

THE ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION

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Abstract: The dominant methodological approach in psychological research has involved the use of quantitative methods within a positivist framework. In this paper I argue that both qualitative and quantitative approaches have their strengths and weaknesses, depending on the research question under investigation. I will examine some of the main advantages and limitations of qualitative research, paying particular attention to the value of this approach in psychology and education. I will draw on examples from my own research over the past twenty years, in studies concerning young people's experiences in education, the job market, leisure and family life. Advantages of qualitative research include an increased degree of flexibility in the research design; the ability to avoid a reliance on the researcher's pre-determined assumptions; and the ability to focus on the meanings of key issues for participants, especially any contradictions or inconsistencies in their perspectives. Qualitative research can enable one to tackle 'sensitive' issues; to appreciate the wider social context of people's experiences; and to make connections across different areas of participants' lives. Limitations of qualitative research include the expensive and time-consuming nature of the collection and analysis of research information; the reliance on a relatively small number of participants; and the reluctance of many academics, practitioners and policy-makers to take qualitative research seriously. Qualitative research in psychology now incorporates a wide range of different approaches to data collection and analysis, and the selection of an appropriate qualitative approach should always be dictated by the research question(s) under investigation.

Key words: Qualitative methods, Quantitative methods, Research methods in psychology.

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Introduction

The dominant positivist approach to doing research from a psychological perspective treats researchers as apolitical, emotionally distanced and unbiased beings who apply the techniques of the natural sciences to the study of human behaviour through the use of the scientific method. Researchers are assumed to select topics for investigation solely on the basis of theoretical and empirical interest, then develop a set of hypotheses from current research in the area, before identifying specific variables and populations of 'subjects' for isolation and study. Information about these variables (such as employment history, psychological well-being, or attitudes to child care) are generally recorded in numerical or 'quantitative' terms, frequently using standardized measures or specifically developed questionnaires. Such information can then be subjected to statistical analysis in order to ascertain whether or not the hypotheses under investigation can be confirmed, thereby contributing to further theoretical developments in the selected research area (May, 1993).

This brief description provides an overall definition of how 'quantitative' methods are generally employed in mainstream social psychological research (Willig, 2001). In contrast, many researchers, including feminist researchers and those working in applied contexts, have argued that a rigid reliance on the use of quantitative methods within a positivist framework can be limiting and counterproductive for the development of knowledge that is relevant, useful and theoretically sophisticated (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994).

In this chapter I explore some of the main strengths and limitations of qualitative methods in specific research contexts. I start from the position that research can never be totally value-free or objective, although we can always strive to be rigorous. As researchers, we can claim to be distanced, objective observers, but this simply obscures the potential impact of our own theoretical and political preferences, the influence of our own career strategies, and the wider context in which research is funded and resourced. Particular topics or theoretical perspectives can be 'flavour of the month (or year)', obtaining funds more readily than less 'popular' topics or those which use more marginal approaches or methods. The selection of research topics, methods and theoretical frameworks can depend more on such factors than

on purely academic or research merits. The mid-1980s saw waves of research funding for issues related to AIDS and HIV for example, but whilst AIDS remains a considerable threat to health in many parts of the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, research funding has not remained at its original level, at least not in the social sciences.

If we break away from a rigid adherence to the use of quantitative methods within a positivist framework, we can assess the most appropriate research technique(s) for each study in the context of our requirements on that particular project. It is important to recognise that the choice of research methods is no more free from theoretical or political concerns than the selection of topics for investigation. Those operating in the psychological domain face a powerful set of assumptions, which can be difficult – sometimes impossible – to overcome. Quantitative methods and the use of statistical analyses are the norm, and the use of qualitative methods can be viewed as less valuable, less valid, and as a ‘soft’ option which is less scientific.

