



ISSN 2394-5308



Issue 01, Volume 1, December 2017

Printing AreaTM

International Multilingual Research Journal



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www.vidyawartha.com

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QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES INTO THE RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

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Abstracts

Qualitative and quantitative research is often presented as two fundamentally different paradigms through which we study the social world. These paradigms act as lightning conductors to which sets of epistemological assumptions, theoretical approaches, and methods are attracted. Each is seen to be unsuited with the other. These model claims have a tendency to resurface from time to time, manifesting themselves in the effects of different cultural traditions upon academic styles of research. There are pressures to view research in terms of this divide but perhaps more pressures to ignore such a divide. In this paper, examine how qualitative and quantitative approaches are in practice wicker into the research process.

Keyword: qualitative and quantitative, research phrase

INTRODUCTION

In doing so I discuss the phasing of the research process and the different considerations which apply in different phases. A distinction is made between the context of enquiry or research design phase and the context of justification where data are analysed and interpreted. Part of the research process that is also considered here and is often ignored in the literature concerns contextualization, an important phase particularly in cross national research. The case for separate paradigms is that

epistemological assumptions, belong to different research cultures, and have different researcher biographies that work against convergence

QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCHERS

While research practices diverge, there is considerable pressure for convergence at this present time. Externally, there is increased demand for research to inform policy and for practical rather than scientific research, again a trend that may work against specialization in either qualitative or quantitative research¹

The importance placed upon particular types of research evidence is subject to changes in political climates and persuasions. As Janet Finch argued in the 1980s, British government has long preferred quantitative evidence in contrast to more pluralistic methodological preferences of US governments in the same period.²

Both externally and internally, the pressures of research markets and the mercerization of universities in the 1990s and twenty first century are leading to the institutionalization of research training. The arrival of a skills based economy in which training has superseded notions of apprenticeship is as influential in research as elsewhere in the labour market. In Britain, in the past ten to fifteen years, we have seen a steady expansion in masters' degrees courses in research methods and in other courses dedicated to research training. Today's students on master's courses are typically introduced to both qualitative and quantitative methods, whereas in the past they were not exposed to such a wide range of methods.

However, responding to pressures from funders and the demand to disseminate and to do so in particular kinds of ways can result in epistemological issues vanishing from view in the way data analysis is discussed, while methodological issues may be reduced to skills training. Lack of space in the article format also can mean that methodological issues are relegated to footnotes, while in books they appear in appendices or end notes. These pressures have on the other hand

helped to generate an increase in journals and books devoted to methodological issues.

QUALITATIVELY AND QUANTITATIVELY

Working qualitatively and quantitatively involves considerations at each phase of research enquiry. In other words, when researchers work with different types of data within the same research project, the way they use these data will vary according to the phase of the research in which the researcher brings the different data sets into play. Bryman distinguishes between the ways in which qualitative and quantitative research are combined in terms of: (a) the importance given to qualitative and quantitative approaches in the research investigation and (b) the time ordering or sequencing of the approaches. However, as he suggests, such distinctions are not always possible in practice because they rely on being able to identify the dominance of one approach³

In the rest of the paper, I give some examples of the ways qualitative and quantitative approaches enter the research process with particular attention to the context of enquiry and the context of justification, drawing upon studies from my own research biography.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Here is where two data sets are clearly specified in the research design—as distinct and separate parts of a study. The study concerned children's concepts of care and their contribution to family life⁴

which was carried out in two London boroughs. The first phase was a self completion questionnaire survey of school based populations—of around 1,000 children aged 11–12. The second phase involved a sub sample drawn from the survey of groups of children and their parents living in different types of household (63 households). This second phase employed a semi structured interview schedule.

Exemplar Studies

Each phase had a particular aim and addressed different research questions and concerns. Moreover it was also the case that the second (qualitative) phase depended upon the first

(quantitative) phase: The interview cases were embedded within school based surveys located in particular social milieux which we also sought to describe. The surveys therefore provided contextual information about the populations of children who had been selected. Where a study is being conducted with a two stage design, the contextualization provided in the first stage can be very helpful.

The survey provided a sampling frame for the interview studies conducted with children and their parents in different types of family structure. Gaining access to children via schools was essential to reaching particular family sub groups for the interview study. (The questionnaires were not anonymized but contained codes linked to children's names; this enabled us later to identify and contact the groups we wished to select for the interviews.) Access required careful negotiation with schools but also some reciprocity on the researchers' part. By providing schools with quantitative data drawn from the questionnaire survey phase relating to each school, we hoped to gain access to the qualitative sample. The questionnaire surveys were therefore designed with this additional purpose in mind.

The case to be made for attaching qualitative sub samples to statistically derived samples such as national cohort studies is a further variant of mixed method designs. Such designs may benefit quantitative researchers through achieving a better handle upon the meanings of underlying statistical associations, while it gives qualitative researchers the chance to select particular cases, to draw upon contextual information from the wider study and to test hypotheses on large, statistically representative samples⁵

Different research methods may be incorporated during the fieldwork phase rather than in the design phase, with one method encompassing more than one type of approach. The exemplar study of the latter concerns a longitudinal study of women's return to employment following maternity leave carried out during the 1980s.⁶

In this study, an important conceptual shift took place, away from a focus upon outcomes and to a focus upon meaning and upon the household:

how mothers made sense of their situations and responsibilities and the ways in which they and their households (the children's fathers) actively organized and construed employment and parenthood. This change in conceptual perspective translated into a change in the study's method of interviewing, with a new set of aims that underpinned the collection of qualitative as well as quantitative data. The result was an interview schedule that combined structured questions (the responses to which were categorized according to predefined codes) with open ended questions giving scope for probing (responses were transcribed and analysed qualitatively). We remained committed to collecting the structured data originally promised but required the interviewers to collect such data while seeming to adopt a flexible, in depth mode of interviewing. Indeed this combined interviewing approach was so successful that, in one of the later waves of the longitudinal study when, for resource reasons, we decided to collect only quantitative data, we found the interviewees reluctant to comply; they continued to respond in the way they had done in the earlier semi structured interviews.

Conclusion

The paper has also suggested that a fieldwork method may include a quantitative approach so that data on particular items are collected systematically; some questions on the interview schedule discussed were treated quantitatively (for example on behavior and practices) while others had a qualitative character. An interviewing approach which allows interviewers to probe and the interviewees to give narratives of incidents and experiences is likely to result in a more holistic picture of people's understandings than a conventional survey analysis would provide and elucidate the meanings that research participants attribute to their practices and actions.

The paper has also discussed contextualization and interpretation as a separate phase of the research process and as a phase that informs other phases. Contextualization is a critical part of a multi method strategy in creating and

making sense of data. In methodological texts there is surprisingly little attention given to the issue.

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