

This essay will consider whether, "*qualitative research gives access to the true perspectives of people in a way that quantitative research can never do*". In an effort to determine whether or not this is actually the case, it will first be necessary to outline two main methodologies, positivism and interpretivism, and consider their relationship to both quantitative and qualitative research. The three main orientations of qualitative research will then be explored along with generalization and homogeneity in order to determine whether true perspectives can be obtained. This essay will conclude by recommending that, due to the limitations of both qualitative and quantitative methods, the above quotation be amended to reflect more of a mixed methods approach. It is believed that this would allow greater access to people's true perspectives.

Methodologically, quantitative research is closely aligned with positivism, which is based on the natural sciences. Positivists believe that the natural sciences have been successful as a result of them considering only that which can be supported and verified by the evidence, especially experimental evidence. Furthermore, positivists thought that social and political progress would be stimulated by undisputable scientific fact (Study Guide, p79). Although there is no automatic link between positivism and quantitative methods, the two have become closely related. Quantitative methods rely on "*structured forms of data*" (The Open University 2001, p26) which would involve careful scientific experimentation and statistical use (Study Guide,

p79). Furthermore, in order to collect evidence in a transparent manner, positivists rely on “*procedural objectivity*” (Study Guide, p79) which would allow a different researcher to conduct the research in the same way so to confirm or reject the conclusions reached. Many pieces of quantitative research attempt to adopt the requirements of positivism, such as testing a hypothesis and measuring effects (Study Guide, p80). However, in his “*antinaturalist critique*”, Gage (2007, p152) rejects positivism as a way of researching education and outlines a further possibility, the “*interpretivist critique*” (2007, p153).

Researchers adopting an interpretivist approach would consider, “*the phenomenological perspective of the persons behaving*” (Gage 2007, p153). Interpretivists believe that the culture and society in which people live influences their understanding of it. It is suggested that it is not possible to understand why people behave in certain ways unless there is an understanding of how these people interpret their own environment (Study Guide, p81). The fact that positivists use statistical and experimental methods to measure, for example, social or educational processes is rejected by interpretivists (Study Guide, p82), who instead adopt qualitative methods in their research. Unlike the procedural objectivity of positivists and quantitative research, interpretivists use qualitative research to obtain theory from data collected. This is known as grounded theory and attempts to ensure that theory is

“grounded in the social activity it purports to explain” (Glaser and Strauss cited in The Open University 2001, p56). Consequently, qualitative research often involves researchers dealing with “*verbal accounts in natural language*” (The Open University 2001, p26) which can result from transcribed audio or video recordings.

Consequently, it can be seen that the positivist and interpretivist methodologies have given rise to two distinct, although sometimes complementary, methods of enquiry, these being quantitative and qualitative methods respectively. Whilst both can be used to determine people’s perspectives, they will do so differently, quantitative methods perhaps analysing statistics generated from a questionnaire, and qualitative methods relying on the abilities of the researcher to understand the perspectives of the participants without jumping to conclusions. However, the original quotation suggests that, “*qualitative research gives access to the true perspectives of people in a way that quantitative research can never do*”. The important words to focus on here are “*access*” and “*true*”. By examining the forms of qualitative research, it can perhaps be shown whether or not accessibility and truth are achievable. According to the Study Guide (pp105-113), there are three main orientations that qualitative research may take: investigating experience; penetrating fronts; and documenting discursive strategies.

When a researcher is involved in investigating experience, it is the behaviours and perspectives of the research participants that are important. In fact, a particular focus of qualitative research can be to concentrate on "*meanings, perspectives and understandings*" (The Open University 2001, p49). The Media Guide (p46) indicates that one of the aims of the research being conducted on the PSHE lesson (DVD2, Section 3a) is for the researcher to determine the opinions of the teacher and students taking part in the PSHE vertical tutor system. Indeed, the video of the lesson along with the interviews conducted with the teacher and participating students provides the researcher with enough data to try and understand the perspectives of those taking part, particularly in relation to what they think about the vertical tutor system. However, the researcher has to take what is said completely on trust (Study Guide, p113) which suggests that there may be differences between the accounts given by the participants and the true situation. Consequently, participants in a research project may create fronts to disguise their true feelings and beliefs thus distracting the researcher from accessing the true perspectives of people and protecting themselves in some way at the same time.

