who would I want to give me feedback. For this to be worthwhile, I personally wanted to get some people who I have maybe some harder relationships with.*

Ruth, Scientist

Ruth then talked about how she had used negative feedback as an opportunity to initiate further conversation with the colleague she had a poor relationship with. She had shared comments from the report, asking for help in thinking how best to move forward. In this way, 360 became a shared tool for improving a difficult relationship. Within the research literature, the topic of choosing raters is discussed in terms of rater accuracy, bias and balance (Garavan, Morley and Flynn, 1997; Flint, 1999), not in connection with improving relationships with specific colleagues. Given the fact that ratings are anonymous, this is maybe not surprising. However, in Company B there was clear evidence that both raters and recipients approached the 360 process as an opportunity to understand and improve their relationships, as well as to communicate or appraise the degree of respect within those relationships.

Within the Company, the 360 report belongs to the individual. The feedback facilitator delivers the report to the individual, but unless otherwise agreed they do not keep a copy on file. Copies are not held on the individual’s personnel file. This means it is up to the individual when, or indeed whether, to share the report with others. This presents an interesting situation where a line manager knows who on their team has received a 360 report, and indeed they will know the ratings and comments they themselves contributed to the report, but where some of the team may choose to share their reports, and others choose not to mention the reports at all. In such instances, the line manager may draw their own conclusions as to the reasons for these different choices. Notwithstanding, there were certainly examples of individuals using their
360 report to give particular information to their managers. At times, the individual passed over the entire report, on other occasions they preferred to exercise greater control over what aspects of the report they shared. Once again, the act of sharing or not sharing specific sections of a report might lead the line manager to their own interpretations as to the significance of this:

I intend to give my manager a copy, and also one of the managers on the other site that I work with, as well, I’ve got a 1-2-1 with him … I thought it would be interesting. And although I might not share all of this with him, I’ll certainly let him see some of it so that he can get a rounded picture of me…. I don’t know what I’ll choose. If he focuses on a particular attribute, as a discussion, then I can use some of this information.

Su, Scientist, Midlands

Mary, an HR manager who herself had been through the 360 process made a similar decision, this time prior to an internal selection interview. She was very clear that the reason for doing this was so that the interviewer could see the 360 data alongside the other data gathered within the selection process. In addition to the actual data within the report, she was also sending a message that she was open to her potential new manager seeing both positive and negative views, that she wanted him to employ her knowing the full picture. The openness in providing a copy of the report conveyed a message to her future manager:

When I applied for the role I just got, I gave my supervisor my 360 report because it had been done fairly recently, because I just wanted… just along with everything else he was seeing for the interview. I just thought it would give him an insight into how others saw me and how I was performing in the role I was in. Before I was interviewed actually. I gave him the report to read through. “So you can see me warts and all through this. See what people think of me. If you still want to employ me,
then good.” So, yeah, no, it’s quite a balanced report. There was criticism and room for improvement but there was some really good things in there as well. I felt comfortable handing it across.

Mary, HR Manager, N.E. England

In sharing the report, there was an intention to communicate something about relationship, trust and a measure of dispassionate disclosure about the feedback they had received. Sharing the report, in and of itself, carried meaning.

In summary, HR managers who facilitated feedback used 360 as a way of building their own relationship with a line manager. Recipients at times chose raters specifically in order to develop particular relationships, at times targeting weak relationships. By engaging colleagues in the 360 process, there was an expectation that the relationship could be improved. In spite of anonymous ratings, there were instances of recipients following up comments with their raters. Sharing the 360 report itself was also used as a way of signalling openness and trust. These are all examples of social contact and relationships being built within the process itself or afterwards through using the 360 report.

6.2.3 A ‘snapshot’

Raters are providing feedback at one point in time. They are likely to have particular examples of behaviour in mind, whether or not they feed back those details in text comments. This is a snapshot, not a movie:

...personal realisation of how others perceive you. .... And really just to take a snapshot of your chosen sample, how they see you at that point in time. I think it is a snapshot because the whole purpose of it is that you take on board the information ... because you can then do it again down the line in 12 months or 24 months, and hopefully see some changes or improvements.

David, HR Manager, Ireland
The 360 is relevant to the time of its completion. However, recipients also keep 360’s over months or years. Some of those I interviewed referred back to 360’s completed some years before and talked as though that feedback continued to be relevant:

The feedback I remember was … me being a “disabler rather than enabler” in my team. I know I can be like that…. I worry.

John, Team Leader, N.E. England

Perhaps because a 360 report is so well presented, it becomes an item that participants choose to store. It is concerning to see participants lean over to pull out their 360 from their desk drawer, and talk as though the ratings are currently relevant, however many months or years ago they were given, when one would have hoped that things had changed since then.

The metaphor of 360 as a snapshot not only communicates that 360 is a still picture of performance taken at one point in time, it also conjures up the idea of something that is quick to do and look at. Steve, (Learning and Development Manager) also used metaphorical descriptions to convey one of the same messages, namely that 360 is carried out at one point in time. He was talking about the optimal frequency of doing an online 360:

I think every couple of years as a vague kind of benchmark. I think it’s different for each individual. But to have the choice or the expectation. “Do you know what? It’s been a couple of years since I did one. I should really do that again” It’s like getting an MOT on a car. Or a fire survey on a house. It should be done periodically. Like give your boiler a service. It works every day, why do I need to give it a service?

Steve, Learning and Development Manager, Head Office

The MOT metaphor communicates the idea that an individual’s performance needs an annual oil check and overall examination to
ensure that they are ‘road worthy’. It is an interesting metaphor, suggesting that failing the check might signal potential safety issues, possibly leading to an undesired incident. 360 becomes about safety, for the individual and for others. It is not about debate or interaction, in this metaphor 360 is not about contact or relationships. It is about an expert, or an expert process, identifying whether performance is acceptable or not. It includes the idea that we are not the experts about our own performance. Instead, it is important to bring in the professionals. It is about an annual check, regardless of whether the individual considers their car, their boiler, or performance, is adequate. And it describes, like the snapshot metaphor, 360 being about a visual check at one point in time.

6.2.4 360 for measurement

With numerical ratings so central to a 360 report, there is a clear signal about measurement being important. However, participants with different roles in the process placed varying emphasis on measurement. Raters and recipients usually described 360 as more about opinions and perceptions, helpful for development, but did not usually talk about 360 as something objective.

Whereas participants with different roles in the process had different stances on this:

Senior managers talk about it more around performance.
Individuals talk about it in terms of development. The managers, the direct conversations will probably be for performance issues.

Len, Engineer, Midlands

The official HR purpose for 360 is for development, where the individual is given the opportunity to increase their self-awareness and focus on their own learning. This contrasts however with the views of some line managers, at least as observed by Steve, namely that 360 can assist with
measuring an individual’s performance such that the information can then feed into decisions about pay and rewards.

*It’s always been pitched … by the HR community here as a developmental opportunity. So it could come from a sort … employee contribution and development plan, the ECDP, as your rating at the end of the year, based on the plan that you put for yourself. So you could have as part of your plan, “I would like to find out more about myself by doing a 360”. As opposed to, “Your 360 says you’re not very good. Therefore, we’re scoring you low.” Some managers are using the data extracted from it for logistical purposes, whereas the vehicle that it was intended to be is one of self-discovery and development.*

Steve, Learning and Development Manager, Head Office

From this it is clear that opinions vary within Company B about whether to see 360 as development or assessment. Once again, this seems to depend on the status of the person talking. The quote above supports decisions by individuals to use a 360 to discover more about themselves for development purposes. However, Steve believes that others are extracting data from 360’s to inform ‘logistical’ decision-making. However, given that the 360 report is the property of the individual and that therefore all the processing is carried out by the consultancy and no data are stored centrally, it is hard to understand how line managers gain access to it without the express agreement or invitation of the individual recipient. An HR manager (Paul) cited an example of a manager intending to use his 360 to improve his chances of promotion. According to the HR manager, the individual’s intention was to select 10 raters who would promote his strengths. Only 6 completed the questionnaire, and the feedback was not sufficiently positive to place before his line manager. Ad hoc attempts by individuals to introduce positive 360 reports to decision-makers are interesting in that such actions appear to be carried out in the belief that 360 is in itself objective, regardless of how they are set up. Furthermore, the embedded suggestion is that a 360
report would influence a decision-maker without information about how the raters were chosen. In those situations where 360 is used for decision-making, it might be reasonable to expect that the line manager would be involved in rater-selection.

This discussion is particularly pertinent in order to understand the value of 360 for an organisational assessment of performance management. Clearly, someone selling 360 is more likely to emphasise benefits to the organisation and indeed, in this instance, the consultant promoted 360 and its potential contribution to organisational level decisions about redundancies and how to increase the performance of those remaining:

So it really is quite a flexible way of assessing your individuals and getting some insight into their behaviours and their performance. … so a number of organisations are looking at resources they have internally, getting the numbers right, I suppose, to keep the accountants happy. But when they’ve done that, it’s really to focus on those resources and say, “Well, are we getting the best out of these people that we possibly can, and are they, do they feel they are getting as much out of the role as they possibly can”. So it’s useful I think, in that if it’s done correctly and administered correctly then the employees feel that it’s worthwhile in terms of their career development, but also the organisation feels it’s worthwhile because they get useful insights into their employees.

Simon, Consultant

From Simon’s perspective, measurement, and working with the data that results from that measurement, is central to 360’s contribution to organisational performance. In the following quote, Simon is promoting his own organisation with its greater attention to using the gathered data:

The 360 has many phases. You have the measurement phase. You have the results phase. And then you have the action phase. Well, vendors, suppliers if they rush to secure a deal, will happily do that initial measurement phase but when
it comes to the results phase, and more particularly the action phase are very much hands-off, either through lack of experience or lack of commitment to the organisation. So they tend to run hard and then you find organisations have done all this work up-front about measuring. They have a mountain of data and don’t really know what to do with it or how to maximise the benefit.

Simon, Consultant

360 is not a psychometric. Nonetheless, at times it is talked about in the same way as psychometric tools such as MBTI (as was also observed in Company A). Recipients display misunderstandings about the differences between personality and behaviour:

I’ve heard people before they’ve done it, saying, “I’m aware of these points, but it’s pointless me changing because I’ll revert back to that way of behaving in a couple of months’ time because that’s me, that’s who I am.”

Mary, HR Manager, N.E. England

In psychology, a distinct difference is drawn between behaviours that are more easily learnt and changed, and traits\(^{15}\) that are deeper-seated personality descriptors that are more durable and harder to learn or change. 360’s are based on competencies, which are composed of specific behaviours, not traits (Morgeson, Mumford and Campion, 2005). Traits are less likely to change, and their measurement requires psychometrically constructed questionnaires. Psychologists describe behaviours as learnable. However, there is a need for more explanation of the relationship between traits, behaviours and effectiveness (Derue et al., 2011).

\(^{15}\) A trait is “A dimension upon which people differ psychologically. Traits are stable over time.” (Arnold, 2010: 715)
Psychometric tools have to be properly administered, ensuring that those completing any tool understand the instructions and, usually, complete the questionnaire within a specified length of time in order to facilitate comparison of the individual’s results with those from the general population. 360 is not administered in this clinical way. Raters may take as long as they like. There is no briefing at the outset or practice questions to clarify understanding. Rather, the idea of ‘properly administering’ 360 rests largely on the need to follow the measurement phase with facilitated discussion at the results stage and finally with the actions phase. By applying such language as ‘administering’ the 360, as participants often do, there is a message about the 360 having the same status as a psychometric. It doesn’t. A 360 serves a different purpose.

Addressing another aspect of psychometrics, the publishers of psychometric tools generally provide such information as their test-retest reliability. That is, the results of a personality profile are expected to remain reliable over some period of time, with only major life changes altering results in any future re-test. Such a measure of test-retest reliability would be meaningless for a 360 as a change in behaviour would be anticipated and hoped for.

The consultants sold 360 on the basis of its rigour and objective approach concentrating on the measurement aspects. However, views on the ‘measurement’ role of 360 vary from seeing it as an assessment of performance (e.g. MOT) to a snapshot of ‘opinions and perceptions, helpful for development’. At the same time, HR managers have combined 360 with psychometric tools thereby recognising the different roles that these tools serve and distinguishing between measured personality traits (psychometrics) and behavioural feedback or commentary (360) So, in this context, 360 is not seen as ‘measurement’ but rather as feedback.
6.3 ANONYMITY

The same three themes are identified in the Company B data as in the first case study: safety; pseudo-anonymity; and accountability.

6.3.1 Safety

As with Company A, participants voiced the belief that anonymity was necessary for other raters to feel safe, while describing themselves as being open and ready to give honest feedback direct to an individual. When explored further, this tended to mean that the individual was prepared to be open with people junior to, or at the same level as, themselves, while they may not always choose to be open to people more senior:

*I think if people are going to, especially direct reports, are going to be honest and truthful in it, I think it has to be anonymous.*

Ash, Scientist, Midlands

The quote below connects culture with the need for anonymity, specifically because the culture is not as ‘open’ as people like to describe it:

*I would say that the fact that it is anonymous, would say that we are not as open as we would like to be and direct with people in terms of giving feedback and that is definitely reflected in the way that we do things round here. We say that we are very strong on performance management, and in reality that is not generally the case… I suppose in terms of the culture, are we as open as we think we are? No, I don’t think so. But then again, I think because of that culture, it probably wouldn’t work if there wasn’t anonymity. Because you wouldn’t have the responses and you wouldn’t have the information that you require from it.*

John, Team Leader, N.E. England
In an informal conversation, Steve, the Learning and Development Manager, commented, in a similar way, that although the talk in the organisation was of being open many people spoke behind each other’s backs.

6.3.2 Pseudo-anonymity

Once again, as with Company A, although anonymity was seen as sacrosanct, its actual existence was questionable. And once again, recipients spent time attributing feedback to individual raters:

> Obviously I selected the people … so obviously, myself, I fed back on myself, so I knew who that was. My manager, I knew who that was. And then there were a number of peers, and then … a number of people … that didn’t actually directly report into myself, but they did work for myself, and then a number of managers in other areas that I deal with so I’m not completely sure exactly who directly did feed in, although when I look at some of the comments, I can … I know people’s style of writing to some extent, so I know who that is, or when I have an interaction with a person, and they talk about that interaction, then I can say, “Oh yeah, I know who that’s from”….It gives it some context, rather than it just being a comment. It helps understand when that interaction took place, or if they’ve interpreted it as well….It makes it easier to understand.

Su, Scientist, Midlands

Recipients found ways to have direct conversations with their raters following the 360, without disrupting the appearance of anonymity. Linking 360 with a second intervention such as MBTI, allowed the individual to open conversation based on the second intervention, while using details from the first. Indeed, at times it proved possible for individuals to use examples from the 360 and reword them so that they appeared to come from the MBTI, thereby making them acceptable to discuss with their raters. The 360 and MBTI both formed part of the high
potentials’ development centre. This combination provided a springboard for follow-up conversations with the individuals’ raters:

Obviously, some people that fed back, with some of the comments, I spoke to them afterwards and said, “Ok, I’ve been on this development centre, and what I want you to do is be like a barometer and see whether I’ve changed. Or see where there are points where I am just doing what I always used to do.

Ash, Scientist, Midlands

Ash was especially active in following up his raters’ comments. In so doing, he concentrated on the changes to be made, rather than quizzing people about the detail of their comments. Ash also invited his raters to contribute to his development in a dynamic and genuinely helpful way. Using them as ‘barometers’ invited the raters to become even more astute about their observations, watching and feeding back without waiting for an official process. Those raters who take up the invitation may well further reduce the anonymity of their 360 comments as they may continue to draw on the same phrases and topics in their follow-up feedback as they did in the 360. However, the ritual of anonymity is maintained.

Should they choose to do so, raters were offered the option to initial their text comments. This could be seen to communicate several messages: the rater wants the individual to understand the context of the feedback; the rater is saying that they don’t need anonymity, possibly because they trust the individual or that they are sufficiently confident about themselves; or the rater is offering a clear invitation for follow-up discussions. Knowing where a comment comes from means that discussion with the facilitator can engage with the context, the specific content and perhaps a specific event, rather than with conjecturing who might have written the comment and what it might refer to:

The Business Director I was working for gave me feedback and he actually initialled all his feedback, which I think is super. I
love that. Because then … well actually the way that he types is the way he speaks, so you can tell by his phraseology. Because it is very tempting isn't it, when you read a 360, “I wonder who said that?”, you know. And because some people are ambiguous with their comments, he actually writes, “in case you don't know what that means, X said that” And then you go and speak to him and say, “Yeah, I knew you did, I could tell”. Without him actually initialling it. Unfortunately the people who write clearly, initial. And people who don’t, don’t … and you are left wondering what on earth it means sometimes.

Steve, Learning and Development Manager, Head Office

Those raters who write more general text comments, possibly out of a desire to remain anonymous, do not end up offering clear context and details. These raters do not choose to initial their comments. The act of initialling the comment communicated a positive message to this recipient and enabled further conversation, thereby building the relationship. However, the practice of some raters initialling their feedback also had the effect of reducing anonymity for the other raters. The following extract from the same interview asks Steve (L&D Manager) to consider this:

Me: That’s interesting, because if you encourage people to put their names on then, given the low number of raters, it becomes harder for the other people to be anonymous.

Steve: Yeah, that’s true. [laughs] I hadn’t thought of it like that… yes that’s true, isn’t it?

[silence]
You’ve just frightened the hell out of me now, thinking about it like that.
Steve is responsible for the corporate 360 process. He wants the openness facilitated by initialled comments, whilst at the same time is seriously concerned about the concomitant reduction in rater anonymity.

So, the existence of ‘real’ anonymity is questionable. What is perhaps less clear is the amount of time and clarity lost due to the playing out of ritualised anonymity, along with the impact on working relationships, the lost opportunities to build more open relationships and finally the impact on organisational culture.

In Company B, the feedback facilitators often knew the individuals that they fed back to. Indeed, they at times played the dual roles of facilitator and rater within the same feedback discussion. This presented the facilitator with an interesting decision: do they, or do they not, identify the ratings and text comments that they themselves gave? The HR manager in the next quote had decided not to acknowledge his comments within the actual meeting, although he was prepared to talk about his observations at a later point:

*She even said to me, “I thought you might have said that” and I didn’t say anything. Like I say, I was very conscious, if she wanted to come to me after this process, I don’t know if I’d necessarily go through the report with her saying, “this is my comment here” but I would definitely in those areas say what I’d observed, that’s what my input would be.*

Paul, HR Manager, Midlands

Interestingly, even outside the official process, Paul was cautious about going through the report identifying his comments. This appears a rather curious approach, unless we take it as being part of an attempt to sanitise the ratings and comments, by eradicating the connection with real people, especially with a real person sitting in the same room. Anonymity is considered sacrosanct, including the facilitator’s anonymity even, as he said, when he does not mind if the individual knows which comments he
wrote. Later Paul says that identifying which was his feedback “wasn’t appropriate in that process”.

6.3.3 Accountability
As stated in both the literature review and the previous case study, one of the impacts of anonymity is that raters cannot be held accountable for their feedback. Raters do not have to explain or justify. However, there is more to accountability than knowing who wrote which comments. Here, three aspects of accountability are discussed. Firstly, the credibility of the 360 process; then the need for increased feedback skills to enable people to interact in a more fully accountable way; and finally the recipient’s responsibility, or accountability, for their choice of raters.

Anonymity does not in itself reduce the credibility of the 360 process. Indeed, for some, anonymity signals that the process is more objective. However, there is also recognition that at times some raters may use the cloak of anonymity to ‘have a dig’, writing feedback that they would be unlikely to deliver face-to-face. Given that recipients can choose their raters, any extreme versions of such tirades are unlikely; that is, unless either the recipient is aware of the potential for tirades and therefore selects their raters to initiate the deluge, or they are unaware of this potential and have selected their raters in ignorance. Whatever the case, to have a system where there is potential for raters to say what they like without any recourse for the recipients, communicates to some a lack of credibility in the process itself:

*I suppose if it wasn’t, it would add more credibility to the process but would you get the open and honest answer? If it were not anonymous… people would stand by it*\textsuperscript{16}.

Gillian, Commercial Manager, Head Office

\textsuperscript{16} Laura, an HR Business Partner in Company A, also said that raters would be more likely to ‘stand by’ their comments if there were no anonymity (p148)
This recipient voices a dilemma: either the system is entirely credible where people are accountable and stand by their feedback, or the system allows anonymity in an attempt to secure open and honest answers.

At least some of this dilemma connects to the level of feedback skills and practice within the organisation:

_Some people would use that [the anonymity] potentially to have a dig. I can imagine that situation. But, ... I think it is better to have it that way because, some people don’t find it easy to have 1-2-1 conversations, especially if it’s to give negative feedback, and how do you structure that. So the fact that it can be here, again, the person can read it but it is going to be more honest, so the person giving the feedback might feel better being more honest, because there isn’t that direct dialogue and potential conflict._

Su, Scientist, Midlands

This is not about raters wanting to avoid their responsibilities to a colleague. It is not about confidence in and of itself, nor is it about seniority. Rather, the issue is about knowing how to structure feedback, having the skills to give positive as well as negative feedback, being ready to engage in direct dialogue and having the ability to handle potential conflict. This is a set of skills that are covered at a basic level in the supervisory course in Company B. However, those that are not supervisors are rarely given the opportunity to develop such know-how.

When accountability is discussed in relationship to 360, the discussion centres on the accountability of the raters. Less, if any, attention is paid to the accountability of the recipients. Indeed, recipients can be somewhat cavalier in selecting their raters, giving little if any thought as to the schedule of those individuals or to how they might react to the request to complete a 360 questionnaire. In a sense, separating ratings from those who give them since what matters is collecting the feedback, and as it is anonymous it matters little who it comes from. However, at the
very least it makes sense to pick people who have the time necessary to complete the questionnaire:

*The report is quite extensive. It’s fine to just tick in the boxes, left to right with positives and negatives etc. but the real value I think comes from comments. So if you fill that in properly it can take some time to do it, and you really have to pick people that will speak the truth and will put time into the process.*

Paul, HR Manager, Midlands

Many recipients of course do give careful consideration to choosing their raters. Certainly, some raters will be known for their openness and quality of feedback and therefore are likely to be chosen more frequently. (Individuals who are chosen frequently may of course view this as a great positive.) The current design tends to distance the recipients and raters from one another, with anonymity contributing to that distancing. Indeed, the distance forms part of the overall clinical and quasi-scientific approach, whereby the recipient is perhaps intentionally distanced from not only their raters but also from a sense of the context their raters are referring to. As part this overall approach, the recipient becomes almost the ‘subject’ within a scientific experiment and is no longer expected to play an active role in the process itself. Consequently, within such a quasi-scientific culture of 360, the idea of recipient accountability and responsibility is harder to discuss and certainly to uphold.

In the context of 360, ‘accountability’ has tended to refer to rater accountability for their feedback. The word ‘accountability’ has a tone of almost legal culpability and liability. It certainly fails to communicate the promise of a positive, dynamic and forward-focused interaction, where both parties develop greater mutual understanding. Inviting raters to act as barometers, as in an example from the previous section, suggests a more active and collaborative approach, where in one instance raters were held accountable, not for their feedback, but rather for the ongoing development of the individual. This forward focus bears further exploration as just one way that recipients have created the opportunity
for their raters to become more actively involved in, and accountable for, their ongoing feedback. Accountability of all participants in the 360 process deserves further understanding.

Not only anonymity but also confidentiality is described as essential for the 360 process to offer open and honest feedback. However, it seems that these two concepts are at times conflated (Whelan, 2007), as well as at times not being understood in the same way by all participants. This results in some inconsistent application of the principles.

Participants are told that the 360 report is confidential. However, the nature of this confidentiality is not explained in any detail, with the result that at least some participants take ‘confidentiality’ to mean that they are in charge of deciding who sees the results and when:

*I think, when they first get the report back, there’s a little bit of a buzz, and people talk with their colleagues, if they think that something is particularly interesting. There will be a little bit of a buzz and they may show it around. But, it’s normally between the person who does the feedback and the individual. That is the main discussion.*

Mary, HR Manager, N.E. England

What is interesting in the practice of showing reports to others is that there are implications for rater anonymity. The following is offered as a definition of anonymity to clarify this argument:

*the degree to which the identity of a message source is unknown and unspecified; thus, the less knowledge one has about the source and the harder it is to specify who the source is among possible options, the more anonymity exists*


The sharing and discussion of a report could possibly assist a recipient to attribute feedback to their different raters. Indeed, others may be better placed either to offer opinions openly about rater identities, or in a
throwaway comment provide the recipient with further data to refine their own opinions. Certainly, the combined knowledge that a group is able to share about raters makes it easier to specify who the source is among the possible options, and therefore reduces rater anonymity.

Confidentiality differs from anonymity. It is about protecting the privacy of respondents. Within 360, the person whose privacy is protected is the feedback recipient. At least, this is partially true, or believed to be partially true, within Company B. Examples have been given, where there is a belief that 360 data are referred to in order to assist ‘logistical’ decisions. The extent to which this happens could be deemed to be a break in confidentiality. Furthermore, as far as the raters are concerned, there is no consideration of confidentiality for them. Instead, the sharing of a 360 report could arguably be carried out in such a way that in those instances where their anonymity is compromised, the confidentiality of their input is similarly reduced.

The combination of actual or quasi confidentiality and anonymity create an air of privacy around 360. Indeed, when asked what people said about 360, most responses were that nobody talked about it, because it was private. Most did not even know who had been through the 360 process, let alone know how those people might describe their experience:

I personally don’t think they talk about it in any specific detail. I think it is quite a personal report. It’s not something that everyone does either. So it can be used for enhancing development. It can also be used for people who are possibly struggling as well …. So, again, I don’t think we talk about, unless someone really wants to sit there and talk about themselves … it’s quite personal to individuals.

Len, Engineer, Midlands

In part, then, recipients may decide not to discuss their reports because they may be struggling to improve their performance, and may not want
others to have this information. However, it has to be said that probably others have recognised such underperformance, and often before the individual themselves; in such cases, it could be argued that being observed to participate in 360 might send out a positive message, although this would require confidence.

Anonymity and confidentiality are at times ill defined, and inconsistently practised. With anonymity and confidentiality as declared principles in 360, privacy becomes a feature so that the use of 360 is rarely discussed. Indeed, discussion of even the topic of 360 seems to be limited. Once again, such practices add to the sense of distance and scientific, objective practice.

Anonymity is talked about as essential for open and honest feedback. Although individuals rarely believed that they themselves would need to be anonymous when rating others, there was a tendency to describe anonymity as essential for others, especially for direct reports giving feedback to their manager. The existence of real anonymity was questionable. The different participants practice pseudo-anonymity, even when rater identities are clear. This separates the raters from their feedback, thereby communicating that the (de-contextualised) ratings and comments have value in their own right. The result is a pseudo-scientific process that attempts to erase identifiable contributors. And yet, recipients develop a range of tactics to follow up feedback they feel sure they can attribute to specific individuals.

A potentially interesting area for exploration is the degree to which individuals hold themselves accountable at each stage of their involvement with 360, whether as rater, recipient, line manager or facilitator. Having confidence and the necessary interpersonal skills are connected to individuals’ readiness to play a more active role in their colleagues’ development, as well as in their own.
6.4 NUMERICAL RATINGS

Seven themes are identified here, with the first two continuing from the Company A case study. Theme one shows how numbers can help to focus discussion because they drive clarity. Indeed, in one of the homegrown 360’s, text comments are not gathered, so all interpretation is of the numbers. Theme two concerns how graphical presentation of the ratings suggests greater sophistication in analysis. Themes 3, 4 and 5 explore the meanings, respectively, of ‘average’, and agreement and difference between the ratings. Theme 6 examines the link with text comments in so far as the extent to which existence (or otherwise) of text comments colours the individual’s response to the numbers. Theme 7 explores the idea that ratings need to be interpreted by a trained individual.

