

## **Qualitative research: ornamental or fundamental?**

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Universities routinely gather a variety of quantitative data either from monitoring or from evaluation sources (e.g. numbers and profile of students, student surveys, course evaluations). This data provides an invaluable means by which a university can get a handle on the scale of issues such as retention and progression rates or student achievement. Why then do universities need the addition of qualitative research for an understanding of these kinds of issues? This talk will seek to answer this question by discussing the distinctive, though much misunderstood, purpose and value of qualitative research.

I will draw on my involvement with a project led by the HEA and ECU with which I was involved concerning the degree attainment variation among black ethnic minority students.

### **1. Quantitative and Qualitative: a false opposition**

**Firstly**, I want to argue that quantitative and qualitative are not opposites in three notable ways:

**a)** Each method of data gathering involves levels of interpretation. Here's three quotes which capture what I want to say in relation to this:

*Interpretation is a major part of all research. I am ready to argue when someone claims there is more interpretation in qualitative research than in quantitative* Stake (1995:9 in Cousin, 2009, 4):

*Method is not simply in the service of interpretation it is part of the interpretation – about when and how you look* (Thatchenkery (2004,79) in Cousin, 2009, 174)

*Sometimes, our sciences create kinds of people that in a certain sense did not exist before. I call this 'making up people'.* (Hacking, 2006)

All research, whatever its framework and purpose involves some degree of interpretation. In the case of quantitative data, let's ponder on the following question from the NSS survey (for those of you from outside the UK this is a national survey into student satisfaction). Trochim (2006) offers a number of critical questions that need to be asked of survey questions like this. Here is an adaptation and selection of some of them to the question: The assessment is fair: 1-5 (disagree – strongly disagree)

- Did the respondent understand what is meant by assessment? And 'fair'?
- Did the respondent understand that a "2" means that they are disagreeing with the statement?
- Does the respondent care or were they just circling anything arbitrarily?
- How was this question presented in the context of the survey (e.g., did the questions immediately before this one bias the response in any way)?
- Was the respondent mentally alert (especially if this is late in a long survey or the respondent had other things going on earlier in the day)?
- What was the setting for the survey (e.g., lighting, noise and other distractions)?
- In the respondent's mind, is the difference between a "1" and a "2" the same as between a "2" and a "3"?

These interpretative challenges do not undermine the value of conducting research of this nature so long as we fully appreciate that the figures we get rarely give us a wholly reliable or objective take on the problem.

This takes me to my **second point** which concerns the silly notion that quantitative research is more objective or robust than qualitative research.

**b)** For a start, we need to get rid of the objective/subjective dualism for any research we are doing because most research is likely to be somewhere in the middle of the two. Few researchers from any tradition hold that objectivity is possible in human science research. I have already signalled one reason why we can't treat quantitative data as objective; other issues concern the selection and associations of what we think is meaningful and the problem of the classificatory drift of quantitative research. For instance, this drift can frontload and then conceal the work of interpretation that goes into decisions about the classifications (e.g. sex, ethnicity, age) used in quantitative research. And sometimes we end up essentialising the inhabitants of our classifications.

When, for instance, we associate Black Minority Ethnic responses with particular questions, there is often a dangerous assumption in the design that students will respond *qua* black students as if difference inheres in themselves rather than in their social contexts. This assumption sails towards the racialisation of statistics. The associations we are finding between BME students and certain questions in the NSS should prompt us to consider that variation has something to do with a socially shared experience (like vulnerability to racism, common subject clusters or, as I discuss later, teacher expectations) rather than to deduce a pathological explanation. As the quote from Hacking (2006) above indicates, this concerns the question of 'making up people':

A lot of our institutional research has 'made up' the first generation university student, the black minority ethnic student, the new university student, etc. While there are often good reasons for the categories, we must never forget that we have invented these categories to get a rough and ready handle on our

investigations and that with such inventions, we are never far away from the dangers of reductionism and essentialism.

If some over-claim that quantitative research is objective, the reverse argument is often true for qualitative researchers who over-claim for the subjectivity of research. Scornful of the claims to objectivity made by quantitative researchers, some qualitative researchers end up celebrating subjectivity through an excessive attention to reflexivity.

Reflexivity demands that we think about our own positionality, power and investment in the research process; it accepts that we can never be outside of it. But you can overlay the reflexive card such that research reports seem to be more about the authors than the actual research.