The research conducted by Malinowski on the Pacific Islanders is another example of penetrating fronts in operation. Whilst Malinowski's research revealed a great deal about the lives of these islanders, his research diaries presented a different account of his experiences, which were described as

being, "*rather unsympathetic, perhaps even racist, attitudes towards the people he was studying*" (Study Guide, p109). Whilst a researcher adopting the investigating experience orientation would take Malinowski's research at face value and accept its veracity, one considering the penetrating fronts orientation would adopt a more critical attitude and be more, "*suspicious of what people say*" (Study Guide, p113) in order to find out what is really going on. Qualitative research often has a focus on natural settings (The Open University 2001, p49) which can be experimental and necessitating a long period of stay by the researcher. However, according to The Open University (2001, p50), "*A researcher who stays for one or two weeks might discover more than a casual visitor about how the school really works, for public facades cannot be maintained for long*". This suggests that whilst concentrating on events in natural settings, a researcher who remains for a longer period of time may be better able at identifying the existence of penetrating fronts, although how he or she is able to remove these fronts is dependent on how accessible the institution under study is, and this is often more difficult for an outsider. Blumer (cited in The Open University 2001, p50) describes this as "*lifting veils*", gradually gaining the trust of the participants until the true perspectives are revealed. However, how successful this is depends on the relationship between the participants and the researcher, and this may take a great deal of time to achieve, if ever.

The final orientation involves documenting discursive strategies which examines what people say in order to investigate the construction of the utterances and what purpose they might serve. As part of a focus on process, this is what The Open University (2001, p55) describes as "*thick description*" where, "*the voices, feelings, actions and meanings of interacting individuals are heard*" (Denzin cited in The Open University 2001, p55). MacLure, with Walker (2007) use qualitative methods to study the interactions taking place during school parents' evenings. They reproduce various transcripts of "*verbal accounts in natural language*" (The Open University 2001, p26) possibly obtained from video or audio recordings. Whilst the first two orientations concentrate more on people's perspectives, MacLure, with Walker appear to be more interested in the interactions themselves. They identified a common structure to these interactions that appeared to promote asymmetries of power and status (2007, p227). For example, parents were expected to be largely passive during the teacher's diagnosis until invited to participate in the dialogue. Even during the dialogue, the teacher would exert his or her expert status by regularly trying to close the conversation in order to protect the diagnosis from being challenged by the parents, although this was often resisted (MacLure, with Walker 2007, p230). Their research shows more of a focus on process and thick description, indicating that qualitative methods are not as homogenous as the original quotation suggests. Indeed, McCranor (2009) states, "*I am not sure, though, that in qualitative research especially,*

*'true' or 'truth' is what is being explored*". MacLure, with Walker's research would seem to lend weight to that statement.

Consequently, it can be seen that the positivist and interpretivist methodologies have given rise to both quantitative and qualitative methods of enquiry respectively. Qualitative methods adopt three main orientations which, in and of themselves may not be entirely successful at accessing the true perspectives of people. However, in combination they may be more successful. Indeed, it seems that investigating experience and penetrating fronts could be used together in order to get closer to the truth, although factors such as the willingness of the participants or the institution under study to allow the truth to be revealed will determine the success of the investigation. However, some research, such as MacLure, with Walker's, moves away from investigating people's perspectives to instead considering the meanings and functions behind what they say, suggesting that qualitative research is not as homogenous as the original quotation might suggest.

In the next part of this essay, it will be necessary to consider the ideas expressed in the original quotation in more detail. The possibility that qualitative methods offer true perspectives but quantitative methods never do has to be explored carefully and the issues of generalization of research and homogeneity in quantitative research will be considered. However, first it is

appropriate to consider the language used in the original quotation in more detail. It states that, "*qualitative research gives access to the true perspectives of people in a way that quantitative research can never do*". The word "*true*" is perhaps not all that useful in research since it can refer to belief or attitude and is something of an abstract concept. For instance, how would a researcher know whether the true perspectives had actually been obtained? Furthermore, the word "*people*" could relate to the people involved in a single case study or it could refer to a population or society. This distinction is important if the research is to be generalized. Finally, it is important to consider the word "*never*", since it suggests that quantitative research is unable to reveal "*true perspectives*".

Schofield (2007, p182) indicates that there is great interest among quantitative researchers concerning the generalization of their research. She quotes, "*the goal of science is to be able to generalize findings to diverse populations and times*" (Smith cited in Schofield 2007, p182). Until recently, this has been rejected or ignored by qualitative researchers who believe that internal validity to be of greater importance as they do not believe it necessary for other researchers to be able to replicate their research (Schofield 2007, p183). As Denzin (cited in Schofield 2007, p182) indicates, "*The interpretivist rejects generalization as a goal and never aims to draw randomly selected samples of human experience*". Gage (2007, p152) would appear to agree with this

assessment when he argues that, “*human affairs simply cannot be studied with the scientific methods used to study the natural world*”. This rejection of positivism and quantitative methods is not new but it does raise an interesting problem. If a researcher is to use qualitative methods to comment on a topic as broad as human affairs, presumably the research should be capable of being generalised in order to do so. However, Guba and Lincoln (cited in Schofield 2007, p186) state, “*generalizations are impossible since phenomena are neither time- nor context-free*”, referring to qualitative methods. If qualitative work is not generalized then it is difficult to imagine how it could provide access to the true perspectives of people, people here referring to a population or society.