6.4.1 Numbers drive clarity

It was Diane, a Vice President, in Company A who talked about numbers driving clarity, and who used numbers to help her firm up her own views and the message she wanted to convey. In the Company B example, the 360 process designed by Conor (HR/L&D Manager) and Keith (Leadership Development Coach) omits text comments altogether, arguing that it is more effective for him to ask the feedback recipient to consider the reasons behind each number:

"None of it is people’s comments. I try to keep everything down to percentages or scores, “Why have we got this?” “Explain to me how you think this” “Why would someone say this about you?” The old prescribed way was people would write down what they thought, and then people spent the next month trying to work out who said it, sort of thing. And as soon as the defensiveness starts, you may as well not bother."

Keith, Leadership Development Coach, S.E. England

In this way, Keith anticipates omitting one stage of the interpretation process. That is, by leaving out text comments, there is no time spent on
interpreting text comments, in ways that may or may not result in the interpretation intended by the rater. Furthermore, he emphasises that the text comment is what the raters think. The implication is that the numbers hold greater meaning. This approach relies on Keith’s availability to discuss the numbers at length with the individual. In addition, even with close questioning by the coach and lots of reflection, the final interpretation may still not be as intended by the rater. However, as Leadership Development Coach, Keith knows each of the people he is working with, and appears to draw on this knowledge to help take forward any sense-making of the numbers. His final comment about defensiveness is made in the context of a big emphasis on building trust and openness slowly with each individual.

Numbers operate as signposts, as carriers of particular meaning. In this example, Keith relies totally on numbers and a coaching conversation to help the recipient to understand the raters’ messages. The expectation is, therefore, that numbers drive clarity.

6.4.2 Graphical representation of the data
One of the recipients was asked to go through his report, in the way that he might have done on receiving it, and voicing comments as he did so. This was a qualified engineer who therefore may be safely assumed to work easily with numbers. He came across as quite irreverent regarding the graphical representation of the data in a graph:

And that one I went “Ooh, that’s interesting” … [flicks] … I don’t know what the pictures meant but I thought, “Oh, that looks nice” [referring to a 3D graph showing the different attributes and scores] sometimes you get some of this feedback and that, they just try and analyse it in every single way … a bit like we do with data … and you just think, “There’s no point” …

Len, Engineer, Midlands

It is interesting to analyse this quote alongside the previous one from the Leadership Development Coach about staying focused on the numbers.
In the previous quote, the process referred to included no graphs, only a Johari Window with percentages against each behaviour to indicate how effective the individual was observed to be. Devoid of any variation in the presentation of the data, this process emphasised that it was for the individual to reflect on the percentages and make their own interpretation. In contrast, the current quote relates to the corporate online 360. This includes summary graphs and rankings as well as graphs for each individual behaviour. The varied presentation of the data communicates the idea that possibly more complex analysis has taken place, which in turn might be interpreted by some as meaning that the data has been more rigorously interpreted. Len, as a recipient, did not, however, interpret it in that way. Instead, he was somewhat dismissive of the various graphical representations.

Given different preferences about visual presentation of data, it is not perhaps surprising that not everyone reacts favourably to it. However, in addition to individual preferences about presentation, there is another interesting area to consider, namely about how some people, perhaps especially those with greater numeracy, might react to what they see as over-analysis of data.

6.4.3 The meaning of ‘3’
The number ‘3’ was the middle rating in Company B’s 360. The text next to this rating reads ‘neither agree nor disagree’, with ‘1’ being ‘very strongly disagree’ and ‘5’ being ‘very strongly agree’. This means that 3 is not ‘average’, instead a ‘3’ indicates that the rater neither agrees nor disagrees with the statement. However, participants interpret a ‘3’ in different ways. The quotes below highlight different interpretations of the same number.

Here, a ‘3’ is taken to mean that the individual meets expectations:

\[\text{Obviously 3 is they meet their expectations, or they’re showing these leadership attributes all the time and then a 5 is they are}\]
an amazing type of person, and a 1 is that they are not showing any of this any of the time. And then normally, there are some comments that go in there. Sometimes, what we’ll get is that someone’s scoring someone a 3 for example, they might not put any comments in there at all, because they just reach their expectations. It’s normally if someone isn’t achieving those expectations that they’ll put some comments.

David, HR manager, Ireland

From this description, the recipient is interpreting a ‘3’ to mean that expectations have been met, the behaviour being questioned is being performed adequately and that no further comment is necessary. Others shared the same view, that comments were not necessary when the rating was a ‘3’. ‘Meeting expectations’ is however not the same for some as ‘ok’, as shown here:

Anything from an ‘agree’ would say that they are ok in that area

Paul, HR Manager, Midlands

Paul takes ‘agree’ (a ‘4’) to mean ‘ok’. Therefore, there would be an argument for writing comments every time a ‘3’ is chosen. If the rater doesn’t agree or disagree that the recipient is displaying the behaviour, then what more, or different, is needed to bring the rating up to a ‘4’? These interpretations differ somewhat from the view of a recipient who sees two possible and different meanings in a rating of ‘3’:

There’s a 3 … so you think “ok, so they think that I’ve either done nothing or they haven’t seen me do it, or there’s been no interaction” and that kind of thing.

Su, Scientist, Midlands

Some 360 questionnaires offer the option ‘not observed’. In the absence of such an option, the rating ‘3’ becomes a carrier of multiple meanings: ‘meeting expectations’; ‘just meeting expectations’; ‘ok’; ‘not observed’; ‘not done’.
6.4.4 Averaging

Averaging the ratings is an expected feature of 360. The following quote from an HR manager shows how he prioritised the averaged ratings within each rater group, over and above the outliers, especially when these outliers were negative:

So I just tried to bring it back to the average by looking at each group, what the mean response was really…I think generally it all depends what you are trying to get out of this. If it’s a particular person and one person’s scoring is very important to you, then … that’s fair enough if … but I would centre it on the population so … If they’d said, “No this is terrible, I was trying to pull her back and say, “Well look at the mean. The mean is very high. And your line manager has answered very high. What do you think of that?”

Paul, HR Manager, Midlands

Here the potential value of outliers is acknowledged in those situations where the recipient is interested in feedback from a particular rater. However, it is hard to see how the individual would be able to identify for sure which numbers came from which individual: unlike the text comments, the ratings are less easily attributed. In other situations, Paul preferred to look at the mean average of the ratings, within each group. In the case he was referring to, this meant paying attention to averages that were higher than some of the outliers, and he seems to be actively avoiding a discussion of the lower numbers. Here, and elsewhere, the average serves to obscure the variations in ratings.

6.4.5 The meaning of agreement

Agreement between ratings can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Firstly, agreement between ratings can lead to the recipient paying less attention to the numbers. Indeed, 360 reports encourage comparisons and the identification of differences, rather than a close analysis of similar ratings. Therefore, agreement between ratings can result in the recipient
finding little of interest there, preferring instead to move onto the text comments:

I think for me personally, the numbers were less interesting, because they were very much … there was commonality between the numbers. When we went through it.

Gillian, Commercial Manager, Head Office

Here, agreement between the ratings is taken to convey little meaning, even though the absolute ratings might hold useful information about how the individual’s performance was perceived.

Secondly, a repetition of the same low rating across a number of questions can lead a recipient to a judgement that all of these ratings originate from the same colleague. Due to the anonymity of ratings, it is hard to assess who has chosen which rating, especially in the absence of any supporting text comments:

He didn’t really know if it was someone he had had a falling out with, and he had had problems with two members of the department … he couldn’t make head nor tail of it. And he was getting a bit frustrated about it. In terms of, “I’m assuming that this is the same person…ummm … because they’ve answered negative left for the last six questions or whatever it was. But what about if it isn’t, and it’s from people from different groups?”

Paul, HR Manager, Midlands

This quote highlights the difficulty in interpreting a repeated rating. Different meanings will be conveyed in the following two situations: the same rater repeatedly gives a low rating; and different raters give a low rating for different questions. Because of anonymity, the recipient cannot be sure which of these two options holds true.

The third meaning of agreement concerns ideas about what constitutes ‘reality’ as opposed to ‘perception’. It would seem that according to the research literature and in practice, agreement between raters brings a
perception closer to reality. Specifically, agreement between self and others’ ratings has long been the commonly accepted operational definition for self-awareness (Atwater and Yammarino, 1992). The following quote with a recipient of feedback addresses this issue:

Ash: Obviously, sometimes it might be a person’s perception rather than the reality, which is sometimes what you get in 360.

Me: How do you know when it’s different, when it’s reality, and when it’s not reality?

Ash: Mmm … ohhh … we’re getting interesting now, aren’t we? Yeah, it’s obviously … I found that with my own 360, what I think I’ve said to you and what you’ve heard can be completely different, and that’s a perception in some ways. But reality, I suppose, is when my understanding and the other person’s understanding of that interaction or of what took place or what was achieved, is the same… But it’s still about my perception and their perception, isn’t it?

Agreement does not make the shared viewpoint the reality. Instead, agreement could be the result of selecting certain raters, who happen to have the same perspective.

In the process of interpreting a 360 report, patterns are searched for. In doing so, agreement is identified between ratings either within one question or across questions. Making sense of such agreement results in a range of different actions by the recipients, including both ignoring areas of agreement as carrying no meaning, and interpreting agreement as something important.
6.4.6 The meaning of difference

As stated above, the layout and presentation of a 360 leads the reader to identify differences and gaps between the ratings. There is no one meaning here. The facilitator and recipient create meaning from the differences and gaps. They ‘read’ the message and bring their own interpretation to it. Three of the possible interpretations of these differences are discussed here.

HR managers prepare to facilitate 360 feedback by reading the report, anticipating potential questions and opportunities to encourage the recipient to address areas of weakness, or indeed strength. One HR Manager talked about a report he prepared feedback on. Most of the ratings were in broad agreement, which he described as being ‘quite well-balanced’, describing it as a positive report. As part of his feedback preparation, he hunted out those ratings that were much lower, anticipating that these would be the specifics that each recipient would want to pick up on:

> And everything else was quite fair and you know quite well balanced within a couple of points. And all very high, averaging around the 5 mark. ... I did look down at individual results. I wanted to look at … especially direct reports or anyone who had answered very negatively and what areas were they.

David, HR Manager, Ireland

Here, negative difference means that other-ratings are lower than self-ratings. The expectation that these would be the areas examined by a recipient was right, as indeed is evidenced in this quote:

> If their feedback doesn’t agree then I’ll question it more, and actually try and get more information

John, Team Leader, N.E. England

When other-ratings are lower than self-ratings (negative difference), the recipient wanted to understand the reasons. One place to find the reasons was in the text comments; another was in follow-up discussions.
Whichever method is used, the motivation is to understand the differences. The assumption here is that if the same numbers are used in both the self- and other-ratings, then there are no marked differences in opinion and therefore nothing particular to decode or understand. The assumption is that the raters mean the same thing when they use the same number. That is not necessarily an accurate assumption.

Conversely, positive difference (where other-ratings are higher than self-ratings) can build confidence, as described in the next two quotes:

Some people have told me that they've got confidence out of it where they've said about their presenting style, “I hate presenting. I feel nervous. I think I make all these errors”, and when the report comes back, it's nothing but compliments, that they've got a good style. And they’ve been quite surprised and shocked.

David, HR Manager, Ireland

I think my immediate question was where do I see myself in comparison to others. And one of the things that was a theme was that I am more critical regarding my own performance than others see me.

Billy, Team Leader, Ireland

Positive and negative differences, understandably perhaps, lead to different interpretations of the reason for those differences. When rated lower by others, there is sometimes an inquisitive, sometimes a defensive, desire to know the reasons for those lower ratings. It might be argued that the individual sees lower ratings as possibly incorrect, and therefore needing to be justified. In contrast, higher ratings by others are seen as being a sign that the individual is too self-critical. What is not considered is that different people may be using numbers in different ways from each other, but meaning to convey the same message.
6.4.7 **Interpreting the numbers**

Time and again, recipients commented on the importance of having a trained facilitator to interpret the numbers. This encourages the idea that there is a correct way of interpreting the ratings. Indeed, in perhaps most fields where numbers are used, there would be a correct way of working with them. However, as illustrated above, there is a range of interpretations of 360, even amongst those who are trained to facilitate the feedback discussions. The idea that there is a correct interpretation, that only a trained facilitator can identify, contributes to building the idea of 360 as an objective, scientific or even psychometric tool.

Two examples are given here of the process of interpreting the numerical ratings. Firstly, an HR manager who had just started facilitating 360 feedback, describes her process of using averages for each rater group, and how she prefers to stay working with those averages. Secondly, a recipient describes his facilitator explaining his approach to working with a 360 report.

> So I was taking the group as the response…For example, the response from the peers. So if the response from the peers in a certain category was mean of five and a half, or 5.2, I would class that as positive, that it was very positive… So that’s what I was looking at. Whether a 4 is good or not, all depends on the context. It all depends on what category it is as well. You could argue that some of the values questions perhaps should be getting all 6’s.

Mary, HR Manager, N.E. England

[the facilitator] then said, “Ok, what I normally do, is that I go to the back, that’s what he said … and he said, “I look at these kind of things – so where the rankings are high, we’ll take a cut-off on the first four or five high rankings, and these are things that are good, so - You’re good at those kind of things – just carry on being good at those kind of things. And then let’s look
at the bottom things, and those are things we need to develop on – a lot more.”

Len, Engineer, Midlands

The numbers do not provide a clear-cut message for either the facilitators or recipients. Even when text comments are not gathered, and the discussion between facilitator and recipient is entirely focused on ‘percentage effectiveness’ (as described in the section ‘Internally developed and owned’), the meaning is not to be found in the number itself, but rather in the discussion of that number. It is by considering what might be the intended meanings within the number that recipients begin to make their own sense of the feedback. Whether the numbers are averages, or highlight agreement or show difference, the participants in 360 attempt to give nuances to the meanings of each rating, whether or not these nuances form part of what Hall calls the ‘preferred reading’, intended by the raters. Raters encode their messages into numbers, and facilitators and recipients need to decode those numbers to formulate coherent meanings or stories.

6.5 NARRATIVE COMMENTS

In exploring the narrative comments, the themes in this case study are somewhat different from those for Company A. There are five themes. (1) The relationship between comments and numbers. (2) The meaning of agreement. (3) The meaning of difference (4) A message of respect – also reflected in the Company A case study: for example in terms of the quality and quantity of text comments. (5) Factors affecting the interpretation of text comments.

6.5.1 The relationship between comments and numbers

Recipients expected low ratings to be clarified by text comments, and at times disregarded low ratings if they came without that clarification. There were different justifications used by the recipient to ignore the low
rating. In the absence of explanatory narrative, some recipients decided that the rater assessed the performance level as low, but did not care about that particular behaviour. And therefore, if the rater did not care sufficiently to write a supporting comment, then the low rating was not worth paying attention to. Alternatively, recipients decided that the lack of specific comments meant that there was no justification for the rating. In other words they concluded that the rating was not a reflection of the recipient’s performance in that area. What is clear is that without supporting comments, a low rating was paid less, or no, attention. Indeed, as is shown in the quote below, there was the attitude that the ‘actual feedback’ lies in the text comments. This recipient said that he referred to the ratings ‘just in summary’:

...just in summary. It was more, ok, so that’s the kind of scores we’re getting. Let’s go back to the actual feedback, the actual written bits, where people have taken the time to actually state something.

Billy, Team Leader, Ireland

Here we can see that this recipient valued text comments more than ratings partly because it had taken the raters more time to write comments than to give ratings.

The text comments were not read in isolation. Instead, during the feedback discussions, they were related closely back to the leadership attributes (the competencies). This is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it provides a further example of the leadership attributes being used as a learning tool, to inculcate the organisation’s desired culture, on the basis of repetitive use and translating individuals’ behaviours into organisational language. Secondly, it suggests that the leadership attributes offer a framework to help make sense of the comments, rather than attempting to navigate the territory without any map at all. Relating the comments back to the leadership attributes required at times lengthy discussion and constituted an important part of the feedback process:
We had a discussion about the 360 feedback so some of that was going through and looking at the leadership attributes and seeing how my behaviour fits in with them, how I’m displaying those leadership attributes, and picking up on examples, more on the examples rather than the scores … so the scores weren’t as important.

Su, Scientist, Midlands

The wording of this quote talks about ‘fitting’. There is a way in which the 360 report is being looked to as an opportunity to check the individual’s fit within the organisation, and their acceptability against the organisation’s stated behaviour preferences for its leaders. The ratings were not as helpful here; more was needed in the way of description and examples.

Text comments provided detail to back up the ratings. The comments helped by providing context and ideally specific examples, thereby helping the recipient to understand the core message within the feedback. Such detail presents raters with challenges, especially if their anonymity continues to be an important issue. However, it is unclear whether the reason for lack of specificity is indeed entirely related to a belief that the rater will be safer if they can remain anonymous. There is another possible dynamic at play here, namely that the raters buy into anonymity because it is an expected characteristic of what they believe to be an objective, scientific process. If this is the case, then comments that are too detailed might endanger anonymity, thus detracting from a clinical and scientific approach. From the recipient’s viewpoint, a vague or generic text comment holds little or no value, as can be seen below:

I think the detail is important just to give the context of the situation. So when it’s talking about examples, y’know, giving a bit more detail of the example, rather than just being very generic on a particular task, which might have lasted over six months and there was one incident within that six months.

Barry, Operations Manager, N.E. England
At times, a general comment provides no additional value above a rating. In the following quote, a recipient reads out a text comment from his report, and then voices his frustration at not knowing any details as to the place, time or content of the situation being referred to:

“give more of a justification as to the reason for that decision”….  
Ok … what decision is that?

Ash, Scientist, Midlands

Low ratings that came without ‘justification’ in the text comments were ignored. There was insufficient data to understand them, and so the recipient moved on to the next set of data. Even when there are comments, there is no certainty that those comments go with any particular ratings. We ‘make’ them belong, in order to make sense.

In one example, a recipient received a very positive report, with many high ratings. Interestingly, these high ratings came with a lot of development suggestions. This was a combination of ratings and text, where at least some of the apparently more negative was ignored, as is described here by the individual’s feedback facilitator:

Quite a lot of people were willing to write comments, although she had high scores in some of the sections. And when I say high scores, she was averaging perhaps 5 in most of these sections. There were quite a lot of improvement comments. And, again some she took on board, some she sort of said, “That’s just being critical for the sake of being critical”

Paul, HR manager, Midlands

The individual described the existence of development suggestions as being ‘just for the sake of being critical’. An alternative interpretation could have been that the raters really wanted the person they rated high to make even further improvements, and were attempting to be genuinely helpful. However, this was not the interpretation arrived at. Given that the ratings were mostly high, the recipient decided the negative
comments did not fit, and therefore ignored the text preferring instead to pay attention to the positive numbers.

6.5.2 The meaning of agreement
Recipients look for agreement in the text comments. Here, two kinds of agreement are outlined. The first of these is the way that text comments agree with, or appear to support, the ratings. The second kind of agreement is about the similarity between text comments.

Faced with negative ratings, recipients look to text comments to explain what is being viewed negatively. The recipients expect to match negative comments to negative ratings. Without a match between the two, then the rating fails to carry as much meaning, and may even, as stated in the previous section, be ignored altogether. This matching process is interesting, given that there is no certainty about which text comments refer to which ratings. At best, the text comments are presented in the different groupings: peers, direct reports, and customers. The recipient appears driven by a desire for ‘cognitive closure’ (Pierro, Kruglanski and Raven, 2012), to make a whole story from the different elements of their feedback report.

The second kind of agreement that is looked for by recipients is agreement between different text comments. There are, it seems, two particular characteristics of text comments that lead to a feedback message having more impact on recipients: the inclusion of an example that they can relate to; and a theme, signalled by a certain level of repetition of the same words, phrases or ideas. This repetition communicates to the recipient that there is some agreement amongst the raters about how they perceive the individual’s behaviour. And this agreement appears to have more influence on the recipient than issues, which are articulated by just one person. With the ratings, agreement is more immediately visible, presented in graphs. With the text comments, agreement is sought in perhaps a more creative way:
“X can appear a little inflexible at times”, so I underlined that and thought, “I could do with an example of when I’ve been inflexible”. And then I worked through and again thought, “Ok, someone’s said that – ‘a bit inflexible’ – and then they’ve kind of really stated that it might be down to his own highly organised approach to work, rather than me really being inflexible….Some of [the comments] made me laugh … “1930’s headmaster style” I thought, “I know who that is” I thought, “Ok, we’ve just got a different style” and it kind of matches the inflexible kind of approach.

Ash, Scientist, Midlands

From this quote, we can see that the recipient marks text that his attention is drawn too, and then seeks for further support for that comment. He then decides that maybe the person writing the comment is perhaps themselves highly organised, and that therefore the comment is only contrasting the rater with the recipient. On the basis of this comparison, he appears ready to discount the description of him being ‘inflexible’ until he gets to the more flowery description of him having a ‘1930’s headmaster style’. Initially about to discount this due to the idea that he and the rater just have two different styles, he then identifies a possible match between this comment and the description of him being ‘inflexible’. Here, it is the possible agreement between the two raters’ comments that he notices. As a result of this apparent agreement, or theme, he reads more meaning into the message about inflexibility. Such cross-referencing between comments forms part of the recipient’s discussion with their facilitator, as the two work through the report together:

We went through them, did summaries, and then we started to pull them into this, kind of, reality. What I also did as well is, using some of that, what I did was think about what I want to do in terms of my development.

Ash, Scientist, Midlands
Agreement quickly becomes ‘reality’. And because agreement is assumed to mean that it is ‘reality’ that is being described, the more people voice similar views, then the greater the impact of their message.

Agreement between ratings and text comments, and between different text comments, is taken to mean that there is something more ‘real’ about the observations of behaviour. As stated earlier, some facilitators and recipients pay little attention to agreement between ratings. However, others seek out and discuss, so that together the two create meaning out of the report.

6.5.3 The meaning of difference
Differences between the averages of each rater group are highlighted as topics for discussion within the facilitated feedback session. Differences between the ratings and their accompanying text comments, and differences, even contradictions, within the text comments themselves, are not paid as much attention by facilitators. This section discusses two interpretations of difference.

Firstly, contradictions between comments within a 360 report were given as justification for not paying attention to a message. If one rater describes positively an aspect of the individual’s behaviour, that another rater then describes negatively, then some recipients ignore the negative message. As the raters are anonymous, there is no easy way to give context to these differences. Therefore, there is no access to potentially valuable information about what works for different people.

Secondly, difference unsettled some recipients. There appeared to be a lack of openness to ambiguity, certainly in the way that the individual’s performance was being assessed and described. One of the characteristics of 360 is to open our minds to different perspectives. Yet, unexplained difference leaves ambiguities and unknowns that cause some recipients discomfort.
6.5.4 A message of respect

Taking time to focus on someone else can be interpreted as a sign of respect. Two groups are discussed here, in terms of how respect is communicated as a result of time spent on different aspects of the 360 process.

Recipients are encouraged to have some personal contact with their raters before entering their names into the process officially. However, there were several examples of this not happening, due to pressures from work or from the short lead times of, for example, needing to get a report completed prior to a development centre. In addition, there can be some cynicism about the readiness of raters to invest time in their colleagues' development:

I know you should ask their permission first or give them a prompt first anyway to say that that’s going to happen but we all have peers, we all know how interested they would be in people’s development, how much time they would take out of their day.

John, Team Leader, N.E. England

Extrapolating from this quote, it would seem that when raters do give time to completing a 360, the recipient reads this as a message of interest and respect. This is more especially true when a rater takes the time not only to give numerical ratings, but also to write text comments. Returning to the recipients, the official expectation is that they will have contact with their raters before the official 360 request is emailed out. However, this frequently does not happen. This omission could be interpreted as a lack of respect, not only for the raters individually, but also perhaps for the process as a whole. Indeed, lack of contact about the 360 could possibly signal a lack of engagement by the individual recipient either with the raters, or with the 360 process. It may even at times be interpreted as a lack of respect and a sign of distance. However, an alternative way of
interpreting this lack of contact could be that in the playing out of scientific rituals, the people involved might choose to behave in a more laboratory-like fashion, keeping personal contact to the minimum and emphasising the anonymous, numerically-focused measurement process.

The fact of having a 360 report communicates attention has been paid to the individual:

*There’s something nice in getting a report that’s all about them. And this is how people see it. And when you’ve got a good report with some really nice comments, people like it. They do. I think there’s a certain amount of massaging of people’s egos, to some extent. There are some really nice things in there that people take some real positives from.*

David, HR Manager, Ireland

To some extent, raters may project their own perspectives onto those that have requested feedback from them. For example, in the following quote, an HR manager was asked to complete some 360 feedback and took the view that the very decision on the part of the recipient to bother entering the 360 process was itself an indication that the feedback really mattered to them; and therefore, she felt duty-bound to make an effort to produce some helpful feedback. Arguably, this came from a position of wanting to demonstrate respect for that individual:

*I feel that learning in any form is very important to me and to other people. And that it’s necessary to develop continuously learn. Learning about yourself is probably more difficult to do and more worthwhile. … If that person has bothered to enter into the process, it is very important to them, they want an honest and open outcome, so try and be as constructive as possible, whether that’s negative or positive.*

Mary, HR Manager, N.E. England
Receiving attention is interpreted as a positive message. Text comments take more time than ratings, therefore the act by a rater of including text comments may at times be taken as a message of respect.

6.5.5 Interpreting text comments

Part of the facilitator’s role is to ensure that the recipient leaves the discussion with an understanding of the report’s key messages. Interpreting the text comments is not, however, an exact science. A recipient described one of the necessary characteristics of a feedback facilitator as being ‘creativity’. Indeed, the facilitator’s role is an interesting one as they assist the individual to weave together a story that makes sense of the report as a whole, and that enables the individual to identify and implement an action plan. This section explores three aspects of interpreting text comments, namely reading meaning into what is said, and how it is said; the influence of the facilitator on the messages that the recipient leaves with; and the mixed ideas about the necessity of training in order to be able to understand the messages within text comments.

It might be argued that facilitators and recipients are reading meaning into their reports, possibly over-reading meaning. Furthermore, there is no official way to check their interpretations:

“Well, you can read into it any comments you can get something from, I’m guessing. Where there’s positive, negative or indifferent. You could read into perhaps the relationship they’ve got with that person.”

Paul, HR Manager, Midlands

Where the facilitator knows the individual recipient, and perhaps also the nature of their relationships with others, it becomes possible for them to draw on information from outside the feedback, from their own experience and observations of the individual, as they read the raters’ text comments. As is suggested in the quote above, it also becomes possible
to read into the nature of the relationships between the raters and the recipient. Indeed, reading into the relationship may happen just on the basis of the report, even with the facilitator having no prior knowledge of the recipient or raters. In Company B, however, it is usual for the recipient to know the HR manager who facilitates their feedback.

Rater anonymity was also given as a reason for not reporting back to raters about the interpretation of the report and any resulting action plan. It is impossible without follow-up discussion to judge whether the meaning that has been read into the text comments relates or not to the meaning intended by the raters. An example of this is when a recipient, and possibly their facilitator, may read a text comment as a ‘rant’, as a person letting off steam. The rater is anonymous and is not held accountable for any of their feedback, which can result in them voicing opinions more strongly than they would if their identity were known:

*It is the person’s opinion. So if they want to write anything, that’s up to them. If they’re doing it out of malice then there’s probably a hidden message in there. So that perhaps speaks volumes as well. Either about the person doing it or the person whose survey it is.*

Steve, Learning and Development Manager, Head Office

The surface message in such outpourings may or may not be clear. However, this illustrates how it is possible to read into any text comment multiple meanings. Steve talks about the possible hidden message with the negative feedback. Indeed, that hidden message may be about the rater or the feedback recipient. Such negativity can be perplexing for the recipient. On one occasion, following their discussion with a feedback facilitator, a recipient took their 360 report to their line manager to seek further clarification:

*… it can be a bit of an occasion to just have a rant, when they give their written feedback. I was actually on the receiving end of that so that was interesting and my supervisor kind of reviewed it … and knew it was more of a rant than*
anything…but knew to pay attention to it. To actually understand why that person had done it, but not necessarily to take those scores and the feedback that they talked about. But the fact that someone had done that – to look into why.