Here's a nice quote from Clifford Geertz on the matter:

Geertz (1973:16):

*I have never been impressed by the argument that, as complete objectivity is impossible in these matters (as, of course, it is), one might as well let one's sentiments run loose. As Robert Solow has remarked, that is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer.*

All research needs to be careful and needs to be judged against the degree to which it has taken care. This is not the only criteria of worth but it is an important one.

Rather than think about whether qual or quan are objective, it would be more useful to take a situated view of this. In particular, we need to make judgements about what kind of complexity we are dealing with. For instance, our data on how many students enrol, stay and progress is relatively reliable because it is based on counting heads. Each number corresponds to a name. This is low complexity data. But results from the NSS, for the reasons above are in another interpretive league. So less 'objective'. Similarly, if a qualitative researcher begins an interview with reasonably straightforward questions, say about using the campus bus, the data yielded is likely to be less problematic than more probing questions about moving between student and family communities as a commuting student.

In sum, the degree to which research, any research, can hold up a mirror to an easily readable reality according to a correspondence theory of truth is minimal. There will be invariably layers of interpretation and we should focus on the quality of that interpretation, whether it is quantitative or qualitative. As one writer put it all research is fiction, the challenge is to produce good fiction. There is a danger of overstretching this neat point but it does remind us that most research probably inhabits a space between making findings and finding findings.

c) **Thirdly**, qualitative and quantitative research are not opposites because both involve attention to the numerical. Qualitative researchers look for patterns and frequencies be this within a particular case study or interview or across a sample. The concept of saturation in qualitative research is quantitative; and discourse analysis is strongly so.

It is important to remember that we cannot make sense of our lives without some numerical intelligence (the time, date, our budgets, etc.) and the application of such intelligence cuts across research methods. It is equally important to remember that some of the greatest insights from science, humanities and from social science come from a study of the singular, the aberrant, the abnormal, the particular. These different meaning making traditions are far closer to each other than is commonly acknowledged.

## **2. A science of the singular: Hamlet and winking**

### **a) deep rather than wide:**

Helen Simons' (1996) edited book 'a science of the singular' on case study research defends the need for us to generate insights about something by going deep rather than wide. This going deep is the mission of qualitative research though it is true that some qualitative research does not accomplish this mission. To paraphrase Stake, good qualitative research is about taking a particular case/setting/group in their natural setting and coming to know them well (Stake, 1995:8 in Cousin, 2009, 135).

Many of us have split off our acceptance of this need 'to come to know a case well' within the humanities from a defence of it in the social sciences. Thus, we accept that Hamlet has something to say about, for instance, revenge and treachery. Theatregoers do not typically pour out of the theatre complaining that Shakespeare cannot conclude anything about revenge and treachery on the basis of one case study; no-one queries why he didn't interview a large sample of Scandinavian princes. Or complain that Hamlet was not representative of princes because he was a particularly troubled one. People accept that Shakespeare's dissection of one case can help us to make what Stake has called 'naturalistic generalisations':

*People can learn much that is general from single cases. They do that partly because they are familiar with other cases and they add this one to this, making a slightly new group from which to generalise, a new opportunity to modify old generalisations* (Stake, 1995, 85 in Cousin, 2009, 135)

Yet when it comes to social scientific case studies, people worry that nothing reliable can be said of them. They worry about generalisation; they worry that not enough people have been involved. But sample size in qualitative research is not about representativeness, it is about creating a sufficient and plausible basis for exploring the meanings people bring to a particular experience/phenomenon. Put differently, sample size in qualitative research is about the construction of an adequate 'laboratory' for in depth investigation, not the exhaustion of a range of experiences. Its about substance. Sample or

case size in qualitative research needs to be judged against whether it offers sufficient substance to make thick description possible.

**b) thick description** If we return to the degree variation issue, quite clearly the quantitative research has told us there is a worrying trend. Worrying too is the quantitative evidence that BME students are less likely than other students to find assessment practices fair. We now need to probe beneath the surface of these trends. What do they mean? Qualitative research is best equipped to do this because it can offer thick descriptions.

‘Thick description’ is a term which is often used glibly and claims to having produced it are sometimes rather thinly evidenced. I should note here that evidencing thick description is not about the size of data display or the amount of description provided from it. Thick description, as Gary Shank reminds us (in Cousin, 2009 129) is not simply ‘voluminous description’ for ‘the task of thick description’ explains Shank, ‘is to make meaning clear’.