Strengths of qualitative research

To some extent the distinction between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research is an over-simplification, and may not necessarily be a particularly helpful form of terminology. In the strictest sense, qualitative and quantitative methods refer to distinct sets of research techniques for the collection and analysis of data or information. However, I would argue that all research techniques carry associated epistemological assumptions or approaches to what counts as knowledge in the research process. My argument that logical positivism is the dominant epistemological approach in psychology is hardly controversial, nor is the argument that this approach is generally associated with the use of the scientific method and quantitative research methods in psychological research studies, especially a preference for experimental research designs (see Burman & Parker, 1993). The problem comes when this approach is viewed as the superior choice in every kind of psychological research endeavour. So my argument is not that quantitative methods have no value in psychological research: far from it. The relationship between qualitative and quantitative research methods has been likened to the tension between the depth and breadth of the analysis respectively (Griffin, 1985b). A particular strength of quantitative research lies in its capacity to provide a broad analysis of phenomena, whilst qualitative research can focus on the operation of social processes in greater depth.

One of the greatest difficulties with a rigid adherence to the use of quantitative methods in a positivist framework is the presumption that only phenomena that can be directly observed (and recorded in numerical terms) are worthy of scientific study. Any aspect of human life that is not amenable to such direct observation, quantitative coding and analysis is defined as beyond the bounds of psychological research. In the field of psychology, as in educational research, this would place severe limitations on the research we can do. It would make any study of the complex and contradictory meanings of specific phenomena for particular groups of participants difficult, if not impossible.

Critiques of mainstream psychological research hinge on such questions of knowledge-validation, making explicit the fact that some people's experiences are more likely to be taken seriously than others while some are more often ignored in particular situations. In addition, it is unsatisfactory to treat individuals as if they were isolated from society – at the very least because this cannot give an accurate picture of people and their lives. Much of psychology has tended to focus on individuals rather than social processes. However, that binary opposition between the individual and society is increasingly being shown to be untenable (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Denise Riley (1983) made this particularly clear when she suggested that much developmental psychology has tended to treat mothers and their infants as if they are on a 'desert island' where the concerns of everyday living cannot reach them. Similarly, Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) have shown that everyday concerns (including economic ones) are a central part of mothers' conversations with their four-year old daughters.

As Carla Willig (2001) has argued, qualitative research is usually concerned with meaning, and in particular how people make sense of the world and how participants experience events from their perspective. In order to be meaningful, then, the project of psychology has to have some means of theorising people within the contexts in which they live. Qualitative researchers have demonstrated that qualitative methods, especially within longitudinal studies involving a series of informal semi-structured interviews and systematic observation, can reflect inconsistencies and contradictions within and between individuals' accounts as an important focus for analysis, and this has been one of the advantages of discourse analysis (Burman & Parker, 1993). Qualitative methods can also allow researchers a degree of flexibility in the conduct of a particular study; facilitate the examination of sensitive or difficult topics if a relationship of trust develops between researcher and researched; and enable researchers to make connections between different aspects of peo-

ple's lives, such as the domestic sphere, employment and leisure time (see Griffin, 1986a for an analysis of the potential benefits of qualitative methods in a study of the move from school to the job market for young women).

During the early 1980s I worked on a three-year study of the occupational and gender socialisation of young working class women as they left British schools and entered the job market: the 'Young Women and Work' study (Griffin, 1985a). The first stage of the project involved visits to six Birmingham secondary schools of varying size, intake, organisation and level of academic achievement. I interviewed head teachers, careers officers, and form teachers as well as 180 school students aged 15 to 18. The latter included middle and working class girls, Asian, African Caribbean and white students, and even some boys. I talked to more academic sixth formers who hoped to move on to university; fifth formers taking GCSE/O level exams who were unsure whether to stay on at school after 16; and non-academic girls taking few or no exams who were determined to leave school as soon as possible.

The informal, semi-structured nature of the group interviews in schools meant that young women sometimes discussed particular issues amongst themselves and revealed considerable variation in their approach to particular questions. This was especially marked in relation to my questions about whether they expected to marry and/or have children in the future, and how this might combine with paid work. Young women's expectations about their future marriage, childcare and employment prospects were riddled with contradictions, although these varied depending on whether they were middle or working class, or from white, Asian or African Caribbean backgrounds. Marriage did not appear to be such an economic necessity for young white middle class women, who stood a better chance of gaining financial independence than their black and working class peers. However, some white middle class 6th formers did talk of planning, and even choosing their careers to fit in with domestic commitments, and the majority expected to marry, have children and leave paid work for between two and ten years to look after their children (Griffin, 1985a, 1986a). Here is one group of white middle class 6th formers (aged 17-18) at a prestigious academic girls' school discussing this issue:

- C. Griffin: Do you think that women should give up work to look after children?
Marie: Oh yes, you couldn't trust men to do it.
Sally: Oh no, god, you'd think that was all women were made for.
Marie: No I don't, but I think that if you had a child you shouldn't not commit yourself and put it in a nursery and not have any interest in it yourself.
Sally: For a few years, but not for the rest of your life!

