

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Notes      Nick Campion

To start with, we need a working definition of Qualitative Research. As Marshall makes clear, the emphasis is on meaning rather than measurement:

Quantitative methodology, generally associated with positivist epistemology, is usually regarded as referring to the collection and analysis of numerical data. Qualitative methodology, generally associated with interpretative epistemology, tends to refer to forms of data collection and analysis, which rely on understanding, with an emphasis on meanings.<sup>1</sup>

Issues of the truth or falsity of a claim are irrelevant to the fact that it may hold meaning. The nature of that meaning may be more likely to be revealed through qualitative research.

As Wallis and Bruce argued,

No-one will adequately explain social action who does not understand how individuals interpret their world. But no-one will understand how individuals interpret their world who is not aware of the social and historical context within which they do it.<sup>2</sup>

It can also compliment literary, text-based research, as Adorno argued:

Limitations of research facilities prevented real field work and forced us to concentrate on printed material rather than on primary reactions.<sup>3</sup>

A fundamental difference between quantitative research methods and qualitative approaches is said to be the fact that the former aims at establishing universal rules governing behaviour which are not time and case specific – the nomothetic mode – whereas the latter is ideographic, unapologetically homing in on the particular. This approach is at odds with the scientific paradigm but ‘qualitative researchers treat the uniqueness of individual cases and contexts as important to understanding. Particularization is an important aim..’<sup>4</sup>

Qualitative and quantitative research should not be seen as mutually exclusive categories, although this is how some people see them. The advantage of qualitative research is that it can deal with subtleties and nuances, investigating people's motives and changing feelings, avoiding the tendency of quantitative research to conceal complexities, or, as Canrill argued, imagine that every phenomenon can be reduced to number:

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1 Marshall, G., *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994 p. 543.

2 Wallis, R. and Bruce, S., 'Accounting for Action: Defending the Common Sense Heresy', *Sociology*, February 1983, Vol. 17 no 1, 1983, pp. 97-111 (p. 109).

3 Adorno, Theodor, *The Stars Down to Earth*, London: Routledge 1994 [1953], p.52.

4 Stake, Robert E., *The Art of Case Study Research* ( London: Sage Publications, 1995) [hereafter Stake, *Case Study Research*] p.39

For one thing, those of us engaged in "research" like to think of ourselves as "scientists". We like to think that there are certain "rules which we can discover and follow in order to be "objective". And we tend to think that if we can only quantify our material and manipulate it statistically, then, and only then, are we being "scientific".<sup>5</sup>

Cantrill added,

The scientist is involved in making personal value judgements at nearly every stage of his work - in the setting of his problem, the selection of the aspects of the problem which he feels are crucial and should be investigated, the selection of the method he will use for his investigation, as well as the interpretation of it.<sup>6</sup>

Braud and Anderson are critical of conventional approaches to research in a wide range of fields, arguing that they are 'incomplete, contain unnecessary biases, are unsatisfactory for addressing complex human actions and experiences..[they]..yield a picture of the world, and of human nature and human possibility, that is narrow, constrained, fragmented, disenchanted, and deprived of meaning and value.'<sup>7</sup>

Here, the German sociologist's Max Weber's concept of **Verstehen** is useful; it can be translated as to understand, but also,

1. To perceive and comprehend the nature and significance of, to know.
2. To know thoroughly by close contact with or by long experience of the phenomenon.
3. To grasp or comprehend the meaning intended or expressed by another.
4. To know and be empathetic toward.

Weber used the term to refer to the social scientist's attempt to **understand** both the **intention** and the **context** of human action.

But what about the intention and context of the researcher? According to Denscombe,

Ethnographers...are concerned that the conceptual tools they use to understand the cultures or events being studied are not, and can never be, neutral and passive instruments of discovery...we have no way of standing outside these to reach some objective and neutral vantage point from which to view things as they really are.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Cantrill, Hadley, 'Foreword' in Payne, Stanley L., *The Art of Asking Questions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980 [1951], pp. ix-xi, p. ix.

6 Cantrill, Hadley, 'Foreword' in Payne, Stanley L., *The Art of Asking Questions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980 [1951], p. x.

7 Brand, William and Rosemarie Anderson, *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (London: Sage Publications, 1998) p.6.

8 Denscombe M., *The Good Research Guide*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998, p. 73.

As a result the '**insider-outsider**' problem has been recognised.

Tanya Luhrmann<sup>9</sup> - cognitive drift  
Susan Greenwood.<sup>10</sup>

Much qualitative research favours an undogmatic combination of methods. As Runkel argued,

When social scientists think about generalizing, they do not use an arcane logic more potent than the logic used by the rest of us. The logic and procedure of science come simply from the efforts of ordinary people trying their best to be careful when they think about what they observe and then they tell others about it. Attention to logic is necessary and important, but I think adhering with exquisite rigour to any cluster of canons encourages us to prize manner above meaning, wrapping above contents, ritual above substance.<sup>11</sup>

## **Reflexivity**

## **Phenomenology**

## **Meaning**

## **Methodologies**

Qualitative research is regarded as indicative rather than conclusive. The principle methodological tools and approaches are:

- **Interviews:** structured, semi-structured or unstructured.
- **Questionnaires:** can solicit yes/no answers or written replies
- **Participant Observation:** the researcher lives, works or shares activities with a group of people, observing, but also joining in.
- **Grounded Theory:** Devised by Glazer and Straus in the 1960s. Does not test a hypothesis; sets out to see what theory emerges from the data in order to generate new ideas.
- **Case study:** the researcher can study a small number of examples, even one example, in depth.