John, Team Leader, N.E. England

Interestingly, the outcome of this discussion was that the rater was moved elsewhere in the business, on the basis that he had not settled within his initial team. This was a surprising outcome from anonymous ratings that are expected to be confidential to the recipient and their feedback facilitator. It was unclear what was said by any of those involved about the role of 360 in the rater’s move to another part of the business.

The facilitator plays an influential role in directing the recipient’s attention, at times challenging the recipient’s own interpretation of the feedback and at other times encouraging them to build on their own interpretation. This facilitator interpreted the report by starting with a rating:

*What I did is obviously look at the area that it was under. Then, when I had sort of broken it down, I looked at the area, looked at the overall score in that area, and then you’d read down and you’d get various comments, which are “Person X is brilliant in this area” … well, that’s nice but what can you pull out of that? …So there were a lot of texts in there and lots of things that you could just discard as passing comments but obviously you’d need to bring it to their attention because they were saying that they were good in that area. It was very important, I felt, that you understood what was being said but also let the person understand.*

*How would I say I did this? I suppose I read it and interpreted what I needed to out of it. Although when feeding back to the person, I was just mindful of the comments that I found*
interesting but not disregarding the comments that I didn’t find interesting, if that makes sense?

Mary, HR Manager, N.E. England

This describes a complex process, involving careful cross-referencing between the rating and the related competency; and then between the rating and the relevant text comments. As a next step the facilitator attempts to ‘pull out’ meaning from text comments, and queries how she can do so with a somewhat vague sentence. She describes a careful balance between discarding comments she considers less valuable and ensuring that the recipient is alerted to all the positive feedback. In the course of interpreting the text comments, the facilitator attempts both to understand the messages herself, while at the same time allowing the individual to make their own sense of the feedback, mindful of maintaining a certain balance. At another point in the interview, the same facilitator talked about how she left out some of the negative comments, choosing not to feed these back to the individual, although of course the individual would have read them herself within the report. She decides that these comments are not relevant, based on her analysis that the behaviours were played out as a result of inexperience or lack of confidence:

There were a lot of critical comments that I didn’t feed back to the person, because I felt they came from areas of lack of experience, perhaps a little bit of vulnerability or lack of confidence. And again that is not for me to pick up on that, necessarily. I needed the person to try and see if she saw the same things. So I sent her the report and asked her to do … to look through it.

Mary, HR Manager, N.E. England

Mary takes on the responsibility for deciding not to feed back the negative comments, whilst also drawing a line about the extent of her responsibility. Specifically, she decides that it is not for her to share with the recipient her personal analysis about the individual’s possible lack of
confidence. Finally, she says that she wanted to see if the individual saw the same things. This is different from saying that she wanted to hear the recipient’s interpretation. Instead, she wants to see if their views are the same. From this it is clear that the facilitator exerts considerable influence on how the recipient understands their feedback. As a further example of this influence, in the following quote, a recipient describes how her facilitator encouraged her to keep reading a particular, positive text comment:

_He kept saying, “Just keep reading that” … “It’s really difficult to be critical or negative about Y.” So he said to keep reading that._

Su, Scientist, Midlands

The facilitator had decided what he considered most important and ensured that the recipient followed his interpretation. The meaning of a 360 report does not just rest within its pages. Instead, the interpretation carried out by the facilitator and the subsequent shared discussions develop meaning from the pages of data. Even when the facilitator prioritises the individual building their own interpretation of the feedback, their own specific questions will inevitably influence that interpretation:

_We just went through the report and I let the person lead me through the report as well. Although I said about some sections, “Well what did you think here?” and he pretty much did his own analysis on it. Which was good._

David, HR Manager, Ireland

The final aspect of interpreting text comments, which this section discusses, concerns assumptions about the need for the facilitator to be trained in order to give 360 feedback:

_In this process, you at least have a facilitator to help interpret as well. And someone like Z is trained in 360 feedback. All managers who do end-of-year feedbacks do go through a supervisory skills course, in how to give feedback, but this is taking it to the next level as well._
The recipient talks about the facilitator being there ‘to help interpret’, rather than to tell the recipient what the report means. However, the word ‘interpret’ itself suggests that there is a specific meaning within the text comments, waiting to be identified, and ‘interpreted’ so that the recipient understands it.

The training received by facilitators varied. For some it constituted a lengthy phone call, talking through the contents of a 360. For others it included an opportunity to sit in on a feedback session run by an experienced facilitator. Consequently, there was no fixed idea that training was essential for facilitators, although there was some notion that it was desirable and another school of thought questioning whether much training is needed at all. It seemed that much of the skills development was down to individuals learning on the job and then reflecting on their performance:

*Each one that I do feedback on, I am conscious perhaps you don’t need any formal training. There was the discussion and the run-through. Perhaps that is enough and that is all you need to do really. I guess somewhere it’s not enough and there probably is more to it. I suppose I am trying to find that out for myself. I try and reflect on every feedback session I give. And like I say, the biggest issue that I have in feeding back, I believe, is perhaps potentially, whether doing it on purpose or not, or unintentionally, is putting my opinion across.*

Paul, HR Manager, Midlands

This HR manager may believe that they should not give their opinion, but at least some recipients considered the HR managers to be expert interpreters, expecting them to produce expert interpretations from the reports:

*He seemed to know …y’know it made no sense to me…irritating really but he was good, I mean really good, made*
There are two different ‘theories’ about 360 evidenced here. The HR manager said that perhaps no formal training was necessary. At the time, I understood him to mean that no formal training is necessary to interpret the report – because there is no specific meaning waiting to be found. Later on he said that there “probably is more to it” and here I am not clear whether he was contradicting his earlier view or whether he meant that there was more skill required to facilitate rather than advise. Certainly, the recipient believed that his facilitator could understand the report because he had been trained. These two quotes each suggest a different theory about 360. Either the report has objective data that requires expert skills to understand and interpret or the report contains subjective perceptions, which are useful when discussed and reflected on.

Whichever of these two theories are preferred, it is the conversation with the facilitator that many recipients find helpful. This quote includes the idea of the facilitator also being the (expert) translator:

> I’m not sure if I got so much from the 360, it was more the value of the conversation with [the facilitator], in building on what 360 was telling me into a development plan. So it was actually that the facilitation had something to do with it. He helped translate some of the results, helped validate the key messages that I had brought out from the reports. And I think there was a couple that I hadn’t got as well.

Barry, Operations Manager, N.E. England

The word ‘validate’ is employed here, and conjures up a more objective or scientific sense of the facilitator’s role. To help ‘validate’ suggests that there is a correct way to translate the results. The facilitator checks the individual’s extraction of key messages, and those messages missed by
the individual are then added. Once again this suggests that there is a (more) correct way to understand the messages within the 360 report.

The interpretation of text comments is a complex process. According to Stuart Hall (Davis, 2004), meaning is created through interaction with the text. The text alone has no meaning. We can see from the quotes in this section that the facilitator and recipient together work with the text, interacting with it and with each other, as they create meaning from the 360 report.

There is considerable influence that the facilitator demonstrates over the interpretation of the feedback as they work with the recipient to make meaning from the text comments.

Happily, more recent research has started to explore the role of the facilitator or coach in the 360 process.

### 6.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

There are similarities and differences between the two corporate case studies. The similarities largely concern the ways in which a chain of participants are involved in the meanings en- and de-coded into 360. Consultants, HR managers / facilitators, coaches, raters and recipients: the role(s) each person plays influences the meanings they give both to the content and to the process are influenced. Both companies see the purpose and value of 360 as mostly related to development. Compared with Company A, Company B appears less interested in developing 360 as part of the formal performance management process. However, both companies have an email-based approach for line managers to gather feedback about an individual's performance, where this approach is referred to as, in Company B, ‘the standard 360’. Participants view the purpose of 360 somewhat differently depending on their role. The consultant in this case study took a scientific and objective stance promoting the value of 360 for measurement. The HR managers were
closer in perspective to the recipients being more concerned about the
development of their relationship and wanting to work with them to
understand the reports, rather than informing recipients what the
measurements meant.

The existence of anonymity communicates that the process is sanitised
of irrelevant details such as people’s identities or context: the ratings and
comments are all that is needed. Participants actively engage in, and
uphold, processes that maintain the appearance of anonymity, whilst they
at the same time recognise anonymity does not really exist. The resulting
ritualised use of anonymity is similar in both companies.

Case Study B supplies further data about the en- and de-coding of
numerical ratings. Here we see the active engagement with creating
meaning from numbers, so that recipients read messages into both the
similarities and the differences between numbers, and between numbers
and text. Raters encode messages into numbers and recipients and
facilitators together decode them, without knowing whether they share a
common code or not. Meanings are given to numbers that do not tally
with the actual Likert scale. The recipients imbued the facilitators with
status and expertise in the reading of the 360 data, thereby giving them a
more expert role and adding to the scientific status of 360. The idea of
interpretation communicates the need for an expert to inform recipients of
the real meanings in the feedback. This mirrors findings in Case Study A.

Similarly, narrative comments are interpreted with attempts to link the
anonymous numbers and text. Significance is read into agreement and
difference between narrative comments.

An interesting difference between the two case studies lies in the
development of 360. Case Study B provides an explicit example of how
360 has evolved, and continues to evolve, within one organisation. Local
managers and HR managers invest considerable time and thought into
locally owned 360 processes demonstrating the tension between simplicity and complexity.

The data in both corporate case studies show 360 as a process of gathering subjective perceptions. 360 is not a psychometric. In challenging the idea of 360 as science, the interview data show how participants engage with 360 in complex ways. We can see how the use of anonymity, numbers and expert interpreters has become ritualised. This presents us with two contrasting views of 360 as measurement and science on the one hand, and subjective material to be worked with on the other. This will be further discussed in the conclusion.
7 – Autoethnography of a coach using 360

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Autoethnographers are often criticised for being overly self-absorbed. And indeed I was aware of this as a potential challenge as I worked on my own research. However, as described in Chapter 4, my aim in using an autoethnographic approach was to develop my 360 practice as a consultant through the experience of receiving feedback as a coach. My expectation was that, using insights from reflexivity, I would also develop as a coach. This chapter is structured in the same way as the previous two. Using the same headings, I address the same research questions, only this time I take the opportunity of more in-depth examination of personal processes and reactions.

7.1.1 My work with 360

As an occupational psychologist with a first degree in linguistics, I am interested in how people make sense of the messages they send to others and receive. As an independent consultant, who has also worked with as an associate with large consultancies, I have worked on different size contracts with 360: I have trained facilitators, gathered feedback using interviews and coached feedback recipients, and I have assisted organisations with deciding how to choose a process.

7.1.2 Themes and subthemes

Following the same structure as the previous two findings chapters, the autoethnographic data are analysed using the same four key themes. And once again, in this section the name of each subtheme appears in italics.

For me as an independent coach, the purpose and value of 360 lay less in any measurement and more in conversations with the people I worked
with (my raters), and a desire to enhance individual relationships. I cared about my own credibility, related to how I and others view my practice. Certainly, I found value in the extent to which both the process and content provided opportunities for me to reflect on my practice, through conversations with myself.

Rater anonymity brought frustration as I tried to interpret the 360 reports. With my change in work conducting two successive 360’s meant changing raters and this poses questions about comparing anonymous ratings across different reports. Even with my good intentions, anonymity fed into my low levels of follow-up and accountability.

Following the findings concerning numerical ratings in the previous chapters, and the issue of graphical representation of the data, I was particularly interested to examine my own reactions to visual displays of the results. I found in myself a drive for simplicity and wanted to find this in the use of numbers, yet I also added complexity as I worked to contextualise the feedback. The meanings of agreement and difference challenged me as it had participants in the two corporate case studies. And like those other participants, I too expected my facilitators to provide professional expertise in interpreting the numbers.

The narrative comments theme is very brief in this chapter. And that brevity mirrors the interest that I felt for that aspect of the analysis. The numbers had absorbed my energy.

7.2 PURPOSE AND VALUE
The purposes of carrying out a 360 on my own performance were two-fold: firstly, to deepen my reflexivity as I explored my research questions and secondly, to help develop my practice as a coach. Three main themes are identified. Reflecting on these parallels raises questions about the methodologies currently employed both to research, and deliver 360. The first of the three themes discussed is conversation: the role of
360 as a facilitator of conversations, specifically, my conversations with others, conversations with myself and conversations with the literature. The idea of conversations interested me throughout this research. Conversations are about social contact, they help build relationships, reflect and contribute to the nature of those relationships. Depicting 360 as a process that facilitates conversations highlights the social aspects, the social purpose, of 360. The second theme concerns the credibility of 360, legitimising my process, and the approaches I adopted to achieve this. The earlier case study chapters discussed the rituals in 360, which build credibility. My commitment to following what I saw as a credible approach to 360 impacted on the choices I made, and the ways that I engaged with the 360 process. This led me to rehearse certain rituals so as to follow the process I had observed in corporate settings (and which, therefore, seemed to be credible). The third theme is about practice. I examine the relationship between my practice in using 360 and my practice as a coach. I am intrigued by the way in which working with 360 has helped me to reflect on my coaching; and how a commitment to developing mindful practice within my coaching (Passmore, 2009; Spence, 2006) encourages me to pause and consider how I choose to practice 360. Here I reflect not only on my corporate case studies, but also on my paid work in the area of 360. The three themes of conversations, credibility and practice as social enactments grew in interest for me and led to further reading, which led to further insights. Thus, in the tradition of autoethnographic accounts, personal understandings are constantly inter-woven with data and literature.

7.2.1 Conversations
Early on in my paid work as a trainer of 360 facilitators, I found myself asking about the extent to which 360 might operate as a tool to open up conversations and enable exchange of feedback in daily interactions, contrasted with the extent to which 360 might become a block to feedback conversations. In my own use of 360, as alert as I have been to the importance of talking with my clients about the processes we engage
in, I notice that when involved in the 360 process, my sense of accountability for initiating those feedback conversations disappeared for some time. I replaced social interaction with a reliance on a formalised process. I found security in the idea that I had done two consecutive rounds of 360. I had ticked that box, the box labelled in my mind as “gathers feedback from clients”. It causes me some discomfort to notice the degree to which I absconded from the territory of client contact giving the technical process power and authority, and giving up on my own thinking.

Originally, I had designed my research to include three rounds of 360 on my coaching. When the time for the third round approached, I felt flat, not interested. After several months, I reflected on this:

I know I should have completed another 360. It is in the design of my research. But what’s the point? I do not feel I have benefitted from the first two. I don’t understand what I am doing. It doesn’t make sense to me. And I feel I have let down my two feedback facilitators. They have both been so generous. And my coaching clients. When I think about them, I feel embarrassed, exposed. I am “Mrs Feedback”. They think I am good at feedback. They think I am good at being direct within relationships to build them and to be present to what is needed. But I have not talked with them about either round. When I look back at the comments, I realise I have done very little to address any of the development actions. I feel raggedy, unclear, a fraud.

15 October 2008

As I re-read this, I am struck with the way in which I felt controlled and limited by the process. Even though it was a process I had designed. I chose the competencies. I chose the raters and the feedback facilitators. I am surprised at the degree of personal loyalty I experienced to those involved, but also the degree to which I did nothing to honour that loyalty. It left me with a deep sense of disquiet. The jangling of narrative
comments and ratings that made little sense to me drowned out the possibility of achieving my original purpose of developing myself as coach. I wanted assistance, particularly in terms of opening up helpful conversations with my clients about what worked and didn't work for them. I wanted conversations and yet I didn't engage with them. And so, I realise the many ways in which my own use of the two 360’s was out of alignment with my desires and values as a coach, firstly in failing to use 360 to build relationships; secondly, my over-emphasis on being seen to “do it right”, that is, to be seen as a professional using a credible process well; and thirdly, the frustration and constant seeking to understand what it means to “do the right thing”.

7.2.2 Relationships
I felt a sense of loyalty to those giving feedback. Perhaps particularly because I am not in the same organisation as my raters, I was aware of their generosity in giving time to complete the questionnaire. My raters included high-ranking executives whose diaries are packed, and experience their time as precious. It was no small thing that I had quite long narrative comments from each. My first feedback facilitator is a friend as well as colleague and we continue to exchange coaching and supervision sessions on a pro-bono basis. My second facilitator is a consultant I have never met face-to-face, but to whom I have passed work, and with whom I have written bids for work. Both are ongoing, meaningful relationships for me. As Walker and Smither (1999) showed, performance improvement is more likely when feedback is followed up and discussed with colleagues. I knew this, and yet I didn’t do it. I didn’t know how. Yet that seems incredible for someone with my skills. The fact that comments were anonymous provided an excuse not to follow up: I didn’t know who said what. I was left with a feeling of things being unresolved within my various coaching relationships, of potentially important topics not yet sufficiently understood. Or perhaps I could say I left myself with those feelings. I did not take charge. Even though I “should know better”, I reflect back and see in myself someone who took
the attitude that a mechanised process would mediate those relationships for me. I was not actually required to have follow-up conversations and so I didn’t. It has taken me a long time to understand better this impact. I find the impact troublesome. The power I ascribed to a largely mechanised process meant I gave up on my own thinking as to the centrality of actually talking with people and building relationships. Furthermore, I used mostly the same raters for each round of 360 and I had intended to continue with the same raters yet again for the third round. I felt unjustified in making a third request, in the absence of demonstrable actions from the first two rounds. My purpose had been to have 360 assist the growth of my coaching relationships. Even my second 360, which was followed by three discussions with my feedback facilitator, did not spur me into action. Indeed, it is clear that I absolutely expected something external to me, something from within the 360, to achieve what I had not: to initiate useful feedback conversations with those I worked with. I am aware that expectations probably diverged here, so that my own expectations of follow-up and of something more happening may well have differed from my raters’ expectations. My sense of loyalty to those relationships remained, however from my perspective, I had not taken sufficient action.

7.2.3 Credibility
Underlying my internal message to ‘do it right’ lay a concern about being seen as professional and consequently, the degree to which I expressed embarrassment, my sense of exposure, feeling raggedy, unclear or a fraud. My expectation seems to have been that, if I had done it right, 360 would have felt cleaner, more straight-line, providing me with feelings of professionalism, as well as being seen to be professional. Both perspectives were and are important to me: I want to develop my skills and relationships as coach, as well as wanting others to judge me favourably. Although not aware of doing so at the time, it seems that an undeclared purpose for using 360 was to persuade both me and my colleagues and clients of my professionalism. In contrast to my declared
conviction that conversations with people are the more important focus, it seems I had anticipated positive impact from a more depersonalised procedure. My sense of embarrassment was expressed in the context of believing that I had not somehow used the process correctly. However, later on as I read and thought more, my embarrassment was triggered more by my not having designed a different third round of 360 to incorporate more direct conversations.

Embarrassment went hand-in-hand with a pre-occupation with how my ‘performance’ looked. This leads me to question the extent to which I endow mechanised processes with more authority than I give to conversations with people. Certainly, within all of this is the notion that there is a proper way to do 360, and that “doing it right” is as important as any other aspect, or indeed more important. Such a message is supported by current popular descriptions of 360 as a psychometric, which signal that there is a correct procedure to follow, making this a valid and reliable tool. However, as a result of my experiences and insights doing this research, I find myself more motivated to return to a paperless, and face-to-face feedback process that I will outline following the section on ‘practice’.

7.2.4 Practice
This concerns my reputation as someone who is seen as being good at feedback. Reflecting on my reports, I am struck that there is little there about me gathering feedback about my own performance. This both challenges my self-image and unsettles my sense of professional image. I am aware of using my report on two levels: one to help me think about my self and what I want; and the other to help me think about how others see me. I notice these are distinct from one another, thereby calling into question the prevalent definitions of self-awareness. Indeed, my second report shows that my fellow coaches, and my paying coaching clients all view me as more adept at sharing and giving feedback than I do. I am not convinced that their view of me is more accurate than my own, but
rather that we may be paying attention to different aspects. What this feedback does achieve though is to force me to face that I need to ‘sell’ myself better, promoting those aspects that others value about my practice.

4.1 Is clear, articulate and direct in sharing and providing feedback

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Figure 4: Extract one from my second 360

However, there are no questions about how I gather feedback. The closest related question concerns the competency ‘Developing the coaching relationship’, that asks about the extent to which I pay attention to how the coachee wants to learn:

1.4 Demonstrates respect for my viewpoint, my preferences for how I learn and who I am

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Figure 5: Extract two from my second 360

Here, the three coaching clients I have worked with the longest are the ones who describe me as ‘always’ doing this. I notice that it is this feedback that I pay the most attention to. These are ongoing relationships. But also it is where there is no variation in the rating. It seems more definite.

I notice my concern with how I am seen (‘do it right’), and my commitment to conversations as a method to engage people in the ongoing gathering and using of feedback. As far as conversations with other people are
concerned, I notice that the act of involving others in my 360 came from a desire to model the gathering of feedback.

7.2.5  Conversations with myself
Reflecting on my 360 was an important aspect of the process for me. I know from interviewing other recipients that this is the case for some but not all. The amount of time that recipients spend reflecting on their 360 is not known, neither is the way that recipients approach this. Journal writing was the most obvious method to me. Recording my thoughts and emotional responses to the feedback helped me to identify some of my blinkered reactions. 360-ratings are returned within a space of a few weeks and provide a snapshot of an individual’s performance or behaviours. Or rather a montage of snapshots through several lenses, edited into something that looks more coherent. When I look at photos within an exhibition, it is through inner conversations that I arrive at my own understanding of them. In the same way, it was as a result of reflexivity that I arrived at my preferred interpretation. And this is what I mean by ‘conversations with myself’.

Mirroring the experience of managers in the two case studies, I also linked my 360 to my MBTI (INTP – Appendix 11). My awareness of my different preferences added to the power of some of the feedback and certainly alerted me to my interactions with that feedback. An example of this is the somewhat serious intensity linked to INTP’s, with at times a lack of attention to other people’s feelings. The content of some feedback included comments about me being seriously focused, such as:

   Sometimes Amanda can come over as rather intense (and a bit scary!) but I know her better than that and I also know we have laughed about this before

My attitude to the process also reflects my INTP profile. I notice that I liked talking with facilitator about my 360, and preferred those in-depth conversations to being left to consider the results on my own. However,
journal-writing definitely assisted with this. From my involvement delivering facilitator training, I know that recipients are usually encouraged to think more about their action plans, than to think for long about the actual feedback. Journal-writing was useful for me in picking apart the details of the feedback and to reflect on my coaching behaviours and on what I thought about those behaviours. At times, this was uncomfortable, for example when I felt obliged to accept some unpalatable feedback, due to remembering other similar experiences. This experience was persuasive to me. I was facing myself, having conversations with myself, with data from different sources. Journal-writing satisfied the extrovert talker in me, so that I thought aloud on the page, as well as the introverted, serious thinker, so that I challenged my own thinking. In addition, journal-writing allowed me more of a role in the process, such that I could continue developing ideas, ideas about feedback content, about my practice, about how to develop my coaching relationships. Again, through journal-writing I was able to satisfy my preference for engaging with process, the journey to get somewhere rather than the final end point. Studies on MBTI and 360 have examined how clarity about personal preferences can help a manager understand that their way of approaching situations may differ from the approaches favoured by their colleagues. However, to my knowledge there have been no studies exploring how MBTI, or other profiles, may be used to help recipients gain insights into their method(s) for engaging with 360.

MBTI has helped me to understand others’ preferences better. This relates to discussions on self-awareness in 360, where self-awareness is defined as “the extent to which an individual sees themselves as others see him or her” (Fletcher and Bailey, 2003: 397). This is problematic. When rating myself, I had in my mind a version of myself separate from others’ views. In retrospect, I rated myself according to the best version or frequency of that behaviour that I adopt. I didn’t consider how I interacted with my different rater groups. During the facilitated feedback, I interpreted the feedback from my coaching peers and my coaching clients in different ways. I understood that these perspectives were not
the same. If I had been asked, I would have rated my behaviour with each of the rater groups differently, with the result that my self-reporting may have been closer to the ratings from each group, and therefore I would have exhibited greater self-awareness (at least according to Fletcher and Bailey’s (2003) definition).

My two 360’s enjoy an enduring existence. I can find them easily on my computer. Like photos in an album. I don’t have other records of my performance that are as well presented, as easily accessible or that have the feel of being so comprehensive. The challenge here lies in not basing decisions now on the data in reports that are now several years old. Individuals within the case study companies had made references to doing this: searching out a few-years-old report to gain insights into current performance. Having said this, there are underlying threads that do indeed remain relevant. Furthermore, there was a striking occasion when I understood some feedback better five years on, by relating it to comments from a close friend:

For this (building on the clients ideas and suggestions) I have rated myself higher than for other behaviours. On re-reading this five years on, I reflect on how it is exactly this that drives K mad. That I talk in a parallel to her. That I don’t seem to build, or allow her to build, on what has been in the conversation so far.

Initially, I had looked at my 360 in ways that seem to me now as quite shallow. If it had not been for my research interest, my introspections may have stayed at this level. However, examining and re-examining the data has helped me to appreciate my strengths more than I had, and to appreciate the improved ratings year-on-year. Had I not devoted as much time to examining the data on my own, having ‘conversations with myself’ I would not have gained as much value from the process.
7.3 ANONYMITY

I arrived at my first 360 already biased against the use of anonymity, so it could be argued that I was just playing out that bias. Indeed, that being a strong probability, I offer these explorations not as objective rationale for not using anonymity, rather I offer them as a discussion of the implications of using anonymous ratings from just one perspective: mine. It should also be noted that I had no organisational relationship with any of my raters and held no decision making power in respect of them. Therefore the issue of rater safety was very different from most 360’s, where it is argued that anonymity is necessary for raters to give open and honest feedback.

7.3.1 Frustration

As a 360 recipient, I experienced rater anonymity as frustrating, distancing and disconnecting. These emotions were strongest during the facilitated feedback sessions, when the feedback was new and unprocessed. As time passed, I lost my inquisitiveness about raters’ identities and became less frustrated, and instead more distanced and disconnected from my raters as individuals, in ways that I explore in this section.

Hall (1997) describes the process of making sense as a joint production. Within a traditional 360 process, such as the one I used, the opportunity for ‘joint’ is the recipient engaging with the facilitator. Indeed, together we did make our own sense of the numbers and the narrative comments. And part of that sense-making included, for me, understanding what the numbers and narrative comments related to: who the raters were, what situation(s) they were referring to. To some degree, I was annoyed at the process and found myself saying what others say:

*I feel like going through all the comments and working out who said what … “What is that about?”[about the written comments] … and there are some people that really wouldn’t care if I knew their names and might even prefer me knowing.*
Like some of those in my case studies, I chose to believe that my raters would not care about, or might even prefer, me knowing their identity. There are two underlying aspects to this. Firstly, I chose to believe that my raters didn’t care about being anonymous, that they felt blasé about this. This belief came partly from the fact that two of the raters in my first round of 360, emailed their completed forms direct to me. I opened one of these not realizing what it was. However, I did not read it. Instead, I forwarded both to the feedback facilitator. I took this as a sign that neither person cared about being anonymous. I was quick to read into this situation, and then to generalize my reading to the rest of my raters. Secondly, I chose to believe that my raters would have given me the feedback without the 360 process and without being anonymous. However, I had never created the situation for such feedback to be discussed, and furthermore was unlikely to do so in a way that addressed such a wide range of behaviours as were represented on the ICF competency framework (Appendix 12). Anonymity created for me a frustrating sense of distance: distance from my individual raters and distance from the situation. By believing that my raters didn't care about anonymity, I shaped a story that they would also feel frustrated by distance, and would prefer to be direct, working in more immediate contact with me. This was not conscious at the time. And although elements of this can be seen in some quotes, it is only through reflexive work that I have come to this understanding. The story I shaped sits with my self-image of working in direct ways with clients and colleagues, where anonymity runs counter to my own aspirations to base my work on principles of openness, trust, respect, connectedness and collaboration.