This heated exchange between young women who would be leaving school to go to university, probably followed by professional well-paid careers indicates that the question about “combining a family with a job” generated a range of different opinions. At the time of interview, marriage and motherhood were seen as distant events that might occur some ten years in the future, but they were also viewed as inevitable for most young women. Few financially feasible or socially acceptable alternatives were available, especially for young working class women. So using qualitative methods enabled me to record such exchanges between participants, and to analyse their significance in young women’s lives.

The use of qualitative methods, including ethnographic observation, can challenge researchers’ assumptions about specific phenomena, as well as reflecting areas of inconsistency, variation and contradiction. For example, I am currently engaged in a 3-year study of the meanings of consumption for young people aged 13 to 18 in the UK, and the implications for the formation of social identities¹. This study involves a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, questionnaires concerning what young people buy and why; semi-structured group and individual interviews with young people and their parents about negotiations over money and the purchase of consumer goods; and a series of ethnographic case studies with young people engaged in specific consumption practices. The quantitative techniques involved in this study will provide invaluable information on over 1000 young people’s reported consumption practices, and the qualitative methods will enable us to examine in greater depth the processes by which certain consumer goods come to occupy a significant space in young people’s social identities.

There are already indications that the findings from this study may challenge some preconceptions about specific groups of young people and their relationship to consumption. For example, it is frequently assumed that young Muslim women will be relatively uninterested in consumer goods, especially those that wear more ‘traditional’ Islamic dress (see Ahmad, 2001, for a critique of the notion of ‘tradition’ with respect to young Muslim women). From our initial findings, it appears that such assumptions must be treated with a degree of caution. Amongst one group of six 13-year old young Muslim women of Pakistani descent that I interviewed in a secondary school during

¹ This project is funded by Britain’s Economic and Social Research Council. The other researchers of the project are Professor Ann Phoenix and Dr. Rosaleen Croghan of the Open University, Milton Keynes and Ms Janine Hunter of the University of Birmingham, UK.

November 2002, five wore headscarves and trousers, and the other wore a blouse, tie, jumper and skirt, with her head uncovered. All six were wearing the acceptable uniform for that school, which allowed girls to wear trousers and 'traditional' dress (trousers and headscarves) as well as skirts. One of the five young women was wearing a headscarf covered in the logo of 'Calvin Klein', one of the designer names that young people frequently cite as a recognised brand name. All of the young women felt that their appearance and designer labels were just as important to them as to non-Muslim girls, and compared to white girls, although they did construct boys in general as more interested in designer brands than girls. I am not able to offer a fuller analysis at this stage in the project, but only wish to note that the use of qualitative methods, especially ethnographic observation, should enable us to incorporate this phenomenon into our analysis as the study progresses (cf. Griffin, 2000).

If qualitative methods can provide an in-depth analysis of the experiences of relatively small numbers of respondents, quantitative methods present a broader picture of a larger set of people. I am arguing for the use of appropriate methods for the research question under investigation. I want to disrupt the assumption that psychological research is necessarily quantitative. Many psychological issues require the in-depth focus of qualitative research if they are to be addressed in a meaningful and non-reductionist manner. Equally, however, we do not want to substitute a qualitative canon for a quantitative one, since there are occasions when quantitative methods might be more appropriate, and it is important not to overlook the limitations associated with the use of qualitative research methods.

Limitations of qualitative research

Whilst qualitative methods can examine social processes at work in particular contexts in considerable depth, the collection and especially the analysis of this material can be time-consuming and therefore expensive. Like quantitative research methods, qualitative research requires training and experience. Unfortunately such training is hard to come by in most research methods training courses in the UK, and experienced supervisors of postgraduates wishing to undertake qualitative research are equally hard to find. Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis incorporate a wide range of different techniques and epistemological assumptions, and careful selection of the appropriate qualitative method is important (Willig, 2001).