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9 Luhrmann, Tanya, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

10 Greenwood, Susan, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology*, Oxford: Berg, 2000.

11 Runkel, Philip J., *Casting Nets and Testing Specimens: Two Grand Methods of Psychology*, London: Praeger, 1990, p. 5.

- **Mythopoesis:** Storytelling is considered a form of research. Used in business when researchers ask employees to tell stories about their situation.
- **Hemeneutic Inquiry:** Read and listen to words with a view to uncovering the deeper meaning.
- **Integral inquiry:** Blends complimentary ways of investigating, understanding and expressing areas of research beyond the conventional. Pluralistic.
- **Heuristic research:** ‘The heuristic approach is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters there is also a social - and perhaps universal – significance’.<sup>12</sup>

The deepest currents of meaning and knowledge take place within the individual through one's senses, perceptions, beliefs, and judgements. This requires a passionate, disciplined commitment to remain with a question intensely and continuously until it is illumined or answered.<sup>13</sup>

- **Transpersonal Research Methods:** The experience of being in the world may be seen as a co-creative adventure shared by the individual and the surrounding environment. Meaning is the conscious interpretation of a deeper state of experience; the purpose of inquiry is to articulate this deeper state.

## Methodological Principles

- **Reflexivity** - reflecting on one's own motives and preconceptions
- **Bracketing** - being aware of one's bias so that its impact on ones; work is minimised

## The Wider Benefits of Qualitative Research

### 1. A Statement by an Astrologer: Dane Rudhyar

In our modern American universities, philosophy has become what it generally is today because the official layer of our present society – the Establishment – has accepted as its ideal, “technological man,” the man who, above all, seeks to measure phenomena and events with reference to the achievement of quantitative and statistically expressed goals, and does so

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<sup>12</sup> Moustakas, Clark, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology and Applications* (London: Sage 1990), p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Moustakas, Clark, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology and Applications* (London: Sage 1990), p. 18.

through the use of machines, standardised tests and psycho-chemical interferences with natural processes...

...Quantitative achievements, and the amount of commodities produced regardless of the welfare and happiness of the producers, in actual fact count much more than qualitative values and whatever is needed to insure the full development of the individual being as a whole-person, microcosm of the universal Whole in which this person loves, acts and has his being.<sup>14</sup>

## Why is Qualitative Research Important?

I have attached the following partly because it's an indicator of the public consequences of understanding the distinction between different kinds of research, but also to point out that good material can be found from a variety of sources, **as long as you are clear about the nature of the source.**

## 2. A Statement about a Politician:

For non-British readers, Gordon Brown was British Prime Minister:

It is the disjunction between values and actions that is so damaging for Brown. He claims to believe in social justice, economic prudence and individual liberties, yet his record shows remarkable inconsistencies on all three. He presided over a boom based on cheap credit and mega City bonuses, while inflicting the giant mortgage on the nation that is the private finance initiative (PFI). His final budget snatched money from the poorest purely in order to score a quick hit against the Tories, but he never had the courage to bring in higher taxes at the top. His government found billions to bail out Northern Rock, but refused to find the £40m to refund the struggling families who had saved for Christmas clubs through Farepak.

As for freedoms, his instincts lead him to favour intrusion, oversight and control. Not only is he pushing ID cards and detention without trial, but his government has given councils and 318 other bodies unprecedented powers to spy on citizens suspected of the most minor offences. Even his introduction of tax credits to help working families has been fatally flawed, because the process of claiming them has been made so bureaucratic, punitive, intrusive and censorious that many of those who go through it end up hating the government and its agents.

This record in itself is enough to alienate millions of voters. **It is made worse because although Brown is drawn to abstract ideas, he thinks public services should only be judged by outcomes that can be costed or measured. That obsession prevents him understanding the real impact on ordinary lives of so many official decisions,** from shutting post offices to closing swimming pools or forcing people to go to giant GPs' surgeries. He doesn't grasp the fact that economic efficiency is not always people's

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14 Rudhyar, Dane, *The Planetarization of Consciousness*, New York: Aurora Press, 1977 [1970], p. 8.

overriding concern - that in their search for good lives, people expect that to be just one of the factors involved in making a political choice.<sup>15</sup>

Similar problems to the above were reported in the British press in the w/b 28 April 2008, in the British legal system. Legal policy is worked out in relation to recommended length of sentence for various categories of crime, and the administration of the legal system is subject to financial targets and bureaucratic fashion. However great anger is caused by, for example, the experience of victims in being exposed to their abusers while waiting to go into court. Government research, being quantitative, tends not to take into account the experience of individuals who are too few in number to register in a quantifiable system.

## Resources

Forum for Qualitative Research

<http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm>

The Qualitative Report

<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/>

The British library provides information and runs courses on oral history.

<http://www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/history.html>

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15 Jenni Russell, 'This man of hidden shallows is alienating millions of voters', *Guardian*, April 16 2008, p. 29.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/apr/16/gordonbrown.labour>