Anonymity also distanced me from a sense of context. I wanted to know how each person preferred me to engage with them. As a coach, I know that each person has preferences, and I want to learn how to understand and react to those individual preferences more effectively.

*I am looking for what I need to change. Either to do more of something because it works. Or to alter, stop something*
because it doesn’t. This is not about something ‘working’ outside of a context. It is about something working for someone, within a context.

In this quote, I write about working for someone, not with someone. This is strange terminology for a coach to use. Even when writing about context, I find that I allowed more distance by talking about for and not with. This distancing was contributed to by rater anonymity. Anonymity depersonalises the feedback. Anonymity helps to establish the idea that my performance as coach is a unified and distinct construct that is unrelated to the identity of those observing and rating, and is unrelated to any individual context. Indeed, anonymity conveys the message that the role of those giving feedback is to observe and rate a performance that is outside of them, separate, a performance that is entirely mine and not something that we co-create together. Within that separateness, I might indeed be described as working for someone, delivering a service to them, rather than working with them. Anonymity means that there is no ‘with’. Indeed, anonymity communicates that it does not matter who said what, beyond what rater group each person belongs to. In this way, anonymity has an important part to play when encoding messages during the 360 process: it underlines separateness of an individual’s performance, such that context is unimportant, and the identity of others is irrelevant. And in so doing, my performance as coach becomes an entity in and of itself that can be measured objectively.

Faced with anonymous ratings, and therefore without context, I often found it hard to understand what the ratings meant. Decoding the ratings, I created explanations, filled in gaps, decided who had probably given which rating. In trying to make meaning, it is possible that I was making inaccurate assumptions:
Acknowledges what I have done, not done, learned or become aware of since the previous coaching session(s) | N | S | F | A | N/A
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Self | 1 | | | | |
Senior managers | 1 | 2 | | | |
Peers | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | |
Total | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | |

Figure 6: Extract one from my final 360

‘Acknowledges what I have done, not done, since the previous coaching session’. Well I suppose I do do that with a couple of the senior managers but not with the other one. I am assuming who has said what.

In this instance, an inaccurate assumption could lead to missing a valuable, positive message. Decoding the message, I decided that maybe I did acknowledge what two of the senior managers had done between coaching sessions, but that I didn’t do so with the third. It may however be the case that my understanding of who gave which rating was inaccurate. If so, then the anonymity of the ratings resulted in me choosing my own, and possibly inaccurate, deciphering of the raters’ identities, which could, in turn, lead to unnecessary changes with one manager, and to inaction with another. In this way, anonymous ratings distracted me into creating possibly inaccurate stories from the ratings, as well as somewhat misleading messages for my development.

At times, there was positive feedback that confused me and that I wanted to be able to follow up:
Brings together information and establishes a coaching plan that addresses concerns and areas for development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N/A</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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</table>

Figure 7: Extract two from my first 360

*I can’t imagine who thought I did. Because I just don’t think I’ve done that. I think that is something I need to have more discussion with them about. To agree what they want, what they would find useful.*

Here I rated myself as ‘never’ establishing a coaching plan, whereas other ratings ranged from ‘sometimes’ to ‘always’. Putting aside the different understandings of what constitutes a coaching plan, I struggled to understand who thought I had done that. And anonymity meant that I was unable to reflect on any particular relationship to enable me make better sense of this feedback. In addition, my coaching peers gave somewhat higher ratings, and even with them I could not seem to appreciate my fairly positive performance (in their eyes). So, for me, anonymity resulted in a failing to consolidate contexts that would help me make sense of the feedback as well as a discounting of positive feedback.

7.3.2 Identifying the raters

When narrative comments were written in such a way that I felt confident identifying the writer, I experienced this as a gesture of familiarity, and appreciation. For example, a peer wrote:
… ‘she used this light touch in a recent coaching session when we were with observers’. Oh right I know who that is then.

However, there were other comments where it seemed that the writer expected me to identify them and the situation, and where I was able to do neither. In the quote below, a coaching client stated that I had read a situation incorrectly. However, he had not pointed out my incorrect understanding at the time it happened, so I didn’t realise my error. And receiving the feedback of course does not help understand the specifics at all. Instead, I am left to generalise that I should not make assumptions, without being able to learn more about this particular manager:

.. so this is interesting .. ‘making an assumption about my family situation’ … I don’t know who that is .. ‘which meant that a metaphor or two were a bit irrelevant or a distraction’…

With some comments, I was completely convinced that I had accurately identified the writer, and tried to make sense of the feedback on that basis. The quote below exemplifies this: I remain committed to my identification of the writer even though I find it hard to understand why the most thorough person in doing follow-up notes, is requesting me to do so. This is a topic that I have circled around for years as a coach and it seems highly probable that I missed, and continue to miss, an important request here, a request that may be somewhat different from my expectations given how very blinkered I am on the topic of follow-up emails and notes:

And this one … this will be from T. .. he is the one who is rigorous about summarising the session afterwards but he would like me to do one or two points to email to him. … ‘the point is to reinforce and re-trigger the focus achieved in the meetings so that I am reminded regularly of the challenges discussed, how I “felt” when….good to be reminded…’ Yes, there is something about that in between thing about how to keep issues up. And I have a real
dilemma about what my role should be. He is the most thorough person that I've worked with in doing that. So it is interesting that he'd like me to do it, and it's not an issue with anyone else. Or at least it's not an issue they've said…. So that's strange.

Here, anonymity once again results in at best unreliable interpretations of the feedback, at worst, when the wrong rater is attributed with the comment, very inaccurate interpretations. The inaccuracy arises because of the specificity of my interpretation of the narrative. And that specificity arises to fill the gaps, the cognitive dissonance that I experienced due to the absence of information about my raters.

Anonymous feedback in 360s communicates, at least to me, that the identity of my raters should not be of interest to me. Certainly, I should not invest time in guessing their identities, but rather I should pay attention to the numbers, the concentration and spread of views about my performance as coach. However, coaches need to adapt their style to each particular individual: what works with one person may be inappropriate with another. And it is this that I offer as an explanation for why I spent time linking ratings to individuals. The next quote is from my journal, following my facilitated feedback discussion. It is not so much that I am focused on the identity of each rater, but rather that I am focused on the situations, which might explain each rating:

Q1: “clearly communicates the distinctions between coaching and counselling”

I say ‘sometimes’. The mode is ‘N/A’. [not applicable] Four of my six peers answer this way. None of the senior managers think it is ‘N/A’. Instead, the three senior managers each opt for a different response. I consider my coaching with each of them. ‘Always’ may well describe C’s perspective. His issues verge more
towards counselling and we have discussed the relevance of coaching versus counselling. I am surprised that one of them responds with ‘frequently’. This must be A but when have we had these discussions and how have I communicated the distinctions? B I have had only one coaching session with, so ‘sometimes’ in the context of one session sounds about right. Two of my peers thought it relevant. And I have put a ring around the higher rating of ‘frequently’, noting that this was probably P, whose topic veered more to counselling territory and with whom I discussed the different approaches I would take as counsellor or coach. S’s session was more emotional. Maybe there was something there, and maybe she marked ‘sometimes’.

The amount of work required to decode such feedback seems unreasonable, at least to me, and more especially when this decoding is done solo, creating such detailed stories without checking their veracity. I wanted to honour the contribution my raters had made by taking the time to understand their perspectives. Indeed, it was their perspectives that interested me, rather than any averages or overall trends.

7.3.3 Changing raters

The virtue of anonymity lies in the idea that rater identities are irrelevant. That being the case, managers are often encouraged to repeat 360’s without necessarily using the same raters, and then to compare their performance year-on-year. I carried out two 360’s in consecutive years. I used two different consultancies for pragmatic reasons\(^{17}\), but used the

\(^{17}\) On each occasion I accessed free-of-charge 360’s. I chose a different supplier for the second round because, in the time between the two rounds, I had made contact with a
same questions. My work had changed over the interim period, and therefore I asked two of the same managers from my main corporate client for feedback and one different manager; and had different peers along with an additional group of coaching clients from Wolverhampton. Furthermore, while I did ask two of the same managers for feedback, it is not clear who actually did complete the questionnaire. Therefore, there is little, if any, overlap between my rater groups in Year One and Year Two. Anonymity means that this fact can go unnoticed, and certainly can go without comment. A comparison of the ratings across the two years shows higher ratings for behaviours in Year Two, in the other-ratings as well as in the self-ratings. Whilst I am happy to interpret this as meaning I have improved my performance, there are at least two alternative interpretations. Firstly, it is possible that by virtue of having thought more about the ICF competencies, I had drawn on that language more frequently so that the raters better understood the questions. It was certainly true that I felt more comfortable myself with the wording of the behaviours and had used that terminology more when thinking about my coaching performance. Secondly, it is possible that by virtue of having different raters, they had different perspectives from the previous group and may well have used the same ratings across both years. Once again, anonymity precludes comparison of any one person’s ratings across years and so precludes charting my progress with those raters who had rated me in both 360’s. Instead, the message is that ratings are generalizable from one set of raters to another, that their membership to the same source group is important but that their individual identities are not and that I behave in the same way with each source group. By using groups of anonymous raters, the identification of ratings is with the relevant rater group.

larger consultancy and knew that this version looked more similar to those that my case study companies had used.
YEAR ONE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year One:</th>
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<th>F</th>
<th>A</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Peers</td>
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<td>3</td>
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</table>

YEAR TWO:

7.1 Brings together information and establishes a coaching plan with me, that addresses concerns and areas for development

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<th>N</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>F</th>
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YEAR ONE:

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<tr>
<td>Senior managers</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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YEAR TWO:

8.3 Acknowledges what I have done, not done, learned, or become aware of since the previous coaching session(s)

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<th>R</th>
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Figure 8: Extracts from both 360 reports, placed together for comparison

So far I have discussed the impact and implications of anonymity within the early readings of the report and discussions with the facilitator. Beyond these stages of the process, there are also the issues of follow-up and, related to that, accountability.

7.3.4 Follow-up and accountability

There are 360 processes where the organisation follows up 360’s and has requirements for reporting on progress with development plans. Neither of my case study companies did this, nor neither did I. I had expected that I would have follow up discussions with my raters, but never formalised this, and somehow never made time for it. On reflection, rater anonymity allowed me to hide. I felt anonymous. Or more importantly, my working relationship with each person had disappeared.

One of the caveats within human resource management about giving feedback is to focus attention on the behaviour and not the person. Indeed, it was the behaviours that interested me. But it was the interactions and the details that I wanted, before I could find meaning in the kind of generalising that would enable me to do things differently. Nonetheless, following discussions with my facilitators, I did write a development plan with objectives and actions. And I did introduce new practices as a result of feedback. For example:

Me: So some people agree with me, that I don’t ever confront them when they have not taken agreed upon actions. That will definitely be the Chief Exec.
Facilitator: I'm surprised about that, do you really never?

Me: Well, 'confront', it is quite strong isn't it?....So it is almost like compiling a checklist of what I want to agree at the beginning of a coaching contract.

Once again, I assume I know who says that I never confront them when they have not taken agreed up on actions. But in this instance, rather than spend time on the rater's identity, I move quickly to deciding what action to take. And indeed, I did create the checklist that I wanted, which I have used albeit spasmodically. So, I did follow up the 360. I had a development plan and I implemented some actions. But, it was a solo activity and indeed, some might argue that implementing an action plan should be done solo. What irks me is that this runs counter to a very key thread of my development as coach: my need to learn greater collaboration, in the room, in the space with my client, so that we co-create a way of working that achieves the client's goals. Anonymity made it difficult to connect the feedback messages to the specific actions that would develop my working relationship with any particular client. It diluted the potency of follow-up. Both I and my raters, if we wished, could leave the 360 report uncommented on. Indeed, many facilitators and consultants recommend that no follow-up conversations be sought. However, it is my own sense of anonymity that surprised me, and which I used to disconnect myself from following up with any individuals in any way.

Follow-up is related to accountability. I now realise that I actually took little accountability for the 360 process, beyond selecting the competencies and my raters. There are two explanations I see for this. Firstly, by virtue of its very nature, the process was out of my hands. It was automated. Automated requests for feedback went out to my raters, along with reminders to those who had not responded by the deadline. The contact I had with the process was: emailing the raters' names and
contact details to the consultant; receiving the report; discussing the feedback with the feedback facilitator (the consultant); and spending time reflecting on the report after that discussion. Charge of the process was taken by the automated process and the facilitator. Secondly, with the benefit of hindsight, I used anonymity as an excuse not to be accountable in terms of engaging with my raters about the feedback and its implications. I know that some 360 systems address this in the design of their processes; however, my process mirrored those my case study companies had bought from consultancies.

Nonetheless, there is an issue of accountability here. Taking greater accountability would have meant actions such as: giving my raters some information at the beginning about how I saw my role; possible inviting feedback about particular aspects of my role; explaining the content of the questionnaire, especially to those who do not know the ICF competencies; and then, following the report, asking for their reactions to my development plans. None of these actions are specifically prohibited within any 360 process. However, I had decoded rater anonymity to mean that I was expected to maintain a distance from my raters.

7.4 NUMERICAL RATINGS

I started this research convinced that asking people to give their colleagues numerical ratings does not assist the development of working relationships, if anything my convictions were that such a process is more likely to get in the way of building working relationships. Throughout my consultancy and coaching work, my commitment continues to be to the development of meaningful work relationships: not that I have sufficiently defined what that means, or have undeniable ‘proof’ that such relationships contribute to the achievement of organisational objectives, but just that I choose to believe they do, and of course I could cite some references to support my own bias. But, as my experience has taught me, this is not a straightforward issue. Indeed, I became increasingly intrigued with my own relationship to numbers to a point where I am now
cautiously respectful of the potential value of numerical ratings (albeit with questions about how that potential can be realised); while continuing to experience discomfort about the ways in which numbers can eradicate the personal and ‘disembody’ relationships.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, numbers are believed to communicate objectivity, distance-from-the-personal. Furthermore, by using a number the focus is on that number and its relationship to other numbers, rather than on any relationship between the number and the individual rater. I noticed that initially I was fascinated with the numbers as a measure of my performance. But even within the feedback session of my first round of 360, I was repeatedly trying to relate the numbers to particular people. At times, I had the sensation of clawing air, as I tried to grasp what was being said, trying to add ‘somebody’ back into the numbers. I experienced frustration time and again as I tried to make sense of the messages that people had encoded within the numerical ratings.

7.4.1 Graphical representation of the data

As a 360 facilitator, I have often focused on the graphs. Yet, as a 360 recipient, I became aware of how quickly I lost a feel for what each graph meant, wanting instead to see that my ratings were high, regardless of the individual question. I felt increasingly taken over by the desire to see patterns of ratings over to the right of each line, to signify ‘high performance’ without paying much attention to what that high performance related to. As I became aware of this hunt for patterns of high performance, I realised that I was not linking the numbers back to the behaviours. The numbers had taken on a life of their own. My rebellious self yearned for a situation of:

Minds and relationships no longer colonised by graphs and numbers and a facilitator’s view. Where the individual’s reported feedback is not reduced to a standardised structure,
which makes everyone the same in aspiration - to be the best, 
at the top of the graph

7.4.2 Drive for simplicity

Metaphorically, in the quote above, rebellion and colonisation conjure up pictures of numbers holding power with any move against them having little chance of success. Numbers felt like the ‘enemy’. And I wanted to enter that enemy camp; to experience 360 from the inside. What I found in that camp surprised me.

I started with the narrative comments, and even with deep reflection, even though I tried to be aware of my own bias in decoding those comments, I felt unconvinced that I knew what the raters had wanted to convey. It all took too long. I wanted greater simplicity. About an hour into trying to make sense of the words, I started to use numbers. I worked out percentages, used rankings to identify strengths and priority development needs. I felt the need for a process and looked to numbers for meaning.

Enticed into the world of measurement. Looking around each new corner. Wanting to gain mastery. Believing there is an inner meaning to the numbers, if only I knew the key to unlock the door to those meanings.

There was a continuing belief on my part that there was something to be understood about numbers, some secret or magic that I didn't understand; a belief that emanated from an underlying faith in the scientific truth of numbers despite it contradicting my rationalisations for qualitative research. Uncomfortably, I noticed that I was beginning to question my reasons for not using numbers. That maybe I employ various philosophical justifications for qualitative research just because I feel unskilled in the use of numbers, even though the idea of numerical objectivity, solidity, scientific ‘truth’ was lodged deep within me.
7.4.3 Agreement and difference

I wanted numbers to work their magic. But I found it hard to know which numbers to attend to:

*Do I pay attention to what the majority say? Or is there (more) value in understanding the differences, the wider ranges? [2: 116]*

17.8.2007

I started within the first facilitated discussion by looking for agreement, and noticed myself doing so:

*So you see what I have started to notice now is that I am going for where there is agreement, but that doesn’t necessarily mean … what does that mean - that they all agree…? It looks different from if there was more of a spread … but does that mean that it is stronger or not? I don’t know*

I continued to pull myself back to remembering where, or rather who, the numbers came from. Yet, I no longer remember all the individual raters. And in that connection-less space, whether ratings are repeated by the majority or are spread appears meaningless to me. After all, each person I chose as a rater had a different relationship to coaching, they had different levels of coaching expertise along with different experiences of reflecting on, and rating, performance. These differences existed as much within any one of the rater groups as between them. With that much difference, I found myself wondering whether ‘agreement’ within or between groups signified anything more than that several individuals had given the same rating. I was no longer convinced that ‘agreement’ provided me with any actual information about my performance with people from a particular rater group.

So, I moved from searching for similarities to looking at differences. What interests me about looking for differences, is that my attention was on patterns amongst the numbers:
In the next section, ‘Communicating effectively’, I first note any big differences. I note that there are two of these but I don’t even notice the wording of the behaviours. I am now seeking out patterns. A shorthand that will make the task quicker. [2: 119] 17.8.2007

My second report looked somewhat more sophisticated: the data were processed, producing bar graphs, ranking and percentages. I gained insights from comparing numbers with each other, and once again from the patterns. But I also misunderstood the numbers in my second report more than once. For example, here is a table, which appears on page 4 of the report:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Self Score</th>
<th>Avg. all Populations</th>
<th>Difference (Everyone - Self)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Developing the coaching relationship</td>
<td>69 %</td>
<td>76 %</td>
<td>7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Active Listening</td>
<td>75 %</td>
<td>79 %</td>
<td>4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Powerful questions</td>
<td>81 %</td>
<td>78 %</td>
<td>-3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Direction communication</td>
<td>75 %</td>
<td>79 %</td>
<td>4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Facilitating learning and results</td>
<td>55 %</td>
<td>64 %</td>
<td>9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Designing actions</td>
<td>88 %</td>
<td>69 %</td>
<td>9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Planning and goal setting</td>
<td>44 %</td>
<td>73 %</td>
<td>29 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Managing progress and accountability</td>
<td>58 %</td>
<td>68 %</td>
<td>10 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage Scores

Figure 9: A summary page from my second 360

At first I read this to mean that the behaviours were ranked according to the ratings I had received. Therefore, I read that the those factors at the bottom of the list were my weakest. It was only as a result of more careful examination, that I realised there was no ranking in this table, rather that I had to compare the percentage scores, as well as paying more attention to the right hand column which compares self- and other-ratings.
I found also that I had to stop and think more about what those percentages were percentages of (the mean average of all other ratings, given as a percentage). And I notice that by virtue of presenting these data as percentages, I experienced the information as different from the bar graphs and assessments against each behaviour. In fact, my determination to have meaningful information led to my misreading at least some of the report.

As it happens, predictably, my misreading of the table matched my own self-image and, after much to-and-fro, also appeared to match the more detailed feedback later in the report.

However, when my self-ratings and other-ratings were broadly the same, I paid less attention. This meant that I did not think about the reasons why others might view me as I did. Instead, when the rating was low, I considered what I might do to improve, based on the ‘fact’ that we all agreed I needed to. When my self-rating and other-ratings were high, I felt no need to spend time thinking about why or how. My facilitators encouraged me to identify those higher ratings, but in the absence of any gap or apparent problem there was little to engage my mind. At times, I went beyond the 360 territory, beyond the world of work, to find some way of understanding the feedback.

7.4.4 Interpreting the numbers

No self-respecting statistician would support the above of analysis of ratings and conclusions from so few sources. And to be fair, both feedback facilitators emphasised that together we were composing possible explanations for the patterns we saw, rather than that the reports pointed at specific interpretations.
In fact, having the opportunity to talk through a 360 report is recognised as an important stage of the 360 process. Offering possible interpretations was one of the actions of each of my facilitators:

..to go to one of the extremes means that they have thought about it a bit more. (Facilitator One, in response to my attempt to discount some high ratings)

When the second facilitator was explaining why my peers rated me differently from how managers rated me:

*Perhaps that’s because they [my peers] are just that much more aware.* (Facilitator One)

In such examples, the facilitator was making their own sense of the ratings. A further example was from the transcript connected with this part of my first report:

![Table](image1.png)

Figure 10: Extract three from my first 360

Me: *And this “new ways of doing things”. That’s interesting. I don’t know. I don’t … it’s the “risky” bit I don’t feel I do.*

Facilitator: *It may be that things feel riskier to other people.*
Interventions by the facilitators were more often couched in cautious terms, using ‘maybe’, ‘perhaps’. Even so, they offered a rationale as to why raters chose their ratings. With this encouragement to construct a rationale and backstory, I added texture and detail to the ratings. I was ‘decoding’ (Hall, 1986), not as a passive receiver of information but rather adding in both my own and my facilitator’s interpretations. My raters had chosen numbers to convey a message, those numbers had been collated and presented in a report and then discussed and considered. A traditional 360 design does not check that my ‘reading’ of the numbers contains the message as intended by my raters. Instead, my facilitator and I were free to make the numbers our own and work with them as we chose.

A 360 report is designed to highlight differences and similarities between performance ratings given by various rater groups. In my 360, the ratings for each group appear on different lines, or as different bars on a graph. This meant that, for example in my first round of 360, I was comparing ratings given by my peers (those people I had learnt alongside, coached and been coached by) with ratings given by coaching clients across different organisations. The theoretical explanation for grouping raters has two aspects, both of which I saw as relevant to my own situation. Influenced in part by my reading I believed, firstly, that my raters’ perspective on my coaching would be influenced by their own work role, their prior experience of coaching and how they interpreted coaching competencies (London and Beatty, 1993); and secondly, that I would coach different kinds of people in different ways (McCauley and Moxley, 1996).

These reasons for different ratings were convincing for me. Certainly, I was aware that I expected other coaches to have different perspectives on my coaching performance compared with the managers I coached: and that this expectation was based on the idea that other coaches would be influenced by the coaching experiences we had shared and the conversations we had had about the coaching competencies. In addition,
I knew that I used different approaches and shorthand when coaching other coaches, compared to the approaches and shorthand I used when coaching managers. Clearly, both of these perspectives would impact on the ratings. However, my engagement with the ratings went further than this. My raters may have been influenced by their different perspectives, and I may have behaved differently with different kinds of people, but in addition to that, I related to the ratings differently, according to which rater group they came from. And it seems, my facilitators did the same. To suggest that the reason for coaches rating me differently from managers was because of their level of awareness (see quote above) is one such example. The stories I wove into the numbers were as much about my assumptions about the perspectives of different groups as it was about their actual perspectives (which, in any case, were not checked by me).

A 360 questionnaire only asks for one self-rating against each behaviour despite the fact that an individual may actually perform with different groups in different ways, and perform differently with individuals within the same group. To take account of this, the individual might be asked to rate their performance in respect of each of the separate groups or even each individual. It is true that this would vastly multiply the number of self-ratings, however, doing this would be more consistent with the principle of identifying different perspectives. It would also help to emphasise McCauley and Moxley’s (1996) idea that, in this case, I coach different people differently. Within such a regime, anonymity would, of course, be out of the window.

7.5 NARRATIVE COMMENTS

In complete contrast to my expectations prior to embarking on this research, what intrigued me most was my reaction to, and interaction with, the numbers. What was surprising to me was how very little time I spent with the narrative comments. This section reflects that imbalance of attention that I paid to numbers and words.
My experience working with narrative comments mirrored those described in the corporate case studies. Like those I interviewed I experienced the narrative comments as more personal, a gift, something more interesting. I was not as rapturous as the senior manager who described her experience of reading her comments as pleasurable as eating ice cream; however, I was more immediately drawn to them.

The most striking reaction I experienced was feeling overloaded by the processing required to make sense of the comments. I ended up wanting something simpler, a number. Having said that, there was a constant flux between complexity and simplicity. I tried systems for making sense of the fit between comments and ratings thereby creating greater complexity on the path to what I hoped would be a simpler message.

7.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This autoethnography explores the same themes as the corporate case studies. There were several unexpected insights that resulted from this exploration, three of which are highlighted here. Firstly, I am struck by my own apparently docile acceptance of a largely automated process. Operating outside of an organisation, the purpose and value of 360 for me was focused more on a desire to build relationships and my practice as coach. And yet I did not take action on those issues. Not critically aware of my docility at the time, I note my lack of discussion with my raters, including the lack of any attempt on my part to brief them prior to their completion of the 360 questionnaire. This is in spite of encouragement from my facilitators that I might communicate with my raters at the start of the process to highlight my objectives and that I might consider ahead of time how I might want to follow up any comments with them. This inactivity signalled my willingness to give over control to a mechanised process, effectively disengaging. Anonymity added to a low sense of having to take charge of follow-up and accountability. What is surprising here is that I (as a facilitator and trainer of facilitators who has promoted greater interaction between raters and
recipients) so quickly began to follow what I perceived as standard procedure, even though my facilitators encouraged me to follow a different approach. I find it unsettling how easily I conformed to what I interpreted as expectations of my behaviour. Even though my facilitators were advocating greater involvement, I notice how there was something alluring for me about collaborating in what I saw as the rituals of 360.

Secondly, in listening to the tapes of my facilitated feedback sessions, I was struck by the collaborative story-building that I engaged in with each of my facilitators. We each, separately and together, decoded **numerical ratings** and **narrative comments** and encoded a coherent story, based on our own sense-making of numerical and narrative data. The power of the facilitator’s role in this process deserves further attention.

And finally, I am perhaps most surprised at my eagerness to use numbers in my **drive for simplicity**: as I tried to decode the narrative comments, I experienced such tiredness and boredom that I turned away from words and instead devised an analysis of my 360 data that used numbers. I found myself acting out the tension that I have written about earlier in this thesis: the tension between simplicity and complexity. In an attempt to make sense of complex narrative data, I used numbers to impose greater simplicity; whilst at the same time, in an attempt to make sense of apparently simple numerical data, I used words to add context, texture and depth. This dynamic relationship in 360 between numerical and narrative comments, and between simplicity and complexity, also deserves further attention.
8 - CONTRIBUTIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This PhD makes three unique contributions to research. The first of these is the identification of how quasi-scientific rituals are used to assert 360 as a tool for objective measurement of performance. The quasi-scientific nature of these rituals is highlighted through an analysis of 360 against Ritzer’s (1996) model. In the Literature Review, I characterised 360 as the McDonaldisation of feedback. In this chapter, analysis of the empirical data leads to a more nuanced application of Ritzer’s (1996) theory, such that participants’ actions appear, on the surface, to support Ritzer’s four principles while at the same time their ‘under the radar’ behaviours and talk do not.