Thick description, then, is a misleading term because it must be both depictive and analytical. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that thick description is not wholly data derived – to generate thick description you have to enter the research stage with what Blumer called ‘sensitising concepts’ or what Malinowski refers to as ‘foreshadowed problems’. These are provisional ideas and concepts that help with the sense-making process of inquiry. Data and theory should be always dynamically linked in qualitative inquiry. You could say perhaps, that thick description is the outcome of thinking *with* data; qualitative research is a creative interplay between the intellectual and the empirical.

In his famous discussion of thick description in *The Interpretation of Culture* Clifford Geertz (1973) drawing on the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle points out that the mere observation of a person winking cannot tell you whether it is a physical reflex or a form of communication; and if the latter, its symbolic meaning in a given cultural context is unlikely to be self-evident and even if we know of this meaning how can we be sure its not just a satirical subversion of it? Thus we have to avoid the thin description of behaviourism which observes that a wink has taken place within an observable stimulus-response frame. Rather, we need to get at what distinguishes twitches from communication rich winks and these latter winks from mimicked ones. We can only do this by getting close to the meaning-making activities of human beings, by ‘sorting out the structures of signification’ (Geertz, 1973). Put another way, often, we need to explore what symbolic interactionists helpfully call ‘the interactive order’ to discover who is allowed/prompted to wink at whom, when and where? A qualitative inquiry towards thick description would ask questions like: What are the rituals and dynamics between winkors and winkees? Where is the power? What structures and human behaviours sustain the rituals of winking? What are the sanctions for not winking or for doing so in the wrong place?

While our surveys on ‘the student experience’ in national and local evaluation instruments have their place, arguably we need to know much more about the

relational experience between students and teachers/support staff. In contrast to schooling research, there is surprisingly little research into interactive orders in university education. Quantitative research is a blunt instrument for this purpose because it doesn't allow you to see the relational in action. This is a missing part of higher education research. I will finish with an example.

In the field of schooling, underachievement by particular groups of children has been widely explored qualitatively for evidence of the Pygmalion effect. The original research in the nineteen sixties from Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992) showed that where teachers were told that particular children were the most able (even though this selection was quite random), this produced more able children. There is research that builds on this which suggests that teacher expectations play a more powerful role in learner performance than do pedagogic methods

It is quite possible, then, that a teacher who believes in all of his/her students and uses traditional methods of teaching will get better results than a teacher who uses cutting edge pedagogy while believing that some of his/her learners are less able than others. Incidentally, when innovative teachers research the effects of their interventions, the quantitative indicators of success (higher grades, regular attendance, etc.) will always be hard to disentangle from the positive effects produced by the teachers' evident commitment to their learners – unless a qualitative dimension is introduced into the research.

This question of teacher expectation and its effects on learner performance prompts a need to research this qualitatively. A colleague at Coventry, Dr. Gurnam Singh is exploring a hypothesis that BME students are *made* through interactive orders that confirm their 2-ness (for international colleagues, UK degree classifications proceed from 1<sup>st</sup>, upper second, lower second, two-two and third; national data shows that most UK domiciled black minority ethnic students get two-twos).

Gurnam Singh does not think that the construction of the BME student (a case of making up people) is a conscious drift on the part of teachers but one that involves a subtle self-fulfilling prophecy process (earlier studies into this subtlety in relation to gender have exposed such a process). At this stage of his inquiry, the Pygmalion effect is the 'sensitising concept'. I agree with Gurnam Singh that this could be a fruitful line of enquiry and one which suggests there be some serious ethnographic research to get at the interactional order between BME students, teachers and support staff.

Whether we accept the Pygmalion effect as a possible lead, all institutions affected by the degree variation issues (and this is also a gendered issue) needs to commission some very careful qualitative research to find out what is at the heart of this variation. Otherwise, they squander the news their quantitative data generates about where to dig deeper or worse, they leave the explanation at the stage of classification with all the problems connected to 'making up people' already signalled.

We do not need endless interviews and focus group research into the student experience to supplement surveys. Qualitative is not a means by which the quantitative is prettified. It is not the accessory to the main outfit; it is an indispensable means by which we can make sense of what is going on in our universities. Fundamental, not ornamental.

## **Reference**

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