In addition, qualitative research usually involves relatively small numbers

of participants, and this can mean that it is less likely to be taken seriously by other academic researchers or by practitioners and policy makers. This example is taken from my study of racial discrimination in a local British job market for young adults (Griffin, 1986b). This two-year study was funded by Leicestershire County Council between 1983 and '85. It was a social survey of 18 to 22 years olds in Leicester, looking at their un/employment histories, education and training levels and job expectations. This project originated in a six-month qualitative interview study by Avtar Brah with groups of young Asians in Leicester (Brah & Golding, 1983). One of the outcomes of Avtar Brah's qualitative study was the documentation of widespread experiences of racism by this group of young Asian people from white teachers, prospective employers and careers advisers. In response to these findings the County Council did not commission a study of local employers, schools or the careers service, but, instead, funded a primarily quantitative survey of young adults' educational attainments and employment histories which included a comparison between young white and Black (i.e., Asian and African Caribbean) people in Leicester. This was the study in which I was involved as main research worker.

There were two reasons for this approach, both methodological and political. Firstly, the common assumption amongst even 'sympathetic' councillors, council officers, teachers and careers advisers (and, it has to be said, some researchers), was that racism and other forms of 'discrimination' and disadvantage can at least partly be attributed to characteristics of the 'target' groups in question (Race and Politics Group, 1982). In this case, it was assumed that the relatively higher rates of unemployment amongst young Asians in Leicester compared to their white peers could be explained in part by their 'inappropriate' qualifications or 'cultural restrictions'. The fact that these arguments were not supported by data from Avtar Brah's study or by other research in this area was ignored in favour of a survey, which constructed young Asian and African Caribbean people as the potential sources of their own disadvantage. The survey found no evidence in support of these arguments.

Secondly, the nature of the knowledge which was provided by Avtar Brah's qualitative study was discounted by even the more 'sympathetic' councillors and council officers because they needed to be able to quote 'statistics' or quantitative evidence in council meetings in order to bring about political change such as improving the council provision for young Black people, such as youth work groups. In this case the main political change involved the movement of local authority funded youth schemes for young Black people (all of which were on temporary funding) onto the mainstream programme,

which occurred around 1986 immediately after the project was completed. There was another reason why Avtar Brah's study was not taken seriously. The group of young Asian people she interviewed had been particularly vocal and effective in challenging the policies of the (Labour-controlled) City Council as well as the (Conservative-controlled) County Council in Leicester. Her data were therefore discounted as representing a supposedly 'biased' and 'minority' opinion because her respondents were identifiable (as a group if not as individuals) within a particular political context. Finally, as an Asian woman Avtar Brah herself might well have been seen as 'biased' in belonging to the same minority group as her respondents. As a white woman, I (C. Griffin) might not have been considered to be too enmeshed with the sample to be objective, although in fact Avtar Brah and myself shared a similar political perspective. Thus, in order for research to be taken 'seriously' methodology is important, but the status and the ways in which researchers and respondents are positioned also have an impact (de la luz Reyes & Halcon, 1988).

The myth of the apolitical objective researcher

In this section I want to briefly address the assumption that researchers can and should always operate as objective and apolitical actors in the research process. To some extent, I see this issue as relevant to researchers regardless of whether they employ qualitative or quantitative methods. Throughout the *Young Women and Work* study, I was frequently asked, "Why are you only talking to girls?" by teachers, school students, employers, and even by other researchers. I did interview a few young men, but the study was never intended to be fully comparative, and young women's experiences were the main focus of the research. Male-only studies were fairly common in the fields of youth studies and educational research when this study was conducted in the mid-1980s, but they were seldom criticised for their gender-specific bias outside of feminist circles (McRobbie, 1978; Spender, 1980). So studies of boys and men's experiences were treated as the norm, whilst research focussing on the lives of girls and women was frequently seen as 'sexist' or 'biased', or at the very least unusual. I was working alongside Paul Willis at Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, who had recently published one of the most influential studies on the move from school to the job market for young white working class men, *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977). By his own admission, Paul Willis had never been questioned about the gender-specific nature of his research.