The second contribution is the conceptualisation of 360 as a social process. More specifically, adapting Hall’s (1973) model, 360 is described as a spiral of meaning-making, where each interpretation and use of 360 impacts on subsequent possibilities for its interpretation and use. Hall’s (1973) encoding/decoding theory was used in the Literature Review to typify the different ways in which participants engage with the meanings of 360. Here, examples from the case studies are used to demonstrate how participants either comply with the ‘dominant reading’ (preferred by the company), or adjust their reactions to, and interpretation of, 360 as they construct a ‘negotiated reading’, or establish their own meanings within 360 adopting an ‘oppositional reading’, rejecting what appears to be the interpretation intended by the company. While the principles of McDonaldisation help to identify the driving forces for simplicity and a scientific process in 360, the use of Hall’s model emphasises the active role of each participant in building the complex meanings of 360.

The third contribution is methodological. This research represents the first substantive interpretive exploration of 360 and the first use of an autoethnographic study of 360. A central thesis of the current work is that the way in which participants engage with 360 does in and of itself contribute to
meaning-making. It is appropriate therefore that methodologically this PhD adopts an approach that is also focused on understanding meanings. All three case studies show instances where participants have been reflexive in their accounts of how they make meaning from 360. This PhD draws on reflexivity to work further with those meanings.

Each of these contributions is summarised here, showing how they each extend or contrast with previous research. Following these summaries, the limitations of the research are identified along with implications for both practitioners and academic researchers.

8.1 THE QUASI-SCIENTIFIC RITUALS OF 360
The language of 360 is a scientific one: reliability, validity, averages, norms, and objective. As part of this talk about 360, there are taken-for-granted practices, which have a quasi-scientific feel about them. The rituals communicate conformance with scientific practice. By engaging in these rituals, participants appear to promote a scientific basis for 360, whilst at the same time taking actions that subvert principles such as anonymity and using numbers as measures. Here ritual is used to refer to actions, which have become symbolic in 360, which are expected or even required within 360 tradition. As with rituals in other spheres, for an outsider or someone such as the researcher who takes a different view, some of the actions can seem irrational or illogical. Furthermore, within the group of 360 participants the rituals are played out differently according to their role in 360, which influences the way they talk about 360 as an objective and scientific process.

Status is relevant here: the status of consultants as they sell 360 into clients, the status of HR as they sell 360 internally and the status of managers who it might be argued are looking to be seen as ready to advance within the organisation. For all these people, the thesis of the current research is that there is kudos and value in voicing a shared agreement that 360 is objective, scientific, reliable. For different reasons, the different participants’ interests
appear to be bound up in maintaining the public, voiced view that 360 has scientific merit. Such a shared view strengthens belief in the process while demonstrating an allegiance to the value of competencies and attempts to objectively measure individuals’ performance against those competencies.

Three particular rituals are depicted in the current research. These concern anonymity for raters; triangulating results of 360 with other data; and the role of numerical ratings. Findings from the case studies and autoethnographic work are at times in direct opposition to the apparent intentions of designers and expectations of academic researchers. That is consultants and academics talk as though anonymity exists for the raters; as though it makes epistemological sense to compare subjective views of feedback-givers with, for example, personality profiles and assessment centre results; and as though raters are using numerical ratings in a similar way to each other, that is as though numbers have a uniform meaning. Yet, the current work draws into question each of these three views of 360. Indeed, it is the contention of this thesis that the power of 360 lies in the insight it potentially offers into a range of different perspectives on an individual’s performance: not that 360 defines or summarises that performance in a collection of averaged ratings. Moreover, that in an attempt to increase the credibility of 360 in a world which favours apparently scientific, quantitative methods, the practice of 360 has become imbued with quasi-scientific rituals: ritualised language, ritualised use of anonymity and numbers. As a result, the rituals, described in this research, have become taken-for-granted. In effect, the result is somewhat akin to ‘the emperor’s new clothes’ syndrome, such that participants talk in support of anonymity for raters, whilst knowing that (i) rater anonymity sometimes renders de-contextualised feedback difficult to understand/interpret; (ii) it frustrates recipients’ efforts to clarify or build on the feedback they have received; (iii) it undermines accountability for raters and recipients; and (iv) genuine anonymity does not exist since most people, most of the time, try to figure out who has said what.
8.1.1 Pseudo-anonymity for raters

Anonymity remains sacrosanct, taken-for-granted, in most approaches to 360, and this was indeed so for those interviewed in the current corporate case studies. However, the interview data revealed a widespread conviction amongst 360 recipients that they were able to identify at least some of their raters. This alone is not as interesting as the way in which recipients then behaved to ensure the semblance of anonymity.

*I did reflect on a couple of comments after, thinking “Oh I’d quite like to explore that a bit more with that individual, but then I realised that I’m probably not supposed to realise who said that, so after lots of sort of thinking about it, ….I did it under the radar …*

Participants collaborated in creating the semblance of anonymity, such that there was a tacit agreement that no rater would be approached in any direct way about their feedback. This was so even when the recipient was convinced they knew the identity of a rater. Those professionals (consultants and some HR managers), whose reputation rests arguably on their ability to supply and work with tools that offer objective measurements, asserted the importance of anonymity.

In online 360, pseudo-anonymity does the work of building an image of 360 as scientific, to do with numbers not personal accounts. The agreement to behave as though feedback is anonymous reduces accountability of both raters and recipients for discussing the feedback directly with each other. Depersonalising and disembodying the numbers by separating them from the raters strengthens the message that it is the number that counts, not the person, and that therefore follow-up discussions are not necessary. By contrast, if such discussions were declared necessary, a different message would be established: that contact with people matters and that understanding our impact on each other requires conversation. By collaborating with the maintenance of pseudo-anonymity, participants comply with the ‘dominant’ or ‘preferred’ reading: for instance, that an examination of the numbers, possibly with the help of a trained facilitator, is sufficient for a recipient to understand...
what they need to know and what they need to change. Pseudo-anonymity continues because participants work together to maintain it. It gives a scientific feel to 360, and justifies a continued distance between those who give and those who receive feedback.

8.1.2 Triangulation
The very name, ‘360-degree feedback’, or ‘multisource feedback’, communicates the importance of gathering views from different sources. Indeed, ‘360-degree feedback’ is about receiving feedback from those who are placed all around the individual recipient. This coverage of all the angles is the core idea that distinguishes this approach to feedback. And that core idea is one of triangulation.

Triangulation, as explained in Chapter 2, originates from geography and is the process of taking measurements from different vantage points to validate the reading, thereby confirming location. Within 360, it is about seeking confirmation of one person’s view of the recipient, by finding that same view elsewhere. As one quote from an HR manager in Company A shows, triangulation brings a certainty to what is said:

*They can be quite difficult…I like going between a psychometric and observations to kinda persuade the person that it means something…Triangulation, that’s what one presenter called it. I like that. There’s no arguing then… not just me having a go, other people and other reports are saying the same thing.*

Returning to how 360 is written about, we can see that researchers and commentators operate two different views of 360 simultaneously – one valuing the subjective, and the other, the objective. For instance, Lang and Rybnikova (2012: 51) advocate that “more instruments should be based on inter-subjective, triangulated evaluations such as 360-degree feedback” – thereby suggesting that subjectivity can be managed and triangulated through a scientific ‘instrument’.
Certainly, gathering data from a variety of sources increases credibility and possibly validity:

*This is in line with previous recommendations by other scholars (Edmondson and McManus, 2007; Lovelace et al., 2001) who advocated the use of multi-source data, both internal and external to the team, to enhance the credibility of findings and to serve triangulation and, hence, validity purposes (Jick, 1979).*

Savelsbergh, van der Heijden and Poell (2010: 466)

And indeed, ‘triangulation’ has been used to describe 360 itself: “As the field evolved, measurement experts began recognizing the value of multiple raters for triangulating true score performance, as well as the enhanced ability to observe and measure different facets of job performance.” (Tornow, 1993: 223). Tornow contrasts the interests of scientists and researchers with those of managers and practitioners, such that the scientists’ goal is to “reduce the error of measurement, and rater variations, in order to enhance the accuracy of measurement”, whereas the practitioners’ goal involves measurement as “a means to an end, not an end in itself” (Tornow, 1993: 222). However, in the intervening years since Tornow, it seems that there has been increased attention to the different ways of ‘validating’ the feedback (Fleenor, Taylor and Chappelow, 2010), rather than remembering that measurement is not an end in itself. That is, there is evidence of a desire to emphasise the ‘accuracy’ of the 360 ratings. In the current case studies, ‘triangulation’ by those interviewed included the use of MBTI and assessment centre ratings. Variations of such combinations appear in other studies (McGurk, 2009; McCarthy and Garavan, 1999).

Data in the current research shows how participants seek confirmation of the accuracy of 360 by accessing other data sources, such as assessment centres, MBTI and informal conversations. Some of the participants called this confirmation process ‘triangulation’. In addition, the data show that some raters and feedback recipients develop their own methods for checking the feedback messages they give or receive. That is, they look outside the
individual rating or text comment to establish patterns and agreement. This might be seen as a personal approach to triangulation.

Hence, the idea of the ‘scientific’ nature of 360 persists while at the same time there is, throughout 360 literature, clear acknowledgement of the subjectivity of individual viewpoints, which, according to some perspectives, actually increases the value of the feedback.

These two perspectives are in conflict from an epistemological point of view. Specifically, if we take the idea that individual viewpoints are subjective, then adding together or averaging subjective viewpoints still produces subjectivity (van der Heijden and Nijhof, 2004). This is based on an understanding that knowledge is created by individuals and as such, cannot be statistically manipulated. In contrast, if we take the idea that averaging is a meaningful method for increasing the reliability, validity and generalizability of ratings in 360, then this is based on the idea that there is one true performance that is being observed, and that through triangulating these different views, involving several raters and averaging their ratings, that one true performance can be more accurately measured.

The first idea reflects the interpretive epistemology of this current work – that is a belief that knowledge about performance is an act of interpretation and that there is no objective knowledge about a person’s performance that is independent of thinking, reasoning human beings (Schwandt, 2000). The second idea reflects a positivist epistemology, which takes the view that there is one true performance that can be objectively and accurately measured by taking readings from a greater number of observers (triangulation). Perhaps bizarrely, some researchers appear to hold both ideas, simultaneously, in their minds (for example, van der Heijden and Nijhof, 2004; compared with Savelsbergh, van der Heijden and Poell, 2010). However, it is the contention of the current work that as individual ratings in 360 are based, not on scientific measurement, but on the subjective opinions of raters, then the only relevant underlying epistemology that explains the construction of 360 is an interpretive one.
Consequently, I return to the metaphor of ‘prism’ (as opposed to triangulation) introduced in Chapter 2 (Richardson, 2005: 963):

*the central imaginary for ‘validity’ for post-modernist texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes…and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose – not triangulation but rather crystallization.*

Having completed the empirical work, the relevance of a crystal to 360 seems even stronger. 360 does combine symmetry, by virtue of averaging ratings within each group. It does have substance, with raters’ comments and the richness of understanding that can be created between the facilitator and the recipient. It certainly focuses the mind on the variety of shapes, and it is the angle from which the crystal is viewed that determines the facets that you see. Furthermore, the views of those giving feedback, and the quality of work relationships, which form the basis for the feedback, all grow, change and are altered. 360 does indeed reflect externalities, incorporating other people’s views and the organisation’s behavioural preferences, as well as the internalities of recipients’ own reflections. And it also contains patterns, similarities and differences. What we see in 360 depends on how we interpret it. Replacing the metaphor of triangulation, with that of 360 as a feedback crystal allows different meanings and perspectives to come to mind.

In summary, talk of triangulation in verifying 360 feedback ratings with other sources, can in itself be seen as another ‘scientific ritual’ played out to increase the credibility and value of 360.
8.1.3 Numbers at work

To understand the manager/practitioner's viewpoint, we need to understand the purpose of the measurement, and how useful it is, quite aside from issues of accuracy. The purpose is neither to find the true score, nor to reduce error variance caused by rater variation. Instead, the manager/practitioner values multiple perspectives of different raters because they represent significant and meaningful sources of variation from which much can be learned. (Tornow, 1993: 222)

Despite earlier work by Tornow and others, calculating the average rating continues to be seen as important. This was so for the consultants and HR managers within the case study companies. Indeed, with the very action of calculating the average rating itself affirms the belief, shared by many academic researchers, that individual ratings carry objective validity such that averaging is justified. However, others in the 360 process, specifically raters and feedback recipients, work with numbers differently. Instead, raters and recipients use numbers as carriers of messages, rather than as finite measures.

This section summarises three particular themes, emerging from the empirical work, related to the use of numbers within the 360 process: the disembodiment of numbers; the processing of numbers; the resistance of raters and participants to quasi-scientific use of numbers. These themes, taken together, build an argument that 360 processes make ritual use of numbers in ways that signal a belief in their objectivity, whilst still acknowledging that individual ratings are based on subjective perceptions.

Numbers are disembodied in the 360 process. This is in part the role of numbers: to measure and then to be taken from the context in order to construct a codified representation, which allows simplification and comparison. Disembodying the numerical ratings is a core component, arguably the most influential component, of making 360 appear scientific. The
underlying assumption being that the greater the series of manipulations applied to the numerical ratings, and the greater the cognitive distance between the ratings and their human sources, the more a scientific discourse is created. Yet, at their source, numbers are subjective.

Subjective interpretation, a fact which is not sufficiently emphasized in the literature, looms large in all phases of societal accounting research and its utilization. Indeed, once we follow “disembodied numbers” back to their sources to see how they were arrived at and what therefore they actually represent, we find that they are often based on the most subjective of all forms of activity

(Mushkat, 1983: 103)

Part of the disemboding of numbers is the processing of them. During the development of 360, the processing of the ratings has increased. The companies studied for the current research have 360 reports where the numerical ratings appear as: horizontal bar charts to compare the mean averages of each rater group for each behaviour and each competency; spider graphs to summarise performance against competencies; norms that show the averages achieved in earlier reports. Colour coding is used to help the comparison between different rater groups. The act of processing the ratings builds a sense of objectivity and of measuring something specific. In so doing, the value of ‘outliers’ is lost, that is ratings that differ from the mean, sometimes significantly. Also interesting, particularly when calculating norms, is that the raw ratings come from raters who have been chosen by the feedback recipients. This means that some recipients choose colleagues they know will rate them high, or (out of an interest in tackling problematic relationships) they choose colleagues they anticipate will rate them low, and these will likely be colleagues whose opinion they respect. Consequently, the group of colleagues, selected by the participant to rate them, is a subjectively selected sample of those who interact with the participant. It is intriguing therefore that the resulting ratings are processed in the same ways that would be used with a more considered and possibly representative sample. It is
also puzzling that norms are calculated using all of this data, regardless of the rationale used for choosing raters.

The processing of the ratings also diminishes the impact of differences between the ratings. That is, the differences are still visible but more attention is paid to the averages. Individual ratings are documented in the 360 reports of the companies studied: columns within the report show how many raters gave each of the different scores. Indeed, the differences in perspective are recognised by many academic researchers as being valuable and not something that should necessarily be reduced (Tornow, 1993). However, interpretation of the meanings of outliers is limited. When faced with a majority view, reinforced with a mean average, it becomes more challenging to interpret why someone takes a different perspective. Plus, given the anonymity of the rater and the absence of any other contextual details, the significance or importance of outliers is minimised. Considering that the premise of 360 is that different perspectives have value, it seems strange that more is not made of outlier ratings.

A further impact of processing the ratings lies in the power of the stories that the processed numbers generate since it is at the point of decoding those numbers that meanings are created and developed. And indeed, facilitators have been shown in this research as adept in their ability to draw meaning out of a 360 report. Part of that ability lies in the facility to link different ratings together, to compare the ratings and text comments and to generate, with the recipient, a set of feedback messages. Feedback messages generated in this way are theories. Their interpretation is not checked with the raters. The act of processing has transferred ownership of the numbers from those giving the ratings to those who are decoding them.

In the decoding, the facilitators and recipients generate narratives that make sense of the ratings, of similarities and differences. The stories about the numbers, as they become theories, become also the basis for a range of decisions. Although confidential, the knock-on effect of the feedback discussion is that a core narrative is being constructed, or added to, about the
recipient. And this narrative will be reflected beyond that particular discussion, possibly within the organisation (depending on the particular reporting arrangements) and certainly within the recipient’s own sense of self.

Shared or personal narratives, of course, give rise to emotional responses and expectations, which can sometimes lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (see Eden, 2003, for a useful explanation of what has come to be known as the Pygmalion Effect and Golem Effect). Therefore, much more needs to be understood about the psychological impact of the facilitated feedback session on the recipient and the narratives created about his or her performance.

So far, then, the numbers at work in 360 have been shown to be the result of distancing the ratings from their sources and applying quantitative processes, which, by their very nature, communicate that the results of the 360 can be manipulated in the same way that objective measurements can be. The processed averages focus attention on differences between the rater groups, rather than on differences within the group (although the latter is not denied). The facilitator and recipient create narratives to explain the data, without checking these meanings with those who supplied the ratings. Interestingly, the final output resulting from processing the numbers is not a further set of numbers, but rather narratives. Participants describe their 360’s with stories about the main feedback messages, not with ratings summarising their performance. Nevertheless, the ratings are central to the 360 process. Indeed, it is the rituals of disembodying and processing the ratings that helps to provide a quasi-scientific presentation of 360.

Throughout this research, a theme has been the conflicting tensions within the 360 process. Tension can also be observed with numbers at work. Specifically, whilst participants talk in ways that communicate a value being placed on the scientific nature of 360, at the same time there is evidence that they employ actions of resistance that are at odds with a more objective stance on 360. This is the third theme that supports the argument in this research that there are scientific rituals at play: participants work ‘bilingually’ both talking about the objectivity and reliability of numbers in the same
interview as talking about how they use numbers as signposts, rather than measurements. This concerns the methods that different raters employ to link ratings and text comments, and to ensure that they are relaying their message rather than prioritising ‘accurate’ measurements. Raters want to signal what they want the recipient to focus on. They prioritise what matters to them, rather than laying claim to rating in what they might see as an absolutely objective manner. Numbers are used as signposts, not as measures. This is softer, it is about holding out a message instead of categorising someone’s performance with one number. Yet the talk about 360 and its validity and reliability all centres on the numbers as measures.

8.1.4 McDonaldisation of feedback
I argued in Chapter 3 that evidence from the 360 research and consultancy material was in line with a conceptualisation of 360 as the McDonaldisation of feedback. What the case studies in this research contribute is a more nuanced view. The talk of the consultants and some HR managers does indeed suggest that they value the four principles of McDonaldisation. Somewhat more convoluted however is the talk of raters and recipients. The case studies show how 360 users in these roles engage in quasi-scientific rituals that have the effect of appearing to value the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and the use of technology (rather than direct human contact). Indeed, at times it requires some effort to at least keep up this appearance. However, those engaged in playing out the rituals are aware that, for example, they are finding ‘under the radar’ methods of having direct human contact. So, although the 360 process loses efficiency, and although the numbers are used by some raters and recipients as signposts rather than as calculable measures, the rituals continue to support the image of McDonaldisation. There is something attractive about a predictable process for, as Weaver (2005) notes, some people gravitate towards McDonaldised environments.

Viewing 360 as the McDonaldisation of feedback emphasises an interest in simplifying large quantities of feedback data. As Ashmos, Dennis and
McDaniel et al. (2000: 580) say “The pursuit of simplicity as a way that organizations try to brace themselves against the onslaught of unknowability”. The 360 process is described in the current research as representing an attempt to simplify complex messages. The case studies, perhaps especially the autoethnography, show that as facilitators/HR managers, raters and recipients engage more actively with 360 they also add further complexity to the simplified messages. The use of numerical ratings (calculability), for example, gives a sense of (apparent or surface) simplicity for the raters in delivering feedback and for the recipients in understanding that feedback. My own experience of 360 showed how I used my own complex calculations and manipulations of the ratings to try and understand the messages. One of the raters in Company A spent considerable time constructing messages through the combination of ratings and comments, and disregarding any official guidance about what each number signified. In both of these situations, there was still a commitment to the use of numbers and to maintaining a semblance of objectivity.

Use of technology to replace time-consuming human contact is the fourth of Ritzer’s principles. Yet, while the vast majority of 360 is automated, in Company B, more than one site moved towards greater time input by the facilitator and recipient. It was predominantly the HR managers who adapted 360, customising it in ways that efficiencies were lost and a sense of ownership was increased. In addition, a formalised, depersonalised approach such as 360-degree feedback precludes any of the participants engaging with each other. In ensuring efficiency, contact between humans is minimised (Ritzer, 1996: 132). In the two case studies, there was limited follow-up when the standard 360 was being used. However, in the locally developed versions in Company B, recipients were encouraged to follow up with their raters. Furthermore, in one of Company B’s local adaptations, there is more time given to contact between the HR Managers and each individual. Such changes exemplify increased demands on participants’ time, thereby departing from a streamlined, time-efficient process. At the same time however, participants engaged in these more complex versions of 360 continued to talk about their processes in ways that suggested a scientific
approach. Ritzer (1996) understands this tension between a rational approach and departures from such rationality as the result of more privileged or senior uses personalising the process. He typifies this as a characteristic risk of McDonaldisation, that some individuals or groups will indeed reject the core efficient process.

In summary, the quasi-scientific rituals outlined above all help to generate a picture of 360 as objective and concerned with measurement. However, the case studies revealed how participants play out these rituals at the same time as acknowledging the ways in which their behaviour contradict and undermine the very ideas of anonymity and rational use of numbers.

8.2 THE SOCIAL PROCESS OF 360

For the first time in 360 research, 360 is defined as a social process rather than as a tool to provide more objective feedback. 360 is shown as an evolving process, changed and developed by a range of participants, that is: it is a human process. Participants, or ‘audiences’, both encode and decode messages about both the process and content of 360, thereby demonstrating that they are active producers, not passive consumers, in the construction of meaning. Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding, model highlights the dynamics at play, as participants give meanings to numbers and comments that do not necessarily match those meanings intended by those who wrote them. As participants engage with 360, they develop ways of working with anonymity, ratings and narrative comments. As they do this, we can see a tension played out between a drive for simplicity and a desire to give greater meaning to the process and its messages. This tension between simplification and complexification is visible within individuals’ actions and at the level of designing 360 processes. Adopters of the 360 take on the core idea, namely gathering feedback from raters in different relationships to the recipient, and then they adapt other aspects. Local ownership and management of the process exemplifies the tension between simplification and complexification, as in the drive to simplify the system other complexities are added.
I present three arguments to support the analysis of 360 as a social process. Firstly, participants are active in their construction of the meanings they give to, and take from, 360. Secondly, participants react to the apparent simplicity of 360 by adding complexity; while attempts to navigate complexity result in simplification. Thirdly, an adoption-adaption process takes place as managers adopt the core principle of 360 (the gathering of feedback from different sources), abandon other principles and adapt 360 to suit their own preferences and needs. In arguing that 360 is a social process, this PhD also includes the perspectives of a far wider range of 360 participants than has been the case in previous 360 research.

8.2.1 Active participant involvement encoding/decoding 360 data
Research interest continues in identifying the factors that affect recipients’ understanding of ratings. However, to-date such research has been based on a positivist approach to ratings. That is, ratings have been seen as having an inherent meaning, which may be accurately or inaccurately interpreted depending on such factors as the recipient’s personality, context, social identity, learning or performance goal orientation. In contrast, the current research conceptualises the different audiences in the production of a 360 as active. Instead of passively consuming a meaning that is embedded in the ratings or text comments, recipients and facilitators construct their own meanings and co-create their interpretation. In the same way, instead of passively consuming the meaning of questions on a questionnaire, raters relate the questions to their own context, and consider the meanings they wish to give to each question, as part of making the questionnaire, and the process of completing it, meaningful. Facilitators, HR managers and consultants all bring their own perspectives and purposes to their active involvement as participants in constructing their own meanings of 360. Each of these different groups impacts on the others. As an example, the meaning(s) that each participant gives to the rating ‘5’ will be somewhat different, with different contexts and stories being crafted, and different purposes when using a ‘5’ to communicate a message. Therefore, conceptualising the different audiences of 360 as active creators of meaning
calls into question the apparent simplicity of interpreting inherent meanings of 360 ratings.

Indeed, the case studies showed that the meanings of 360 are actively constructed along a ‘spiral of meaning-making’, such that different stakeholders each contribute to the interpreted meanings of 360. Meanings build on previous meanings and evolve. Given the different interpretations that case study participants gave to numbers for example, it is clear that often a recipient may not arrive at the meaning intended by the company or the rater. A spiral represents this continual re-making of meanings, each one based on, and reading into, earlier messages.

Hall’s audience reception theory provides a helpful basis for understanding the dynamics at play here. The current application of Hall’s work builds an understanding of the multi-directional dynamics at play when participants engage with making sense of 360. The ‘text’ of 360 is most obviously the ratings and narrative comments, possibly along with the graphical representation of the ratings. However, ‘text’ can be taken as being wider than this, so that it includes the spoken exchanges between any of the participants, at any stage of the 360 process as well as the design of 360 in content and process. This expanded understanding of what constitutes the 360 ‘text’ is useful when we consider the different ways that the text may be understood. Using Hall’s categorisation, readings of 360 can be construed as dominant readings, negotiated readings or oppositional readings.

Hall explains that a person’s preferred reading of a text takes account of their social position, thereby incorporating or reflecting their social position within their reading; or a person’s preferred reading may articulate their social position as oppositional to the status quo, thereby placing them in conflict with the preferred reading. In this way, the individual’s or group’s social position forms part of the dynamic of the reading of the text. However, rather than analysing the individual social identities of those involved, the current research considers the role of each person in the 360 process, that is whether they are a consultant, HR manager, facilitator, rater, recipient or someone
who has been in more than one of these roles. Therefore, dominant readings are taken to be the preferred reading from the viewpoint of the organisation; negotiated readings are those produced by each person (sometimes with the help of a facilitator) to take account of their own position in relationship to the organisation and to the others involved in the process; and oppositional readings are those where participants have constructed a reading that is in conflict with the preferred reading.

8.2.1.1 Dominant (preferred) readings
A dominant reading of 360 includes the idea that the data are objective, and that the process delivers more accurate performance measurement than the line manager’s ratings alone. This reading is apparent in the 360 literature and is also reflected in the case studies here, more particularly amongst the consultants and some HR managers. What is perhaps more intriguing is the way that participants actively engage in rituals (as described in the previous section), which uphold this dominant reading, while at the same time finding ways to work around, for example, the expectation of anonymity. Moreover, in the autoethnography, whilst I arrived with misgivings about a numbers-based 360 process, I went to some lengths to work within that model and recognise within me a desire to be behaving in line with the ‘dominant reading’. For me and other participants there is something attractive about adhering to the idea of 360 as an objective process. Although contradicting other beliefs I hold, I notice within me the motivation to be rated by clients and colleagues as performing according to professionally sanctioned competencies, within a widely recognised process. Misgivings or disagreement therefore sit alongside a desire to play out rituals of conforming to the dominant reading.

8.2.1.2 Negotiated readings
The numbers do not provide a clear-cut message for either the facilitators or recipients. Even when narrative comments are not gathered, and the discussion between facilitator and recipient is entirely focused on ‘percentage effectiveness’ (as described in Chapter 7, in the section ‘Internally developed
and owned’), the meaning is not to be found in the number itself, but rather in the discussion of that number. It is by considering what might be the intended meanings within the number that recipients begin to make their own sense of the feedback. Whether the numbers are averages, or highlight agreement or show difference, the participants in 360 read into the meanings of each rating. In doing so, the recipient is working with a ‘negotiated reading’ of the ratings. Raters encode their messages into numbers, and facilitators and recipients decode those numbers to formulate coherent stories. Due to the lack of actual contact between raters and recipients to explain/clarify feedback messages, it is unclear as to the degree of match between the messages, as they were in the raters’ minds, and the messages as the facilitator and recipient decode them.

The current study contributes to discussions about the role of coaches or facilitators in 360 (for example, Luthans and Peterson, 2003; Thach, 2002; Seifert, Yukl and McDonald, 2003). Specifically, all three case studies show the very active role of the facilitator in decoding messages in the 360 report. In some instances, the facilitator describes themselves as letting the recipient do their own analysis, while in others they were more directive. At times the more active interventions by the facilitator centred on ensuring that the recipient left with a particular understanding of feedback. This occurred when the facilitator had decoded the report to arrive at a different interpretation from the recipient.

In such cases, it is hard to say whether the facilitator’s interpretation resulted in the message intended by the raters. However, the Learning and Development Manager in Company B described facilitator training as including guidance on how to decode 360 messages, meaning that there is a preferred reading of those messages. Therefore, the interaction between the facilitator and the recipient provide examples of two kinds of negotiated readings. Firstly, when both collaborate to understand the messages and secondly, when the facilitator believes they know the preferred reading and attempts to deliver this, leading to negotiation between the two. Whichever
version prevails, together the facilitator and recipient read into the text and the relationships represented there.

8.2.1.3 Oppositional readings

The current research provides some insight into the ways that individuals occupy a position of opposition either in respect to the way that they are expected to use reports, or to the centrally sanctioned design for 360. For example, one manager in Company B completed a 360 not to understand how others viewed his performance, nor to develop his skills, but instead he attempted to use his 360 report to gain promotion. He went against guidance and chose fewer raters than was expected, resulting in responses from only six colleagues. He did not succeed at gathering the positive feedback he had expected, thereby evidencing what might be described as a failed attempt at an oppositional reading.

The second example of an oppositional reading is also in Company B, where more than one site designed their own 360 process. The message that 360 is valuable was accepted by the local managers who then proceeded to adopt the elements they liked, and adapt those elements they didn’t like. This operated in opposition to the idea promoted by the consultant and some HR managers that 360 would provide quantity of data with reduced time investment.

The current study applies Hall’s encoding/decoding model to 360, developing the idea of 360 messages involving not only the content of the report but also the design and implementation of the process. Indeed, the design of a 360 produces a message. The rating scales, the competencies, the communication of the process all are part of the text, encoded with messages by the designers. Some messages are intended and conscious. Some are the result of taken-for-granted expectations about, for example, anonymised ratings. Managers read meanings into how 360 is designed and implemented. Managers may follow the dominant reading: for example, they
may abide by the quasi-scientific rituals and adhere to expectations about anonymity on grounds of honesty and safety. Or managers may adopt an oppositional reading, which might be a view of 360 as a social process. Alternatively, managers may use a negotiated reading: for example, accepting that there is an expectation that they behave in accordance to the corporate competencies, whilst at the same time reading into colleagues’ comments that some of these competencies are not as important as others. Whichever reading is used, participants in their different roles through the process are active in the encoding and decoding of messages. And this very process of ‘reading’ will itself impact on the organisational culture and relationships.

8.2.2 Complexification-Simplification in 360
Referring to Rosenau and complexity theory, Ang (2011: 782) argues that “the contradictions, ambiguities, complexities and uncertainties … have replaced the regularities of prior epochs”. Yet while the meanings that participants create from 360 may at times be complex, the apparent simplicity of 360 is also one of its attractions. Indeed, as Ang says (2011:787):

*What we should also aspire to, as part of our research endeavour, is explore what kinds of simplifications need to be developed in order to cope, deal with, or navigate the concrete complex realities we are confronted with.*

Systems, through simplifying, by definition leave out some elements (Stewart, 2001). This is evident in 360: it is a feedback system that leaves out people’s identities, context, and detail. Through habitual use of a system, Stewart (2001) argues that we forget what has been omitted during its design. And it seems that we don’t pay attention to, for example, the lack of structure in narrative comments, the fact that it is not possible to link ratings with particular narrative comments (while still honouring anonymity, if that is the preference). 360 might be described as following a machine model: a complex rule system (calculating and organising ratings and text) that creates a simple process and simplified outcomes (Ashmos, *et al.*, 2002). Simplicity in a system can result in people experiencing distance and isolation from one another (Stewart,
2001). Moreover, larger groups have lower average connectivity and “thus have a lower and more manageable level of complexity” (Stewart, 2001:346). I argue that 360 exacerbates this through the lack of accountability and contact or connection between people.

Indeed, as was shown in the case studies and autoethnography, the processes did not stay simple, as participants engaged in ‘under the radar’ usage of 360, creating their own meaning-making methods and working against the protocol of, for example, anonymity by identifying raters and seeking clarity. So now we can see another way of characterising 360, as a “‘simple’ rule system that will generate complex (not simple) processes and potentially complex (not simple) outcomes” (Ashmos et al., 2002: 190).

As mentioned earlier, simplicity models are described “as a way that organizations try to brace themselves against the onslaught of unknowability” (Ashmos, Dennis and McDaniel, 2000: 580), such that, certainly at an organisational level, simplicity is seen to be of value. For the individual recipient, there is also a premium on simplicity in so far as being able to take away some clear messages. However, time and again in the interviews, recipients voiced their disquiet at the oversimplification of messages, underlined by lack of context and leading to a concomitant difficulty in understanding what was being said or asked for by the raters. In addition, some facilitators and HR managers want to be more active in their involvement in the process. There are examples of participants changing the process to allow more context, more contact with at least the facilitator and more conversation. In the present section, therefore, the topic is not simplification, but rather complexification.

At each stage of the 360 process, participants’ actions may result in greater complexity. Closer involvement with either the manager commissioning the 360, those giving the feedback or the recipient(s), opens up conversation, identifies more questions and perhaps inevitably builds more context, along with ambiguity. An analysis of the locally designed 360’s shows how site-based HR managers, consultants and at times the individual recipients, take
actions that make the messages more complex, more contextualised and more detailed. This tendency towards complexification is theorised here as a tendency for some participants to want an increased social understanding, rather than an understanding of absolute measures divorced from context.

360 is used as a leadership development tool. Leadership is about relating to those who are being led, it is “not just an individual phenomenon. It is a complex phenomenon that encompasses interactions between the leader and the social and organizational environment” (Dalakoura, 2010: 433). Although value may be found in identifying a limited number of high priority feedback messages, it could also be argued that as part of engaging with complexity, there is value in a leader developing the ability to recognise and handle ambiguity. Indeed, raters’ different subjective observations, may each elicit different interpretations by the recipient. With such variation between observations and interpretations, one might argue that it is unrealistic and possibly unhelpful to expect a simple message about whether or not, for example, a particular behaviour needs improving. Maybe an ambiguous message is more relevant and more accurately describes the range of reactions that have to be dealt with. Ambiguity becomes part of reality: “in the socially constructed world in which employees work, others’ judgements about them (no matter how biased they may be) constitute an important reality” (London and Smither 1995: 805). Therefore, rather than engaging the recipient in the simplification of feedback messages, it is argued here that engaging them in an appreciation of the complexity and ambiguity of messages may be as, or more, valuable.

The locally designed process in Company B, that involved the use of the Johari Window, is an example of applying what Ashmos et al., (2002) describe as a simple rule, namely that of participation. Greater participation on the part of the coach, recipient and raters increases complexity and connectivity. It is unclear from this example what the longer-term impact may be on the site of this approach to 360. However, it may be that it will reflect Ashmos et al.’s (2002: 203) own view that greater complexity and connectivity
“allows the organization to self-organize, to re-energize, and to co-evolve in ways that are more likely to lead to organizational success”.

8.2.3 Adoption-Adaptation in 360
The core ideas of 360 identified here are: the involvement of raters in different relationships to the recipient; anonymity for raters; the processing of data away from the recipient.

Surprising to the researcher, both corporate case studies showed that the more common understanding of 360 was the annual process of inviting email feedback as part of the performance management system. This annual process has never been included in academic research on 360. Indeed, amongst both practitioners and academics, 360 would not be understood to include anything other than a process, which involves completion of a (usually online) competency-based questionnaire by a number of raters, leading to the generation of a feedback report that is then given to the individual feedback recipient. It is this process that is the subject of academic research. However, several interviewees, including those who had received 360 reports, started by talking about annual 360. This demonstrates that the annual process, with its greater frequency and more standardised use, being the process that is most commonly recognised as ‘360’.

The annual 360 incorporates what can be assumed to be those characteristics most valued by the organisation, and possibly by individuals, whilst at the same time deviating from the online competency-based version in certain ways. Specifically, the annual 360 has three similarities with the online competency-based version. Firstly, the feedback-givers represent different status relationships to the recipient, with email requests going to colleagues who are senior to the individual, peers with the individual or direct reports to them. Secondly, there is anonymity for the feedback givers; or at least only the recipient’s manager knows their identities. Thirdly, the recipient receives processed feedback, rather than the original data (emails). It is the
line manager who decides which quotes to include in the appraisal document, and what to paraphrase.

In addition to similarities, there are also differences between the end-of-year 360 and the online process. Firstly, it is not usually the recipient who selects the feedback-givers; instead, with annual 360, the line manager is very much in charge of the process, deciding who to ask for feedback, deciding which exchanges to pursue and deciding which data to include in the appraisal document and how to present it. In the online competency-based version, recipients select their raters, and therefore, whilst they don’t absolutely know who gave which rating, they have a pool of known colleagues who they will have in mind when reading the report. Secondly, in the annual 360, the line manager knows the identities of the feedback-givers, and therefore has access to them if they wish to continue an exchange about the feedback recipient. As far as the recipient is concerned, the feedback-givers remain anonymous.

Thirdly, there is a lack of uniformity or standardised measurement since whatever the chosen approach to annual 360, feedback is given in narrative comments, not numerical ratings. In addition, neither the analysis nor presentation of data is linked to any specific measures or competencies, and may therefore be more prone to bias that is not explained in any standardised manner. Although not necessarily the case, the email requests for feedback may at times include a reminder of the annual objectives, or may direct the colleague’s attention to specific aspects of work, or may occasionally encourage reference to the competency framework. As a result, the format is not uniform. Furthermore, the total quantity of comment is far less than that produced with the competency-based version. By adopting the term ‘360’, and those aspects of the process that are seen as most valuable, organisations are taking ownership of 360, adopting what they value and then adapting it, at times sizing it down, ridding it of detailed measures and fitting it to their own annual appraisal needs. In so doing, 360 is closer both to the line manager and the individual, less formal, more similar to everyday exchanges when a line manager asks others how their people are doing. 360 continues
to move through processes of adoption and adaptation. It is becoming embedded in organisations, alongside other practices, owned by its users. It might therefore be argued to be more of a social process, than a mechanised one.

Three main arguments have been outlined here to support the contention that 360 is a social process. In contrast to the way that 360 is presented in the literature, 360 in the current case studies is revealed as a process that is adapted and developed by the people who use it. Those involved, at each stage of the process, are active, not passive in the meanings they construct not only about the feedback messages but also about the process of 360. As individuals become interested in 360, they adapt it, changing the process in small or big ways. Frequently, this is shown to result in more complexity rather than simplicity.

Therefore, 360 is presented here as a social process, created through participants making meaning of and through it. Complexity is inevitably a part of those processes. Indeed, one example in Company B showed a local adaptation of 360, which removed it from being an online, distant, ratings-based process to being one that was comments-based and requiring lengthier contact between the facilitator and recipient. The autoethnography showed how I frequently introduced greater complexity into the interpretation of my own 360. The status of 360 as a social process is therefore based on, firstly the active involvement of all participants in the construction of meaning; secondly, the continuing changes that participants make to the process, more frequently in this study towards complexity and away from the control at the centre of the organisation; and thirdly, the example of the adoption of the core ideas of 360 as both organisations implement a 360 process that takes place as part of performance management.

8.3 METHODOLOGY: DEVELOPMENT OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY
This is the first interpretive study of 360, the first substantial study that does not adopt a positivist approach. In adopting an interpretive approach, I argue
that such an approach reflects the sense-making processes that 360 participants themselves engage in. Moreover, this work contains the first autoethnography that explores 360. This method was successful in shedding light on the internal psychological processes that one individual experienced during two rounds of receiving 360 feedback. It is also the first time that autoethnography is used alongside corporate case studies, bringing an interpretive perspective to both the case studies and the autoethnography, which has enriched the depth of the empirical work and enabled insights, leading to more developed theorising.

The third contribution of this current work to 360 research is, therefore, its methodological approach.

8.4 CRITIQUE OF THE METHODOLOGY

This PhD has been undertaken with thoroughness and rigor. In the process, it asserts a number of theoretical positions in keeping with an interpretive approach to research. Yet, as with much qualitative work, attempts at generalising from the data should be treated with caution. This critique returns to the evaluation criteria outlined at the end of Chapter 4.

8.4.1 Contribution to the literature

In Chapter 4, I cited Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997: 1025): “a socially constructed view of science suggests that knowledge cannot be known separately from the knower”. It could be argued that the research design has not completely followed this premise, given that I claim to boundary the autoethnography:

I decided initially to keep any observations from my own paid work out of my autoethnographic writing and instead to focus on exploring my experience of receiving 360. The main way that this boundary is evident is that I do not analyse my experience of 360 as trainer, facilitator or designer. However, I do refer to this experience, and inevitably it does impact on my observations.
Indeed, it could be argued that all autoethnography is attempting to overcome the very idea of boundaries between different parts of an autoethnographer’s life. Writing this section at the end of the PhD process, I can see with the benefit of hindsight that the current work represents the beginning of my autoethnographic writing on 360, rather than that it is complete. Reflecting on the decisions to boundary my autoethnography, I can now see that I wanted to distance myself somewhat from the consultancy and occupational psychology worlds, so that I felt less engaged with practitioner discussions about how best to measure performance through 360. Reflecting still further, I realise that I almost completely stopped any active engagement with 360 as a practitioner during my PhD. I wanted within this PhD to try and situate myself within a similar (although clearly not the same) situation as those I was interviewing, so that I could access thoughts and feelings not easily accessed in an interview (Sparkes, 2002). The next stage of this autoethnographic endeavour will involve me incorporating insights back into my 360 practice as a trainer, facilitator, designer and coach, reflecting and writing on that practice.

I have discussed how I had at least attempted to establish a boundary between my experiences of 360 as a recipient and as a practitioner. It might still be possible to question the wisdom of such a decision, but my original reasons remain convincing at least to me. Less convincing might be my decision not to include my experiences as a 360-researcher within the current autoethnography. Once again, I argue that I wanted to focus on my experience as a 360-recipient, especially as I considered the feedback as potentially beneficial for my coaching work. However, this separation between researching Others and researching Self could be challenged.

8.4.2 Development of theory and epistemological integrity
To gain a PhD, a researcher-in-training (as PhD students are known) has to make at least one unique contribution to their field of interest. On reflection, I perhaps interpreted this as meaning that, in order to retain some uniqueness to my work, I would share and discuss insights from my research after the
PhD rather than during the PhD. Nonetheless, I did present some of the findings at an academic conference and at a practitioners’ meeting of the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development). That having been said, more thoughtful sharing and discussion with both academics and practitioners during the period of this PhD might have further enhanced the honing of theory, and the testing of its epistemological integrity.

8.4.3 Data collection and analysis
There are four specific issues I address in this section: the provision of context within each study; the analysis of a ‘chain of meaning-making’; the thematic analysis; and the production of transcripts.

A justifiable criticism of this study might be the limited use of context for the two corporates. This raises the question of how much context is sufficient. Yet providing context presents challenges when companies are promised anonymity, which mirrors the challenges within 360 of maintaining rater anonymity while still supplying feedback recipients with sufficient context so that they can understand feedback messages. And the same solution would seem to suggest itself in each of those situations: no anonymity. To have carried out this PhD research on that basis would have required skills beyond those I had at the time. However, at this point it becomes possible to return to Company B and discuss with ‘Steve’ options for further 360 research and co-writing. Company A requested that their study be removed from the published PhD thesis. Arguably, the limited context for both case studies is a weakness.

The research design attempted to analyse perspectives from a range of participants in the 360 process, resulting in describing participants as being involved in a ‘chain of meaning-making’. In part this was successful. However, I had not anticipated that each participant would play several different roles in the process. For example, some of the HR managers had received 360, given 360 feedback, contracted with consultancies for the provision of 360 services and monitored service delivery and reported to senior management on progress. The research design and interview schedule were constructed on the inaccurate assumption that it would be
meaningful for people to talk about only one of these roles. Inevitably, this weakness in the research design has also highlighted an interesting and potentially valuable avenue to be explored further: how playing one role in the 360 process impacts on others.

The interview and autoethnographic data were analysed thematically. I was the only person involved in carrying out that thematic analysis. Another approach would have been to have others code interviews to verify the meaningfulness of the themes selected, and to check the validity of allocating quotes to particular themes. However, I had adopted Locke and Golden-Biddle’s (1997: 1025) perspective that “[t]he researcher ‘enacts the meaning-making activity of deciding what knowledge counts”, where I as researcher decide what constitutes interesting material within the 360 research community. However, the involvement of others in coding, checking coding and discussing the coding rationale would perhaps have added further depth to the analysis.

Transcripts were not returned to participants for comment. Although returning transcripts for comment is not standard practice for all interviewers, engaging participants in discussion about their interviews may have provided further interesting data. Certainly, increasing the involvement of interviewees in this way would have been more consistent with the ideas in this PhD about following up comments with those who make them. As stated in Chapter 4, both company contacts made clear that time was limited for their people, and further requests, such as checking transcripts, were unlikely to be met. Therefore, whether or not to return transcripts for comment was not my decision. However, this could be seen as a weakness and an inconsistency in the design of the research.

8.4.3.1 Validity and reliability

In Chapter 4, I described validity as “a rhetorical organisation of (scientific) arguments. It is a feat of persuasion – and therefore a social construction” (Aguinaldo, 2004: 128). Indeed, the content and process of this research have mirrored each other, within on an epistemological view that
measurement inevitably involves subjectivity. This results in a thesis the validity of which is also to be measured subjectively, according to the degree of persuasiveness in its argument. Nonetheless, the methodology might have been strengthened with more specific checks on the argument’s persuasiveness, possibly through more active discussion with other practitioners and 360-researchers.

8.4.3.2 Rigour
The current research started out with an interest in how people make meaning from 360. Once findings were analysed, leading to the conceptualisation of 360 as a social process, then it was this concept that dominated the research. Therefore, rigour was demonstrated in the logical pursuit of this core idea (Donaldson, Qui and Luo, 2012), ensuring that connections were made between the methodology, methods literature, findings and conclusion. Consequently, while the contribution of this research rests on the adoption of an alternative perspective on 360, it might arguably be claimed that rigour may have reduced openness to yet further insights.

8.4.3.3 Credibility and trustworthiness
In a desire to increase credibility, I wrote the autoethnographic chapter in a less personal style than that adopted by many autoethnographers. Interestingly, in so doing, I may indeed have increased the credibility of the research with those who favour positivist approaches, while at the same time losing credibility with those who favour a more evocative autoethnographic style.

8.4.3.4 Persuasiveness
In Chapter 4, I described plausibility as being critical to ensure persuasiveness, whereby the resulting story should be believable and coherent throughout. I suggested that only the audience can measure the extent to which I have produced such a story. Writing this at the end of the
PhD process, three colleagues have read the thesis and, certainly for those who are practitioners and outside the 360-research world, the story is indeed received as persuasive. Beyond this, the persuasiveness of the work remains to be tested in wider arenas.

8.5 LIMITATIONS

In this section I identify three limitations, which then lead to some of the implications for practitioners and researchers: I only completed two out of the planned three rounds of 360 on my practice as coach; the detail of how people make sense of 360 would benefit from more exploration; the role of visual data (graphs) was not explored in the current research.

In the original design, I had intended to complete three rounds of 360, one per year, on myself as coach. In Chapter 7, I reflected on my lack of interest in carrying out the third round. Inevitably, my reactions provided interesting data. However, I could have emulated the more creative practice that I discovered in Company B, or I could have developed the practice that I read about in the NHS. The fact I did neither is in and of itself interesting to reflect on. However, the limitation in the current study is arguably that I remained committed to carrying out only the more traditional form of 360 for myself. Whilst departing from the traditional form of 360 might indeed have enabled different insights, it would have taken me away from my original plan of immersing myself in the more widely adopted 360 process.

The inclusion of autoethnographic writing accessed how I as one person made cognitive and emotional sense of 360. However, the use of interviews within the corporate case studies limited the data to examples of how participants talked about the process, and the meanings they created. A different method would be needed to gather data about how participants vocalised their sense-making as they rated others, or discussed their own 360 report with a facilitator, or negotiated delivery of 360 services. I decided not to proceed with alternative research methods for two reasons. Chronologically, the first reason arose early on in the design phase, when I was exploring research options. When I discussed with my key contacts the possibility of
recording real-time facilitated feedback sessions it became clear that there were possibly ethical and certainly delicate issues that would have to be handled: for pragmatic reasons I decided not to continue down this route. The second reason was that, as my reading and my autoethnographic writing continued, I became increasingly interested in what other participants thought of their experience subsequent to their 360. I wanted to explore participants’ post-hoc rationalisations that reveal considered views rather than real-time responses. Therefore, although a limitation to the current research might be that it centres on the talk about 360, in the context of the current research it is precisely this talk that reveals the longer-standing messages encoded into and decoded from the process and content of 360.

The third limitation identified here concerns the use of graphs as visual data in 360 reports. To date no research has addressed this aspect of 360, instead continuing to analyse the ratings. Moreover, even though I was well acquainted with the use of graphs in reports, I too ignored this in the design of the current research. Indeed, the potential significance of visual data only became apparent in the course of the empirical work. Certainly, more is yet to be discovered about how people make sense of the increasing range of graphs incorporated within 360 reports.

8.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As a practitioner, what I take from this research is that I need to assist clients to articulate their purpose(s) in using 360. At an organisational level, there are opportunities to explore with clients how to design a feedback process so that those who engage with it, whether as givers or receivers of feedback, develop both their individual and collective skills in feedback. Furthermore, in an attempt to build capacity for working with ambiguity and complexity, I am interested in the facilitation of feedback exchanges that allows for pluralist views instead of averaging.

What this means, for me, is that I will continue to develop a f2f-360 (face-to-face 360), as described in the Appendix 10. However, my own experience
has persuaded me to consider numerical ratings as useful signposts that can lead to a story being told.

And finally, I am struck by the learning involved in creating a feedback process. Therefore, I look to continue working with individual clients as they establish their own approaches to gathering feedback from multiple sources.

This research offers opportunities for consultants and HR practitioners to develop their approaches to 360, specifically:

- To emphasise the value of 360 for providing an improved understanding of the perceptions of different stakeholders, rather than its value being for measurements which can be averaged and ‘normed’. This might involve clearer information for raters about: the recipient’s own goals in undertaking 360; sharing the development plan with raters; gathering follow-up feedback on performance against the development plan.
- To offer training, or at least briefings, for raters to help them clarify their own use of numerical ratings and to improve the quality of narrative comments.
- To engage with, and listen to, those HR or line managers who create their own 360 processes within the organisation. Identification of which elements of 360 managers adopt or adapt should highlight what is experienced as valuable. This may usefully inform further development in 360 design.

8.7 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further qualitative research is needed to explore the ways that the various participants engage with making meaning of 360, specifically:

- Ethnographic studies to provide fuller contextual details of where, how and why 360 is used in organisational settings
- Exploration of the consultants’ and designers’ roles in the 360 process.
- Ethnographic studies of the decision-making processes as organisations select, manage and evaluate 360 processes.
- Further exploration of the adoption-adaptation of 360 within organisations
• Exploration of how raters encode their messages
• Exploration of the extent to which messages decoded by facilitators and recipients are those messages intended by raters
• Comparison between the experience, skills and reactions evident in informal day-to-day feedback and in 360, and to examine the relationship between the two.
• Psychological impact of facilitated feedback sessions in 360.
• Exploration of the readings developed within facilitated feedback sessions, possibly using verbal protocols\(^\text{18}\) as a method.

8.8 CLOSED WORDS
For a contribution to research to be regarded as interesting and influential rigorously executed research is not enough, according to Alvesson and Sandberg (2012) it must also challenge an audience’s taken-for-granted assumptions in some significant ways. To achieve this, they propose that researchers need to carefully consider the assumptions underlying existing literature, and how those assumptions shape the understanding and conceptualization of the subject matter in question, thus demonstrating reflexivity as a key quality of rigorous thinking.

This research represents a challenge to existing 360 research. It presents 360 as a social process, in which the spiral of participants is actively involved in the production of meaning and in the shaping of the process itself. Furthermore, the research identifies quasi-scientific rituals that are played out within the 360 process, demonstrating a ritual observance to expectations concerned with anonymity, triangulation, simplicity and the use of ratings, whilst at the same time behaving in resistance to such scientific ideals. And

\(^{18}\) Verbal protocol analysis “is a process-tracing method that requires subjects to “think aloud” while making a decision or judgment. Statements are typically tape-recorded, transcribed and content coded for analysis. Such factors as the amount of attention paid to specific items of information or the sequence in which items are considered can be used to investigate the process by which decisions are made” (Barber and Roehling, 1993: 845). Some use has been made of verbal protocols to understand self- and supervisor evaluations of performance (Martin and Klimoski, 1990)
finally, by integrating autoethnographic writing and corporate case studies, the use of reflexivity comes to the fore.

There are inherent contradictions within the design of 360. Researchers and consultants write and talk about 360 as a more valid and reliable way of measuring performance, and yet many of them also acknowledge that it is built on subjective views. There is an epistemological disconnect in the idea that adding subjectivities together produces objectivity (van der Heijden and Nijhof, 2004). The current empirical work shows how participants collaborate or rebel in their use of 360. In collaborating, (and taking a dominant reading) participants uphold the pseudo-science of 360. They talk the talk of science and objectivity. Quasi-scientific rituals are played out that reinforce the idea of 360 being objective. Pseudo-anonymity is evident as recipients acknowledge that they (believe they) know who said what in their feedback, and at the same time find circuitous routes to having follow-up conversations with those raters without destroying the appearance of anonymity. Numbers are the main element of 360 reports, and yet subjective meaning-making can be seen as raters encode their own meanings into the ratings, combining them with narrative comments in ways not envisaged by the designers, and not reflected in the guidance given by consultants and researchers. Expert facilitators become necessary to interpret the ‘real’ meanings within the numbers and graphs and calculations. Working with their expert facilitator, recipients decode meanings from numbers and words in their 360 report, creating whole stories that make sense to them. And yet, these stories cannot be checked with those that provided the raw material for them. The talk is of objectivity. The practice is one of ingenious creativity.

The practice of importing models used in one area of research, or indeed in a particular discipline, into another demonstrates the use of allegorical thinking. Using a model to analyse a concept and empirical data sheds light on practices and can create new insights. This PhD drew on two theories not previously considered in 360 research. Firstly, Ritzer’s (1996) model helps to identify the dominant reading of 360, namely that 360 is objective and scientific, a process that is designed to simplify large quantities of feedback,
through the use of online, number-based questionnaires. Analysing 360 as an example of McDonaldisation helps to see the scientific principles underlying traditional 360 processes, as well as the inconsistencies. (i) 360 is promoted as efficient in that raters need only 15-30 minutes to completing the questionnaire and nothing else is asked of them, while the individual recipient receives a detailed 360 report, with data already analysed, therefore requiring a small investment of time to understand. However, examples from the case studies demonstrate that some raters and recipients actually invest considerable time into 360; (ii) 360 reports are standardised, based on competency frameworks that are standardised across the company, with standardised methods of presenting the feedback, making it easier for facilitators and recipients to search and find the particular areas they are interested in. Although there was definitely evidence of standardisation, this was accompanied by examples of people breaking with the standardised approach; (iii) calculable ratings, quantity of data, comparisons, norms and graphs are all well-recognised characteristics of 360. These were evident, and the use of visual presentation of numbers was particularly strong, especially in Company A. However, in one local variation of 360, the quantity of ratings was vastly reduced; and lastly (iv) the use of technology means that raters and recipients need have no personal contact during the automated process for an online 360. However, several recipients attempted to use follow-up conversations with their raters to confirm their understanding of the feedback.