The assumption that the focus on young women's lives was somehow un-

usual or worthy of comment was not politically neutral, as I was soon to discover. A number of teachers, employers and some of the young women themselves assumed that I was a feminist simply because I was a woman interested in young women's lives, in some cases before they had even seen me. For most women this assumption carried a positive connotation, whilst for most men it appeared to have more negative associations. One headmaster took me into his study at the start of the project to tell me exactly why "this equal opportunities thing is a waste of time". At no time had I mentioned equal opportunities or feminism.

I visited each school at least three times, and my first visit involved an informal talk with the head teacher. My first introduction to students set the tone for subsequent interviews, so I asked teachers to describe me as "Chris Griffin who is doing a project about girls at school and at work". I was never introduced to students in front of a whole class, but set up my tape-recorder in a separate room. I could then introduce myself to students on my own terms, setting an informal atmosphere from the start, usually by laughing and smiling and adopting an informal conversational tone. I made it clear that I was not connected with the school or the Careers Service, and that the interviews would be treated in complete confidence, before asking students' permission to tape-record their words.

Having interviewed 180 young people at school, I followed 25 young working class women into their first 2 years in the job market. I visited one young woman, Jeanette, in her job as an office junior in a small printing company. Jeanette introduced me to her work-mates by striding into the middle of the factory floor, raising a clenched fist and shouting: "This is Chris, she's doing a project on me - women's lib!" We had never discussed feminism as such, although during the course of the interviews Jeanette had made several comments that were similar to feminist ideas, like many of the young women I interviewed during the course of the study (Griffin, 1989). Any misguided hopes I might have entertained of passing as a neutral and apolitical observer in this study vanished with every shake of Jeanette's clenched fist.

Rather than view this situation as a major problem that threatened to undermine the objective neutrality of this project, I regarded it instead as an opportunity and as a vital part of the research process that might tell me something about the way in which young women like Jeanette were viewed in society, as well as about my own role in the research process. The assumptions made by Jeanette and other respondents forced me to examine my status as a researcher and the relationship between research and politics. Why was I

seen as political, biased and feminist, simply because I was a woman researching girls' lives, whilst male researchers doing equivalent studies with young men were treated as unremarkable, apolitical and objective?

This is an example of reflexivity at work, and Carla Willig makes a useful distinction between personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity (Willig, 2001). Willig defines personal reflexivity as "reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs political commitments wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research ... [and] how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers". She defines epistemological reflexivity as encouraging us "to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research" (Willig, 2001, p.10). Far from being irrelevant to the research process, these experiences told me a great deal about the way in which the young women I interviewed were viewed by their employers, teachers and careers advisers, as well as by each other. I would urge all researchers, regardless of their theoretical orientation or methodological approach, to incorporate such reflexivity into their research practice. A concern with issues such as this is usually associated with qualitative research, but there is no reason why such questions should not be relevant for those employing other methods.

DISCUSSION

In this chapter I have argued that it is important that psychologists do not continue to assume that quantitative methodology is the one they should automatically choose for the investigation of every question. Qualitative methodology is not simply 'soft' and unscientific. Indeed, as I have argued, for some research questions it is the only method that can allow in-depth analysis since it can deal with apparently contradictory data and provide insights into respondents' perspectives, which may be rendered invisible by quantitative methods. A rigid adherence to quantitative methods is thus counter-productive.

However, methodological choices are never atheoretical or value-free. Both quantitative and qualitative methods have their own strengths and limitations and these need to be considered in relation to the particular research questions being investigated. I am not, therefore, simply advocating a switch from one methodological canon within psychology (quantitative research) to another, equally dogmatic, one (qualitative research). As I have shown, there are instances when quantitative methods are essential to research. There

may also be occasions when one research project can use both quantitative and qualitative research in a complementary manner (Brannen, 1992). The above discussion indicates that while debates about methodologies and research techniques are important, it is equally important that such debates do not lose touch with the political and theoretical contexts in which specific projects are conducted.

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