Secondly, use of Hall’s encoding/decoding theory identified the different ways in which participants read the messages of 360. Examples of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings underlined the meaning-making involved in interpreting not only the content of feedback but also the messages embedded in the 360 process itself.

By virtue of involving people, with all of our differences and preferences, every social process contains contradictions and tensions. The current study draws attention to some of these dynamics as they are played out within 360. I have described one aspect of these dynamics as a tension between a desire for
simplicity and a desire to address greater complexity. Within my autoethnography and listening to some of the interviews, I observed this at an individual level. Within Company B, local innovations reacted against what they experienced as impersonal and complex, and yet their own attempts at simplifying at times also became complex. The only surprise is that it has taken quite this long for rebellions against the simplicity of online 360 to become apparent:

*the human condition is such that at one fell swoop it spawns systems and the rebellions against them: anti-systemic protest and system-building zeal*

Bauman (1995: 143)
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Appendices

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APPENDIX 1: Original targeted sample in each company

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Target no. of participants per company</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>360 consultants:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>From the organisation supplying providing 360 to the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyers:</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The internal project manager (probably an HR manager); and one other senior manager, who contributes to decisions about 360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The people who fed back the results of the 360 report to each of the recipients below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raters</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ideally, five raters for each of the two recipients interviewed;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipients</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Once again, each recipient will be paired up with five of the raters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX 2: Interviews in Company A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referred to in the case study as:</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>T= Telephone interview</th>
<th>F= Face-to-face interview</th>
<th>Length of interview in minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>HR Business Partner</td>
<td>22.9.2010</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>27 (plus 2 informal conversations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>HR Global</td>
<td>28.7.2009</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>HR Business Partner</td>
<td>28.7.2009</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Scientist</td>
<td>28.7.2009</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Scientist</td>
<td>28.7.2009</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Scientist</td>
<td>28.7.2009</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>28.7.2009</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>External Consultant, 360 provider</td>
<td>7.9.2009</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total of 8 interviews:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>5 hours 37 minutes</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 3: Interview participants in Company A

Katherine, HR Business Partner
Katherine was my primary contact in Company A. She was herself doing an MSc dissertation and so had sympathy for someone trying to access interviews. She was an HR Business Partner and the company contact person for the 360 provider. In her role, she gave advice to managers, teams and individuals within the company, including advice about whether or not to use 360. She facilitated 360 feedback sessions occasionally, and had also been asked several times to rate others. In her previous company Katherine had also worked with 360 and had received 360 herself. She completed a CIPD qualification which included some work on 360.

Lisa, HR Global
Lisa worked in HR Global, meaning that her work involved giving advice to people across a number of sites. Like Katherine she was CIPD qualified and had learnt about 360 on her course. She gave advice about 360 to managers, and had rated others. She had not received 360 herself.

Laura, HR Business Partner
Laura was an HR Business Partner, and like Katherine had given advice, been a rater and received a 360. Company A was her first employer since leaving university.

Matthew, Scientist
Matthew had a PhD and was employed as a Scientist. He had attended a management development programme not long before the interview, where he had received an MBTI profile and a 360 report. The programme also included an assessment for development centre, where there had been discussion linking MBTI, 360 and observations from those on the programme.
Daniel, Scientist
Daniel was a Scientist, and the manager of a small team. He was very interested in both MBTI and 360. We did the interview in his office, where he had up on the wall the MBTI profiles of his team members. He also had his 360 near-to-hand in a desk drawer and reported that he looked at it regularly, which was evidenced by the thumbed look of its pages.

Jane, Scientist
Jane was a Scientist. She had rated others using 360, but had not received a 360 herself. She had the title of ‘Consultation Rep’: this was not as part of any union but rather a role set up within the company itself. She had been party to many conversations about 360 and had strong views about it.

Diane, Vice President
Jane was a Vice President of the company. She was a US’er who had worked in Scandinavia as well as the UK. She was very vibrant and passionate about 360. She had read a few articles about the topic in her “favourite bed-time reading”, the Harvard Business Review. She had some influence on decisions about the use of 360. She had received 360, was frequently invited to rate others, and her team members had often asked her to help them understand and use their 360 reports.

Mike, External Consultant
Mike was a consultant with a company providing 360 services to Company A. The company used Hay 360 products as a basis and then incorporated 360 within some of the management development programmes they delivered to the company. We did the interview at a service station on the M1 and emailed a few times following that meeting. Mike’s knowledge of how 360 was used within Company A mostly focused on those programmes that he himself designed and help deliver. He was aware of the ad hoc uses of 360 but not of the fact that the company was considering incorporating 360 within performance management processes.
APPENDIX 4: Table of interviews in Company B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Referred to in the case study as:</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>T= Telephone interview F= Face-to-face interview</th>
<th>Length of interview in minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head Office</td>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Learning and Development Manager</td>
<td>24.3.2009</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.12.2009</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE England</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>HR manager</td>
<td>18.11.2010</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barry</td>
<td>Operations Manager</td>
<td>11.11.2010</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Len</td>
<td>Team Leader</td>
<td>11.11.2010</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John</td>
<td>Team Leader</td>
<td>18.11.2010</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>Team Leader</td>
<td>22.11.2010</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David</td>
<td>HR Manager</td>
<td>24.11.2010T</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE England</td>
<td>Conor</td>
<td>HR/L&amp;D Manager</td>
<td>15.11.2010</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>Leadership Development Coach</td>
<td>15.11.2010</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commercial Manager</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>Gillian Commercial Manager</td>
<td>24.3.2009</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ruth Scientist</td>
<td>20.9.2010</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ash Scientist</td>
<td>20.9.2010</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peter HR Manager</td>
<td>20.9.2010</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Su Scientist</td>
<td>5.10.2010</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultancy</td>
<td>Simon Consultant</td>
<td>28.9.2010</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>105</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 5: Interview participants in Company B

Steve, Learning and Development
Steve took on his role and Learning and Development Manager just a couple of months before our first conversation. He was based at the Head Office and managed the contract for company-wide 360 services. He had several opinions about 360, some focusing on the lack of co-ordination across the company as a whole. At the same time, he did not intend to force any conformity and was interested in finding out what others were doing. During the period I was interviewing, we had three informal conversations and two recorded interviews. He sent me a LinkedIn invite and I now have a picture of him playing his saxophone. This was a very vibrant interaction that I enjoyed and that resulted in lots of animated discussion.

Gillian, Commercial Manager, Head Office
Gillian had entered the company as a graduate and had had three promotions until arriving in her current post. She was particularly interested in customer feedback. Gillian had attended a training course, which included 360. Gillian had rated others as well as receiving 360.

Mary, HR manager, N.E. England
Mary had worked in the company for ten years and had moved into HR from a line manager role. She had used 360 as a tool within teams as well as encouraging use of 360 for some managers who were being coached. She had rated others, had been trained by Steve to facilitate feedback and had just started to facilitate 360 feedback sessions. She had not had a 360 herself.

Barry, Operations Manager, N.E. England
Barry was very interested in improving feedback in his area of the business. To that end, some of his team had been developing a
spreadsheet to gather basic ratings. He also valued the facilitation aspect of 360, and particularly that this was done by internal facilitators. He was cautious about consultants talking up their products. Barry had received one 360 report, and had given ratings to his own managers.

**John, Team Leader, N.E. England**
John worked in operations, reporting to Barry. He had received one 360 report but had not engaged actively with this and had not expected his peers to take the time to respond in any detail. John was aware that his own style was seen at times as a little abrasive. He talked in positive terms about the helpfulness of experts to help him understand both online 360 as well as end-of-year feedback.

**Billy, Team Leader, Ireland**
Billy had started with the company two years ago and had recently been promoted to Team Leader, within the Operations Department. He had attended one short management course and had recently received a 360 report. He had not yet completed a 360 questionnaire for anyone else.

**David, HR Manager, Ireland**
David had been trained by Steve’s predecessor to facilitate 360 feedback, using the company format. He had carried out over 10 feedbacks and described himself as enjoyed them. As HR Manager he had advised managers and teams on the most appropriate way(s) of using 360. Local coaches had used their own preferred formats with managers on his site.

**Conor, HR/L&D Manager, S.E. England**
Conor was a very enthusiastic HR and L&D Manager on a site of 30 managers. He worked closely with Keith and together they had designed their own 360 process. He had also been trained to facilitate 360 feedback using the company format, although had not used this recently.
Keith, Leadership Development Coach, S.E. England
Keith had originally worked in production and had moved into his current role about two years before I met him. His primary responsibility was to spend one-to-one time with each of the managers on site, about half of whom had gone through the locally designed 360.

Len, Engineer, Midlands
Len had received a 360 and rated several others. He had worked in the company for about 15 years and had been in his current role for about five. He talked about his use of statistical analysis and was at times somewhat disparaging of 360 involving “too much playing with data”.

Ruth, Scientist, Midlands
Ruth had joined the company in the past two years as a graduate. She was currently supervising two people. She had attended an “Assessment for Development” Centre, at which she had received an MBTI report as well as a 360. She

Ash, Scientist, Midlands
Ash had been in the company for just over five years. He had a small team of three people. He had received a 360 report and had rated several other people.

Paul, HR Manager, Midlands
Paul had been facilitating 360 for nearly five years. He had received two 360 reports himself and had rated lots of others. Several people came to him after their formal 360 facilitated feedback session, in order to ask for his help in understanding their report better. As an HR Manager, he gave managers and teams advice about the best way to approach 360.

Su, Scientist, Midlands
Su had been in her current management role for only a few weeks. She had recently received a 360 report. She wanted to use her 360 as a way
of introducing herself more fully to her new manager and to managers on other sites, with whom she worked.

Simon, Consultant
Simon had been working with Company B for several years. Like the consultant in Company A, he was most involved in putting together events for the company that incorporated 360. He had designed and run some assessment centres for Company B.
APPENDIX 6: Interview Schedule
Interview schedule

What do you think about the idea of 360?... What is 360 for? and drill down asking “What do you think about that?” ... or “Stepping outside of this organisation, what do you think is the value of 360?”

What status does MSF have here (compared with other HR activities)?
How relevant is it to you? Your work ... life?

What do people you know think of 360? How do they talk about it? What stories have you heard about 360 ...
How have others described it?
What is it compared to?
What do others see as the purpose of 360 ... the advantages and disadvantages
What messages have you picked up about how senior management view 360-degree feedback?
So how would you summarise the company’s purpose in using 360?
How do you see 360-degree feedback linking with other processes or activities?
What does HR say about 360? What information did they give you about it?
What have you read about 360-degree feedback? (information on how to use it; websites; marketing literature)

Can you remember the first time you came across 360-degree feedback? Can you talk about what you first heard about it?
How long is it since you first heard about 360?
What changes have you noticed in other people’s attitudes about 360-degree feedback over that period?
What changes have you noticed in your own attitude about 360-degree feedback over that period?
There are several HRD activities in your company ... how does 360 compare with the others?
How do you view the relevance of 360 to your own working life?
What level of importance does HR attach to 360? And what about senior managers?

What other experiences have you had that may affect the way you approach 360?

Tell me about after the feedback ...

What do you think about comparing the text comments and the graphs / numbers?

How do you interpret the feedback?

Compared with organisations that do not have 360-degree feedback, what do you think the positive impact is on your company? .... And any downsides?

How research participants develop their approach to MSF over time - and what do they attribute these developments to?

How do recipients and raters go about making sense of numerical ratings, text comments and the anonymity of raters?

For recipients:

What are the main feedback messages you remember from your 360 report?
How did you go about understanding those messages?
Can you talk about the numerical ratings? How did they help you make sense of the messages? How did they hinder you making sense of the messages?
What about the text comments … how did they help / hinder?

Ask the recipient to open the feedback report and go through some of it, saying out loud how they are processing the information … maybe for 5 different questions? (doing more than 5 might take too long)

For raters:
Can you talk through how you completed the 360-degree form on X?
What do you recall as being the main feedback you wanted to give to him/her?
What period of time did you base your feedback on?
When you were deciding what rating to give, what did you draw on to make your decision?

Ask the rater to look at some of the questionnaire – preferably online, and to talk out loud their thinking as they consider how to rate the individual … ask them to say out loud each step of their process.

For both:
Can you talk about what you understood to be the significance of the following aspects of the process:
The anonymity for raters?
The choice of competencies / questions?
The fact that you were asked to work with numerical ratings? … and text comments?
How do participants describe (rationalise/story-tell) their actions and reactions following a round of MSF?

For recipients:
Tell me about after the feedback? (talk to raters, re-read the report, any actions ... development plan ...?)

How did you decide what to do?
What had you already heard others did?
What aspects of the experience were the most valuable to you? ...
Why?
What aspects of the experience did you give less time or attention to? .... Why?
How did it link to other experiences for you ... other development activities / team interactions / business activities?

For raters:
You were invited to give X feedback – and you completed a questionnaire for them ...

Tell me about after the feedback ...

What do you see as your role in the process?
When, in your view, did your contribution start? ... and finish?

How did your involvement in that process influence you in the subsequent period?
What changes did you notice in terms of what you paid attention to when you observed X or other managers?

What subsequent opportunities did you use to underline any of the feedback messages to X?
What messages would you like to be able to give more clearly – positive / negative?
APPENDIX 7: Pre-interview information emailed to research participants
RESEARCH INTO 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.

I am a PhD student at Loughborough University Business School, as well as being an experienced coach and consultant. This is an independent research project. All the data will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be anonymised. As part of my agreement with your company, I will be making recommendations to management about best practice in 360.

My research questions for this project are:
How do 360-degree feedback participants make sense of the role of 360 and its impact on what they do at work and on their work relationships?
How do 360-degree feedback participants go about making sense of numerical ratings, text comments and the anonymity of raters?
What impact do participants believe that the existence and practice of 360-degree feedback has on them, their work relationships and their organisation?
What aspects of their own experience, background and/or upbringing, do participants believe impact on how they approach 360-degree feedback?

Please bring with you, or if you prefer email me:
- A copy of your 360-degree feedback report, and any other documents which you think will help me to understand the use of 360-degree feedback in your company and/or that show your own experience of 360-degree feedback. If agreeable to you, I would like to take these papers away with me. This will form part of my research into the design and use of 360-degree reports.
- The completed information below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job Title</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of years in your current job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of years in the company</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How many times have you completed 360-degree feedback for someone else?  
How many 360-degree feedback reports have you had on your own performance?  
Why did you have this/these 360-degree report(s)? Underline as appropriate:  
as part of a management development programme; on your own initiative; your manager / someone else suggested it; it formed part of another initiative; other reason (please specify)

Please tick those roles you have played in relationship to 360-degree feedback:
- I have managed people who had 360
- I have talked with other feedback recipients about 360-degree feedback  
- I have been involved in making decisions about how best to use 360
- I have read articles about 360
- 360 has been included on training I’ve attended
- Other (please describe)

Bio-data

<table>
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<th>Age:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Please describe any aspects of your experience or background that you think relevant (continue over page)</td>
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Amanda Harrington     E: A.Harrington@lboro.ac.uk     M: 07976 258685
APPENDIX 8: Pre-interview information emailed to research participants
CONSENT TO BEING INTERVIEWED

UNDERSTANDING 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK

Background

The interview is part of my PhD research project to study how people make sense of 360-degree feedback. I am interviewing people who receive feedback, people who give feedback and also those who are involved in the process as project managers, funders, designers and coaches.

360-degree feedback is an increasingly popular tool for developing managers and sits alongside an array of other approaches. It uses both numbers and text comments. It ensures feedback is anonymous. It is designed to help improve performance and work relationships. The purpose of the interview process is to explore your own experiences of, and thoughts about, the 360-degree feedback process. The interview will last 30 minutes.

I would like to record the interview to ensure I capture every relevant detail. If you wish, you may cease the interview at any time. All responses will be treated in the strictest confidence, and interview transcripts will be read only by me and my two supervisors at Loughborough University Business School. Neither you nor your organisation will be identified from the information you provide. Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in any reports or scientific papers arising from this research.

Before we start the interview, I will ask you to sign the attached form to indicate that you are happy to be interviewed, you understand the purposes of the research and you are happy for the interview to be recorded.

Amanda Harrington
PhD Student
Loughborough University

A.Harrington@lboro.ac.uk
UNDERSTANDING 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK

Consent form

I understand the purposes of this research, and that all information I provide will be treated in the strictest confidence. I understand that I cannot be identified from the information I provide, and I will not be identified in any reports or scientific papers arising from this research. I also understand that I can stop the interview at any time if I so wish.

I consent to this research interview being recorded.

This form will be kept separate from the tape of this interview.

Name of participant: (please print):

Signed:

Name of researcher (please print):

Signed:

Date:
APPENDIX 9: Report written for Company A
Research into the use of 360-degree feedback at Co. A

This report gives some initial recommendations, a review of some of the literature and an initial summary of findings from interviews carried out in Co. A in the summer of 2009.

1. Recommendations

1.1 To consider carefully how to signal the dual use of 360-degree feedback. This is so that raters are clear about the purpose and so that trust and openness can be encouraged. Specifically, ensure that in both format and process there is as much distinction as possible between the use of 360-degree feedback for appraisal and its use for development.

1.2 Find ways of supporting both raters and recipients to follow up 360-degree feedback so that the process assists teams to build their feedback skills, and so that recipients come to understand the key messages more accurately.

1.3 To pilot a face-to-face 360 project in an area of the company, which is seen as having higher levels of trust and openness.

1.4 To link the current training courses on feedback (e.g. Crucial Conversations) to 360, e.g. encourage 360-raters to use the ‘Situation-Behaviour-Impact' model in their text comments, although this does have issues related to anonymity.

2. The literature

The following model summarises the main influences on 360-degree feedback.

![Theoretical Model for Understanding Performance Improvement Following Multisource Feedback](image)

2.1 Characteristics of feedback: anonymity

There are questions about the relative importance and value of confidentiality and anonymity versus accountability. For the ratees, there are questions about ownership of
the feedback, the degree of confidentiality of the results and the individual ratee's accountability for taking action on the results. For the raters, there are questions about their need for anonymity in order to give honest and open feedback, and about their accountability for giving 'accurate' ratings and for assisting the ratee to address development issues.

With these issues in mind, academics seem to suggest that there has to be a choice between either confidentiality and anonymity, or accountability, as the existence of either is considered to limit the other (London, Smither and Adsit, 1997).

Less positively, there is some indication that anonymity of ratings makes it more difficult for an individual to decode messages, to understand them and therefore to take responsibility for acting on them. Even though there are potentially valuable messages within the MSF report, managers may feel frustrated in their attempts to take these forward. In a study looking at participant views of a MSF programme, Mabey (2001: 47) reports that some managers thought that “the process might be improved by being more open in contrast to the closed nature of appraisal discussions with one's line manager”.

Brutus and Derayeh (2002) describe an MSF programme which required ratees to select their raters one year prior to collecting the ratings. The purpose of this advance notice was to increase the raters’ awareness of their ‘evaluative duties’, alerting them to the behaviours they would be asked to rate, and thereby increasing their attention to observing these behaviours around the year.

Liedtka et al. (1999) go beyond using MSF as a measurement tool. Indeed, they look to MSF as a “powerful enabler” in the reshaping of relationships with subordinates (p417). As such, MSF becomes a learning tool that impacts on real working relationships. To maximise these benefits, they advocate that team managers engage in active conversations with their team members, involving them in drawing up their (team manager’s) self-development plan. This approach focuses on MSF as a method for developing work relationships, rather than as an assessment tool. Such involvement ensures that raters become more accountable for the feedback they give.

2.2 The use of facilitators
There has been some, but limited, research into the difference that a facilitator might make to the take-up of development suggestions (Luthans and Peterson, 2003; Rowan, 1998; Seifert et al., 2003). Indeed, it could be argued that it might be difficult to separate out the specific impact of a facilitator. In addition, those studies that have addressed this issue, have only talked about the amount of time given, and the standard structure of the conversation. There is no indication as to the skill of the facilitator. Smither et al. (2005) compared earlier studies which included the use of a facilitator with those that did not mention such a stage in the process; they found no significant effect. Morgan et al. (2005) did not look at effect, but rather the value that ratees themselves ascribed to the use of a facilitator. Here, they found different reactions. Some found the involvement of a facilitator “highly valuable”, especially as the facilitator was an external consultant. Others considered it not so useful as “no matter how carefully an outside consultant prepares, they won’t really understand the culture of the organisation as well as someone from within it does” (ibid: 671). There are expectations evident here about the relevance of context. Whilst an external facilitator may offer a higher level of feedback skills, along with greater security of confidentiality and impartiality, they cannot know the intricacies of the organisation as well as an internal facilitator. To this end, there are organisations that train internal facilitators from amongst their own managers. This solution ensures that the facilitator is more familiar with the organisational context; it does not however necessarily provide the same level of feedback skill, and may on occasion raise questions about confidentiality and impartiality. These topics are not covered within the academic literature.

There is no mention in the academic research of the facilitator’s accountability to the organisation. There are no examples of themes being gathered from discussions, nor examples of facilitators being asked to focus on key strategic objectives when giving the
feedback. Instead, organisations appear to accept the cost of providing usually one-to-one facilitated feedback, without there being any feedback loop into other HR processes, or any information being supplied to senior management. Given the often high level of facilitation skills that the organisation is investing in, it would seem that there are opportunities here for more benefit to be gained. This would be relevant both for the organisation, but also for the individual ratees and raters who want to know that their investment of time and effort does provide meaningful benefit.

2.3 The ratings
From this it is clear that there are different opinions about whether or not the averaged ratings in MSF reports offer higher levels of validity and reliability than ratings given by supervisors alone. A theme within these discussions is the potential for increased objectivity with increased perspectives being represented, and with all of the assessments being anchored on specific behaviours (Hurley 1998). However, different raters could be rating in very different, even contradictory, ways. Rather than highlight and explain these differences, MSF reports and graphs can tend to obscure them. The obscuring of differences is increased by MSF designs which provide averaged ratings. Such averaging presents ‘a more uniform message’ and is thereby deemed to increase the ‘meaningfulness’ of the ratings (ibid: 690). The underlying rationale is that the more raters who contribute to the feedback, the more objective the ratings become. This rationale is challenged by van der Heijden and Nijhof (2004) who argue that as ‘assessment occurs “in the head”, it is always, necessarily, and by definition, subjective’ (p 493).

There is a deeper, more philosophical problem with averaging ratings and the search for ‘objectivity’. If individual differences impact on how we perceive others, their performance and possibly how we approach the process of rating, then the current tendency to average MSF ratings fails to help managers appreciate these differences. In effect, a report that highlights averaged ratings, may serve to silence the voices of minority groups (Fricker and Hornsby 2000; Hiley 2004). As an illustration of this silencing, any averaging of ratings could result in making invisible those minority voices which take exception to how a manager is pursuing change. In this way, the averaging of ratings could be argued to communicate to managers that there is one true rating of their (uniform) performance, and that any outlying ratings are not to be given too much credence. The unitarist assumptions inherent in such a position seem to contradict what could be seen as the democratisation of feedback through the involvement of a range of colleagues. One result of averaging is that managers may lose valuable insights from their raters.

In the literature only a few writers hold out the view that individuals within each source have different, subjective perceptions of a ratee’s behaviour, that different people observe and experience a manager from different vantage points in terms of role with different levels of emotional involvement leading to different perceptions (Gillespie 2005; Wilkie et al. 2006).

Even the research on ethnic and gender differences in MSF still suggests that there is a generalisable, group view about level of performance. In contrast, Van der Heijden and Nijhof (2004) point out that adding subjectivities together does not produce objectivity:

\[
\text{Subjectivity} + \text{Subjectivity} + \text{Subjectivity} \neq \text{Objectivity}
\]

In addition to different subjective observations by the raters, each item on the feedback questionnaire, along with the words it uses to describe behaviour, may elicit different interpretations. With this much variation between observations and interpretations, one might argue that it is unrealistic and possibly unhelpful to expect a simple message about whether or not a particular behaviour needs improving. Maybe an ambiguous message is more relevant and more accurately describes the range of reactions we have to deal with. The ambiguity becomes part of the reality we live with: “in the socially constructed world in which employees work, others’ judgements about them (no matter how biased they may be) constitute an important reality” (London and Smither 1995:
However, as Bono and Colbert observe (2005: 172), “we know little about how individuals react to mixed or ambiguous feedback”. In the meantime, it is the numbers which MSF recipients themselves have to make sense of: “the typical 360 degree feedback report includes an overwhelming amount of data (e.g. feedback on 47 behaviours rated by self, boss, peers and direct reports, etc) and it is difficult to determine what information individuals focus on” (Atwater and Brett, 2006: 529).

2.4 Context

As Dierdorff and Surface (2005) emphasise, context plays an important role for the rating process as it is context that influences “both the behavior and the meaning of behavior” (p96). However, raters are not asked to consider, or identify, any of the details of the context in which they have observed the ratee. Furthermore, when the ratee is ‘decoding’ their ratings, they will not necessarily know who the final raters are, and so are even further removed from an opportunity to consider the influence of context. This situation arises because the ratee will invite a number of people from each of their sources (peers, direct reports, customers) to rate them, but not necessarily all of those invited will actually send in a completed questionnaire. In addition, ratees may group together as ‘peers’ fellow professionals from outside the organisation, from other sites and from other departments. Reading the ratings and understanding what the message is without the context available may present challenges.

2.5 The feedback recipients: importance of self-esteem and self-efficacy

Bono and Colbert’s (2005) study shows how the way individuals process feedback is impacted on by ‘core self-evaluations’, which relate to personality and individual differences. Core self-evaluations are comprised of four factors: self-esteem, generalised self-efficacy, locus of control and neuroticism (Judge, Locke and Durham, 1997, cited by Bono and Colbert, 2005: 176). In particular, they refer to individuals with high self-esteem and high self-efficacy as being less likely to respond negatively to low ratings from colleagues. This is due to their attitude that they are able to learn, and their belief that they have the skills to change their behaviour. Such an attitude is considered by Bandura (1997, cited by Bono and Colbert) to be a prerequisite for learning, and an essential part of learning is receiving feedback.

In their five year study of upward feedback, Walker and Smither (1999) showed that managers improved their performance (that is the ratings of their performance) more in the years when they discussed their feedback with colleagues than when they did not.

2.6 Culture change

MSF is sometimes seen as a tool for introducing culture change. In London and Smither’s (1995) paper, MSF was often cited by respondents as a tool to help shape a new culture or communicate the values of a desired culture. As noted above, the repeated use of behavioural descriptions in MSF contributes to the construction of leadership schemas. By virtue of completing several MSF questionnaires for different colleagues, raters will start to pay attention to these behaviours, and maybe to discuss them with each other. One way of further increasing the attention to behaviours is to ensure that organisational members are involved in the construction of the behaviours, thereby increasing the likelihood that the actual language used does indeed reflect the everyday language of the people in the organisation. Some organisations give ratees control over the choice of behaviours that they are rated against, and this increases the value that the ratees attach to the feedback and therefore the attention they pay it (Martocchio and Dulebohn, 1994, cited by London and Smither, 1995). The salience of the feedback is increased, therefore, with the use of organisation-specific competencies, rather than generic frameworks.

3. Case Study

Interviews have been carried out so far with seven people, most of whom have played more than one role in the 360-feedback process, including feedback recipients, raters, senior managers, facilitators and HR. This section gives some example quotes related
to: the purpose of 360, culture and preparation for 360, the role of anonymity, the interplay between numerical ratings and text comments, how individuals make sense of the data and follow-up.

3.1 Purpose of 360
360 has been used in at least three particular ways in Company A:

- As part of performance appraisal. The feedback is at times gathered by the appraisee to present to their manager, and at times by the appraiser. Either way, they approach the appraisee’s work colleagues and ask for written feedback. This is a known process. It appears to be valued by the recipients and take seriously by those giving feedback.
- As part of training courses: The training provider agrees a tool with the company and administers the process.
- On an ad-hoc basis. A manager may approach HR for help with choosing an appropriate feedback tool. It seems that at times, senior managers may use 360 as part of their own coaching.

360-degree feedback is, therefore, used both for assessment as well as for development. Whereas in institutions such as the CIPD, the term “360-degree feedback” tends to refer to the online process of competency-based feedback, usually administered by an external consultancy, in contrast people at Company A seem to use the term to refer both to the gathering of feedback by the individual’s manager as well as to the online version.

There is greater familiarity with 360 as part of the review process. Indeed, it seems that few people talk about the online, competency-based versions. There appears to be an air of secrecy attached to the whole process. Here, confidentiality has come to mean not only confidentiality about the content of a 360, but also confidentiality about who has been involved in the process. As a result, outside of HR, it appears that there has been little conversation about 360.

I haven’t talked with other people about doing 360 because obviously you’re not always aware who’s doing 360. Sometimes people keep it as a very private thing. And obviously there’s no drive to share it with anybody the way it’s sold to you. So it can be completely private.

Creating a forum for comparing experiences, and reactions, could help develop the use and quality of 360.

Some feedback recipients are unclear as to the question of the purpose of 360:

I don’t know the answer to that, y’know, it’s never been explained to me “this is the specific purpose” of 360 versus other types of feedback.

Both recipients and raters may have unrealistic expectations of 360, thinking that the feedback itself will lead somewhere:

I think some people still think it’s going to provide them will all the answers and therefore they become most disappointed when it doesn’t. And therefore it doesn’t get the momentum with the individual. They don’t see it as anything that’s been worthwhile and they pick little bits out of it. But the people that they have the feedback from don’t see any change either.

There are two main focuses for how recipients are using 360’s:
- To understand how their performance is viewed by others, and how to develop
- To improve working relationships
It’s very impersonal filling in an online tool. And you don’t necessarily get the interaction that you need that will solve the relationship difficulties, if it is a relationship, so conflicts in meetings that sort of thing. A person can write anything in a 360. The majority of them are anonymous so you don’t know who’s written it. You can have a good guess but you may not be correct. So, that’s the impersonal side to it. You then still have to put that into practice, decide what you’re going to do and put it into practice, and that’s when the relationship-building, you may need to do something else. You may need some coaching, um you may just need to sit down with that individual and go for a coffee with them, and just say, “Look, I’m feeling that there’s some tension between … “ So, it’s not the be-all and end-all, it won’t provide you with all the answers.

360 tools have been used as part of development programmes, and have been well-received:

There were two elements, one was the training course which was two days with a group of people where we did role plays and exercises etc. And we were actually observed as we did that. And we had some feedback from the observer at the end of that process. And of course that was all very artificial because it was all artificial situations. And then at the end of the course we obviously set up and did the 360. And I found 360 much more valuable because it was more relevant to what you actually do and the type of interactions you have.

There have been good reports of the training programme(s) on feedback, particularly related to ‘Crucial Conversations’. It would appear useful to work with 360 as just one feedback tool, so that learnings generated within 360 are shared across other feedback environments, and vice versa.

The research literature stresses that raters give higher ratings when the purpose of the 360 is for assessment, and lower ratings when the purpose is for development. In having two somewhat different processes currently, there is a clear signal to the raters about the purpose; that is, the online competency-based questionnaire is used solely for development currently, whereas the collection of written comments is solely for assessment. It would seem useful to keep two different formats in this way.

Referring to online competency-based 360’s:

I think one of the learnings we have as an organisation is: don’t make them too long, make them fairly focused, be very clear why you’re doing it and just keep it to the minimum

At an organisation level, it may be helpful to provide a clearer message about the purpose of 360, and to offer a clear distinction about its two different uses. At an individual level, it may be helpful to provide clearer briefings both for recipients and for raters, so that there is a fuller context and shared sense of direction for all concerned.

3.2 Culture and preparation for 360
There appears to be an expectation that formal feedback is part of organisational life at Company A. There may be value in periodically re-examining the purpose of feedback, both formal and informal, in order to encourage individuals to take charge of their own feedback use.

I think there’s a kind of feeling of feedback fatigue, or performance review fatigue. We get asked to provide and to gather a lot of feedback
Such quotes suggest that the individual sees feedback as a process that is of greater value to the organisation than to themselves personally.

Company A has different sites in the UK and elsewhere. More than one respondent made the comment that the cultures across these sites are different. These differences are reflected in attitudes to giving and receiving feedback. The Swedes are described as being less easy with making ‘negative’ or ‘constructive’ comments and would prefer not to be writing them down. The US’ers are described as being more direct. However, it is not just at national level that differences are visible. Different sites within the UK vary in their culture, in terms of the levels of trust and openness and how this impacts on the use of feedback. ‘Maturity’ of culture was taken by a couple of respondents to refer to the degree of openness and honesty. Taking a reading of culture is an important preparatory step in deciding what format of 360 is most appropriate.

I think if you don’t target it right to the culture and to the level of maturity in terms of that trust environment, you won’t get enough value out of it. It could even backfire.

In addition, some clear briefing or training for feedback-givers might be helpful:

you find that people who are less familiar with giving feedback, um tend to write very bland, non-committal comments … um, because they haven’t seen the power that it can have if it is done properly, but also the impact it has in terms of making things better.

3.3 The role of anonymity
Anonymity is described within the different interviews as being an important characteristic of the 360 process. Interestingly, it appears to be accepted by the recipients that often they will be able to link comments to people, thereby reducing the ‘true’ anonymity of the feedback:

Even though I had a group size of 10, I could work out 90% of the comments. I know who made them. So, it’s not totally anonymous.

However, the assumption is that the raters will feel convinced that their comments are completely anonymous.

Anonymity leads at times to frustration about how to follow up:

I did reflect on a couple of comments after, thinking “Oh I’d quite like to explore that a bit more with that individual, but then I realised that I’m probably not supposed to realise who said that, so after lots of sort of thinking about it, I decided not to do that, because it would have affected their confidence in the system, and it wasn’t really necessary because I could take it as a whole and look it that way.

I did something … so I did it under the radar … But that's only because I realised who, who had sent those comments.

Anonymity appears to allow people to be more specific. Although, the desire to remain anonymous restricts how specific it is possible to be.

often when you’re giving direct feedback to somebody you, you might give a very woolly impression whereas in 360 there is an opportunity to give some more detailed comments. It’s a difficult one. Because of the expectation for anonymity, people can’t be too detailed because it becomes obvious who that person is. But equally, some of the comments I saw in my feedback were
Context is an important aspect of feedback. The lack of being able to follow up comments clearly frustrates some recipients. Skilled facilitation of feedback is often described as essential and certainly best practice (Bracken, 2001). At Company A, 360’s are facilitated by both internal HR managers as well as by external consultants. The recipients’ experience of these facilitated sessions is mixed.

3.4 The interplay between numerical ratings and text comments
Some raters report being able to complete a 360 form in 15-30 minutes. Others say that they devote two hours to each 360. The design of most online 360’s invites the rater to move from screen to screen without referring back, and then at the end to write text comments. One rater reported writing their comments in Word first and pasting them over, once she is satisfied that the ratings and comments fit together:

maybe I've just rationalised it, but I have the feeling that it drives a certain clarity that forces myself to give this person a number and what I try and do is think, “What's the message behind the number?”... I do try to make sure that there is an interplay between those, the numbers and the comments.

3.5 How individuals make sense of the data and how they follow-up
Visual representation of the numerical ratings is valued by recipients, as are summaries of ratings.

Recipients seem to value reports when there are more text comments, possibly because these provide more context and explanation which makes the feedback message easier to understand.

I mean it was good, and I still occasionally flick through it, as you can see, it is quite thumbnailed, um, so I keep my eye on what happened then, so as to ... so obviously I build on that. I did think that um maybe the value in it would come later on because I would quite like to go maybe a couple of years, or three years and then do it again and see whether the same things come up or whether there's less of that [laugh in her voice] or something different. So maybe it's a bit like, I dunno, having a refresher driving test or something. It might be something that people want to do maybe every five years through their career or something like that? I think that could be quite valuable.

In addition to discussions with an HR manager or external consultant, recipients may choose to discuss their reports with their line managers. The usefulness of these discussions will inevitably depend on the quality of the relationship and the skills of the line manager. When they go well, these conversations help provide better context, as the line manager is more familiar with the issues under examination:

we have a bunch of scientists who just analyse and over-analyse the numbers perhaps too much and it's important to have some discussions that just pull you away from that and say, “Well, look at the big picture”

Some recipients go back to their raters for more detail. It seems likely that this is easier for those who are more senior and/or for those with greater self-confidence and more advanced skills in feedback-seeking:
where 360s have really worked is where you take the feedback and you go back to certain groups, if you’re concerned about how your direct reports see you, to take that overall feedback and take it back to them rather than a kind of meeting format, and say, “this is what I heard, y’know, does this make sense?”

In contrast, it is perhaps more often the case that recipients hesitate to carry out any follow-up. This comes out of a lack of clarity about the meaning of ‘confidentiality’, as well as perhaps a lack of self-confidence and skill. As a senior manager reported:

“I’m not sure y’know that it’s allowed!” That’s the kind of question I would normally get about that kind of thing, am I allowed?

Amanda Harrington, October 2009
A.Harrington@lboro.ac.uk
APPENDIX 10: A process for face-to-face 360, developed and implemented as part of my consultancy work
F2F 360

Current situation
You have expressed a keen interest in gaining insights from others’ feedback. You want to benefit from more unfiltered information and frank exchanges of ideas. You value direct access to hearing people’s views and opinions. You want to promote open and direct feedback.

Although you run frequent evaluation meetings, you do not receive in-depth feedback or understanding about how others see you.

Current need
People need to understand your genuine interest in hearing from them. This is an important enough matter to warrant giving it specific time and attention.

Proposal
One way of meeting this need, is to engage in a facilitated feedback process which involves a group of people chosen by you.

The process would provide an opportunity for:
- People who work more closely with you to air their views in a focused way and to be actively involved in discussion about preferred communication and management styles
- You to identify what particularly you would like feedback on and to gather this in a structured manner
- You to use the information gathered to produce an action plan

Process
1. You decide what aspects of your performance you wish to receive feedback on.
2. You identify a core group of peers, superiors, subordinates, customers and/or suppliers, whose feedback you would value.
3. You invite your selected group to be involved in what may be described as one of the following:
   - Communication meeting
   - Communication improvement meeting
   - Feedback improvement meeting
   - Executive development programme

A draft letter appears at the end of this document.
4. In the meeting, we will begin with an overview of the aims and the process. You then present the main areas of development that you are focusing on, along with a commentary on where you see strengths and development needs.
5. You then exit while I facilitate the group to discuss, prioritise and structure the feedback they want to give you.
6. You return to the group. They present their comments to you. You can ask for further examples or details for clarification. The participants are thanked and leave.
7. You and I sit down with the feedback and use it to construct what may well turn out to be both a personal development plan as well as an organisation development plan.
8. You select the details you wish to share with the participants and send them a follow-up letter, with a proposed date for a review meeting.

Other uses of this process
This process can be useful as part of a management development programme, for example at the beginning and end of several months focused training. By including key stakeholders outside of the immediate organisation, the individual manager communicates the importance that he or she attaches to these relationships. In some jobs, there is in fact greater and more regular contact between the manager and contacts outside of the employing organisation.

Advantages and disadvantages of this process
- To increase the use of feedback, some organisations use a traditional, paper-based, scored 360-degree feedback exercise. The advantages of the proposed face-to-face process include:
- The process itself is in line with values of honest, direct communication, without resorting to anonymity
- The value of specific, qualitative feedback far outweighs the fixing of numerical scores to particular pre-determined behaviours
- The process requires that the manager demonstrate openness themselves, with an interest in feedback, an absence of defensiveness, and a focus on behaviour rather than on internal personality traits.
- The participants have an opportunity to practise structuring and giving helpful feedback with appropriate examples for explanation.
- The group functions as a training opportunity for improving the quality of feedback given and sought by all of the participants. As such it is a high value event that has implications for the participants’ own management style and for the use of feedback within their own teams.

The disadvantages of this process include:
- It is time consuming when compared with a paper-based approach.
- It depends on the manager being open to feedback and not “bearing a grudge” against anyone who has the courage to deliver “uncomplimentary” comments.
- It does not allow any individual to hide behind anonymity and therefore relies heavily on the facilitator and manager building an environment and atmosphere that encourages the open giving of feedback.
DRAFT LETTER TO YOUR CHOSEN PARTICIPANTS

Dear

FEEDBACK IMPROVEMENT MEETING – INSERT DATE AND TIME HERE

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part at the December meeting. I will very much value your involvement. This meeting forms part of a programme I am following to further develop my own management and communication style prior to re-entering the organisation’s management structure.

As you know, I have already made use of the company’s 360-degree feedback process, which I found very useful. The final report helped to identify areas for me to think about, along with some key questions for me to explore. The December meeting is a natural progression from the report, and will allow me to check my ideas with you, and to gain more qualitative feedback on specific topics.

My particular aims are to:
• Further develop my management style as one of openness, trust and respect where feedback is invited, listened to and acted on
• Further develop my own skills in management and communication
• Develop a process for face-to-face feedback that will give me a more personal and detailed understanding of your views
• (As a result of your involvement) discuss with you ideas for improving the quality of feedback during, and at the close of, projects
• (for inclusion in letters to any external people you invite) Build opportunities for collaborative development activities with clients and suppliers.

I anticipate that you may well find the meeting of benefit yourself. There will be the opportunity to discuss how to improve the quality of feedback more widely in our work. From my understanding of the process it also sounds as though the meeting can provide a mini skills-development session for all of us!

To give you an outline of the meeting, here are the steps that we will be following:
1. Amanda Harrington, an external facilitator, will run the meeting. We will begin with an overview of the aims and the process. I will then present the main areas of development that I am focusing on, along with a commentary on where I see strengths and development needs.
2. While I exit the room for a time, Amanda will then facilitate the structuring and detailing of feedback from you.
3. Once you have had an opportunity to present your comments back to me, we close the group meeting and I continue working with Amanda on a personal and organisation development plan.

4. I will share with you the results of the meeting.

I am particularly interested in your contribution to this process because…

I will phone you in the next two weeks to discuss this venture further and look forward to your participation. Meanwhile, please find attached an outline of the meeting, supplied by Amanda Harrington, the independent consultant who will be facilitating on the day.

Best wishes
APPENDIX 11: A summary of an INTP profile, using the Myers Briggs framework
The Thinker

As an INTP, your primary mode of living is focused internally, where you deal with things rationally and logically. Your secondary mode is external, where you take things in primarily via your intuition.

INTPs live in the world of theoretical possibilities. They see everything in terms of how it could be improved, or what it could be turned into. They live primarily inside their own minds, having the ability to analyze difficult problems, identify patterns, and come up with logical explanations. They seek clarity in everything, and are therefore driven to build knowledge. They are the "absent-minded professors", who highly value intelligence and the ability to apply logic to theories to find solutions. They typically are so strongly driven to turn problems into logical explanations, that they live much of their lives within their own heads, and may not place as much importance or value on the external world. Their natural drive to turn theories into concrete understanding may turn into a feeling of personal responsibility to solve theoretical problems, and help society move towards a higher understanding.

INTPs value knowledge above all else. Their minds are constantly working to generate new theories, or to prove or disprove existing theories. They approach problems and theories with enthusiasm and skepticism, ignoring existing rules and opinions and defining their own approach to the resolution. They seek patterns and logical explanations for anything that interests them. They're usually extremely bright, and able to be objectively critical in their analysis. They love new ideas, and become very excited over abstractions and theories. They love to discuss these concepts with others. They may seem "dreamy" and distant to others, because they spend a lot of time inside their minds musing over theories. They hate to work on routine things - they would much prefer to build complex theoretical solutions, and leave the implementation of the system to others. They are intensely interested in theory, and will put forth tremendous amounts of time and energy into finding a solution to a problem with has piqued their interest.

INTPs do not like to lead or control people. They're very tolerant and flexible in most situations, unless one of their firmly held beliefs has been violated or challenged, in which case they may take a very rigid stance. The INTP is likely to be very shy when it comes to meeting new people. On the other hand, the INTP is very self-confident and gregarious around people they know well, or when discussing theories which they fully understand.

The INTP has no understanding or value for decisions made on the basis of personal subjectivity or feelings. They strive constantly to achieve logical conclusions to problems, and don't understand the importance or relevance of applying subjective emotional considerations to decisions. For this reason, INTPs are usually not in-tune with how people are feeling, and are not naturally well-equipped to meet the emotional needs of others.
The INTP may have a problem with self-aggrandizement and social rebellion, which will interfere with their creative potential. Since their Feeling side is their least developed trait, the INTP may have difficulty giving the warmth and support that is sometimes necessary in intimate relationships. If the INTP doesn't realize the value of attending to other people's feelings, he or she may become overly critical and sarcastic with others. If the INTP is not able to find a place for themself which supports the use of their strongest abilities, they may become generally negative and cynical. If the INTP has not developed their Sensing side sufficiently, they may become unaware of their environment, and exhibit weakness in performing maintenance-type tasks, such as bill-paying and dressing appropriately.

For the INTP, it is extremely important that ideas and facts are expressed correctly and succinctly. They are likely to express themselves in what they believe to be absolute truths. Sometimes, their well thought-out understanding of an idea is not easily understandable by others, but the INTP is not naturally likely to tailor the truth so as to explain it in an understandable way to others. The INTP may be prone to abandoning a project once they have figured it out, moving on to the next thing. It's important that the INTP place importance on expressing their developed theories in understandable ways. In the end, an amazing discovery means nothing if you are the only person who understands it.

The INTP is usually very independent, unconventional, and original. They are not likely to place much value on traditional goals such as popularity and security. They usually have complex characters, and may tend to be restless and temperamental. They are strongly ingenious, and have unconventional thought patterns which allows them to analyze ideas in new ways. Consequently, a lot of scientific breakthroughs in the world have been made by the INTP.

The INTP is at his best when he can work on his theories independently. When given an environment which supports his creative genius and possible eccentricity, the INTP can accomplish truly remarkable things. These are the pioneers of new thoughts in our society.

_Jungian functional preference ordering:

Dominant: Introverted Thinking  
Auxiliary: Extraverted Intuition  
Tertiary: Introverted Sensing  
Inferior: Extraverted Feeling

APPENDIX 12: Coaching behaviours as they appear on the ICF (International Coach Federation) competency framework
ICF Core Competencies

The following eleven core coaching competencies were developed to support greater understanding about the skills and approaches used within today's coaching profession as defined by the ICF. They will also support you in calibrating the level of alignment between the coach-specific training expected and the training you have experienced.

Finally, these competencies were used as the foundation for the ICF Credentialing process examination. The core competencies are grouped into four clusters according to those that fit together logically based on common ways of looking at the competencies in each group. The groupings and individual competencies are not weighted - they do not represent any kind of priority in that they are all core or critical for any competent coach to demonstrate.

A. SETTING THE FOUNDATION
   1. MEETING ETHICAL GUIDELINES AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS
   2. ESTABLISHING THE COACHING AGREEMENT

B. CO-CREATING THE RELATIONSHIP
   3. ESTABLISHING TRUST AND INTIMACY WITH THE CLIENT
   4. COACHING PRESENCE

C. COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY
   5. ACTIVE LISTENING
   6. POWERFUL QUESTIONING
   7. DIRECT COMMUNICATION

D. FACILITATING LEARNING AND RESULTS
   8. CREATING AWARENESS
   9. DESIGNING ACTIONS
   10. PLANNING AND GOAL SETTING
   11. MANAGING PROGRESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A. SETTING THE FOUNDATION

1. Meeting Ethical Guidelines and Professional Standards - Understanding of coaching ethics and standards and ability to apply them appropriately in all coaching situations.
   1. Understands and exhibits in own behaviors the ICF Standards of Conduct (see list, Part III of ICF Code of Ethics),
   2. Understands and follows all ICF Ethical Guidelines (see list),
   3. Clearly communicates the distinctions between coaching, consulting, psychotherapy and other support professions,
4. Refers client to another support professional as needed, knowing when this is needed and the available resources.

2. Establishing the Coaching Agreement - Ability to understand what is required in the specific coaching interaction and to come to agreement with the prospective and new client about the coaching process and relationship.
   1. Understands and effectively discusses with the client the guidelines and specific parameters of the coaching relationship (e.g., logistics, fees, scheduling, inclusion of others if appropriate),
   2. Reaches agreement about what is appropriate in the relationship and what is not, what is and is not being offered, and about the client's and coach's responsibilities,
   3. Determines whether there is an effective match between his/her coaching method and the needs of the prospective client.

B. CO-CREATING THE RELATIONSHIP

3. Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client - Ability to create a safe, supportive environment that produces ongoing mutual respect and trust.
   1. Shows genuine concern for the client's welfare and future,
   2. Continuously demonstrates personal integrity, honesty and sincerity,
   3. Establishes clear agreements and keeps promises,
   4. Demonstrates respect for client's perceptions, learning style, personal being,
   5. Provides ongoing support for and champions new behaviors and actions, including those involving risk taking and fear of failure,
   6. Asks permission to coach client in sensitive, new areas.

4. Coaching Presence - Ability to be fully conscious and create spontaneous relationship with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident.
   1. Is present and flexible during the coaching process, dancing in the moment,
   2. Accesses own intuition and trusts one's inner knowing - "goes with the gut",
   3. Is open to not knowing and takes risks,
   4. Sees many ways to work with the client, and chooses in the moment what is most effective,
   5. Uses humor effectively to create lightness and energy,
   6. Confidently shifts perspectives and experiments with new possibilities for own action,
   7. Demonstrates confidence in working with strong emotions, and can self-manage and not be overpowered or enmeshed by client's emotions.

C. COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

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5. Active Listening - Ability to focus completely on what the client is saying and is not saying, to understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the client's desires, and to support client self-expression.
   1. Attends to the client and the client's agenda, and not to the coach's agenda for the client,
   2. Hears the client's concerns, goals, values and beliefs about what is and is not possible,
   3. Distinguishes between the words, the tone of voice, and the body language,
   4. Summarizes, paraphrases, reiterates, mirrors back what client has said to ensure clarity and understanding,
   5. Encourages, accepts, explores and reinforces the client's expression of feelings, perceptions, concerns, beliefs, suggestions, etc.,
   6. Integrates and builds on client's ideas and suggestions,
   7. "Bottom-lines" or understands the essence of the client's communication and helps the client get there rather than engaging in long descriptive stories,
   8. Allows the client to vent or "clear" the situation without judgment or attachment in order to move on to next steps.

6. Powerful Questioning - Ability to ask questions that reveal the information needed for maximum benefit to the coaching relationship and the client.
   1. Asks questions that reflect active listening and an understanding of the client's perspective,
   2. Asks questions that evoke discovery, insight, commitment or action (e.g., those that challenge the client's assumptions),
   3. Asks open-ended questions that create greater clarity, possibility or new learning
   4. Asks questions that move the client towards what they desire, not questions that ask for the client to justify or look backwards.

7. Direct Communication - Ability to communicate effectively during coaching sessions, and to use language that has the greatest positive impact on the client.
   1. Is clear, articulate and direct in sharing and providing feedback,
   2. Reframes and articulates to help the client understand from another perspective what he/she wants or is uncertain about,
   3. Clearly states coaching objectives, meeting agenda, purpose of techniques or exercises,
   4. Uses language appropriate and respectful to the client (e.g., non-sexist, non-racist, non-technical, non-jargon),
   5. Uses metaphor and analogy to help to illustrate a point or paint a verbal picture.

D. FACILITATING LEARNING AND RESULTS
8. Creating Awareness - Ability to integrate and accurately evaluate multiple sources of information, and to make interpretations that help the client to gain awareness and thereby achieve agreed-upon results.
1. Goes beyond what is said in assessing client's concerns, not getting hooked by the client's description,
2. Invokes inquiry for greater understanding, awareness and clarity,
3. Identifies for the client his/her underlying concerns, typical and fixed ways of perceiving himself/herself and the world, differences between the facts and the interpretation, disparities between thoughts, feelings and action,
4. Helps clients to discover for themselves the new thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, emotions, moods, etc. that strengthen their ability to take action and achieve what is important to them,
5. Communicates broader perspectives to clients and inspires commitment to shift their viewpoints and find new possibilities for action,
6. Helps clients to see the different, interrelated factors that affect them and their behaviors (e.g., thoughts, emotions, body, background),
7. Expresses insights to clients in ways that are useful and meaningful for the client,
8. Identifies major strengths vs. major areas for learning and growth, and what is most important to address during coaching,
9. Asks the client to distinguish between trivial and significant issues, situational vs. recurring behaviors, when detecting a separation between what is being stated and what is being done.

9. Designing Actions - Ability to create with the client opportunities for ongoing learning, during coaching and in work/life situations, and for taking new actions that will most effectively lead to agreed-upon coaching results.
   1. Brainstorms and assists the client to define actions that will enable the client to demonstrate, practice and deepen new learning,
   2. Helps the client to focus on and systematically explore specific concerns and opportunities that are central to agreed-upon coaching goals,
   3. Engages the client to explore alternative ideas and solutions, to evaluate options, and to make related decisions,
   4. Promotes active experimentation and self-discovery, where the client applies what has been discussed and learned during sessions immediately afterwards in his/her work or life setting,
   5. Celebrates client successes and capabilities for future growth,
   6. Challenges client's assumptions and perspectives to provoke new ideas and find new possibilities for action,
   7. Advocates or brings forward points of view that are aligned with client goals and, without attachment, engages the client to consider them,
   8. Helps the client "Do It Now" during the coaching session, providing immediate support,
   9. Encourages stretches and challenges but also a comfortable pace of learning.
10. Planning and Goal Setting - Ability to develop and maintain an effective coaching plan with the client.
   1. Consolidates collected information and establishes a coaching plan and development goals with the client that address concerns and major areas for learning and development,
   2. Creates a plan with results that are attainable, measurable, specific and have target dates,
   3. Makes plan adjustments as warranted by the coaching process and by changes in the situation,
   4. Helps the client identify and access different resources for learning (e.g., books, other professionals),
   5. Identifies and targets early successes that are important to the client.

11. Managing Progress and Accountability - Ability to hold attention on what is important for the client, and to leave responsibility with the client to take action.
   1. Clearly requests of the client actions that will move the client toward their stated goals,
   2. Demonstrates follow through by asking the client about those actions that the client committed to during the previous session(s),
   3. Acknowledges the client for what they have done, not done, learned or become aware of since the previous coaching session(s),
   4. Effectively prepares, organizes and reviews with client information obtained during sessions,
   5. Keeps the client on track between sessions by holding attention on the coaching plan and outcomes, agreed-upon courses of action, and topics for future session(s),
   6. Focuses on the coaching plan but is also open to adjusting behaviors and actions based on the coaching process and shifts in direction during sessions,
   7. Is able to move back and forth between the big picture of where the client is heading, setting a context for what is being discussed and where the client wishes to go,
   8. Promotes client's self-discipline and holds the client accountable for what they say they are going to do, for the results of an intended action, or for a specific plan with related time frames,
   9. Develops the client's ability to make decisions, address key concerns, and develop himself/herself (to get feedback, to determine priorities and set the pace of learning, to reflect on and learn from experiences),
   10. Positively confronts the client with the fact that he/she did not take agreed-upon actions.
APPENDIX 13: 360 feedback reports: autoethnographic data