However, recently there has been increasing interest in the generalization of qualitative research and it is suggested that agencies considering funding qualitative projects are, “*interested in shedding light on these issues generally, not just as they are experienced at one site*” (Schofield 2007, p184). In fact, Schofield (2007) outlines three ways in which this can be achieved: studying what is; what may be; and what could be. Studying what is involves investigating current situations and choosing a site or multiple sites for their typicality. Studying what may be seeks to examine future trends in order to compare current thinking about the future with what actually happens in the future. Finally, studying what could be examines exceptional situations with a

view to determining what actually happens. It would appear that for large scale projects, such as those exemplified by Schofield (2007), these methods would allow for a greater degree of generalization within qualitative research and could, as a result, move the researcher towards a position whereby true perspectives of people are, to an extent, revealed. However, for a researcher conducting a small-scale 100 hour project, perhaps typical and/or multisite projects simply are not practical. There would be a considerable strain on resources of time and money. More importantly, the kinds of generalization advocated by Schofield are not necessarily the same as those produced as a result of quantitative work.

Bassey (cited in Bell 2005, p12) indicates that there are two possible kinds of generalization: statistical generalization and fuzzy generalization. Statistical generalization relates to quantitative methods whereas fuzzy generalization is based around qualitative methods, using language such as, "*it is possible, or likely or unlikely that*" (Bassey cited in Bell 2005, p12). The kind of generalization being outlined by Schofield would appear to be related to fuzzy generalization and whilst this would allow the researcher to access the perspectives of people, whether they are true or not would depend on how valid and reliable the conclusions reached are.

An alternative could be the use of quantitative statistical generalization, such as randomisation. It attempts to, “*ensure an accurate description of the population*” (Study Guide, p155). By establishing equality between the treatment and control groups, randomisation manages to highlight the effects of a treatment. Whilst randomisation and Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT’s) have been widely used by the medical profession, there is a case for them to be used more often in educational research, at least to show what works. Indeed, both Ravitch (1998) and Hargreaves (2007) advocate greater use of RCT’s and evidence-based practice in educational research. Since RCT’s and quantitative research in general have greater potential to be generalized, it would appear that the original claim that quantitative methods can never provide access to true perspectives is flawed. Take, for example, Denscombe’s (2007) research on health-related critical incidents. Although he primarily used qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups as a means of collecting data, the conclusions he reaches are augmented by the use of quantitative data from a questionnaire survey. The interviews and focus groups conducted by Denscombe indicated that health-related critical incidents did not always dissuade the students from taking risks that may compromise health. The statistics from the questionnaire showed that, “*a health-related critical incident did not always result in a perceived change of attitude towards taking risks with health*” (Denscombe 2007, p216) This suggests that quantitative

methods are capable of confirming qualitative conclusions, thus giving further access to the true perspectives of people.

However, there are limitations to this approach. The Study Guide (p20) suggests that there may be issues with ensuring that the sample being used is representative and, in fact, “*there may be reasons to expect that they are unrepresentative*” (Study Guide, p20). For example, when Barnes (2003) was conducting studies on emancipatory disability research, he discovered that some people who would normally fall within the definition of being impaired or disabled often do not think that they are disabled or oppressed (Barnes 2003, p7). Consequently, they might be considered an unrepresentative section of the overall sample. Nevertheless, to remove them from the sample would not solve the problem as, “*the creation of homogeneity by elimination of people with specific characteristics comes at a cost in restricting the generalizability of the findings to that ‘homogenous’ population*” (Mertens 2005, p153). Thus, depending on the nature of the sample selected by the researcher and how representative it is, the conclusions reached may be capable of being only partially generalizable meaning that the true perspectives of people are not completely realised.

Consequently, it would appear that there are limitations to both qualitative and quantitative methods when attempting to access people’s true perspectives.

This is reflected in the conclusions drawn by Hartley and Chesworth (2000, p22) who argue that qualitative research can be followed up with quantitative research and vice versa. If the original quotation is to be believed, it is uncertain whether Hartley and Chesworth could present such a conclusion. According to the Study Guide (p171) many researchers are now seeing qualitative and quantitative methods as complementary and are attempting to use them together in research projects, although there are problems and difficulties associated with this. Nevertheless, mixing methods can combine the strengths of both methods and mitigate their weaknesses, hopefully leading to a situation whereby the researcher is able to move closer to the true perspectives of people. Perhaps the original quotation should be amended to suggest that qualitative and quantitative methods, working in combination, may allow a researcher closer access to the true perspectives of people. This would appear to be more in line with Bassey's definition of educational research which "*aims critically to inform educational judgements and decisions in order to improve educational action*" since it "*embraces [...] the positivist and interpretive paradigms*" (Bassey 2007, p147).

Therefore, in conclusion, it has been shown that the original quotation is flawed. Whilst through the use of qualitative methods like investigating experience and penetrating fronts true perspectives can be examined, documenting discursive strategies shows a move away from the perspectives of

people. Furthermore, quantitative research can be used to highlight people's true perspectives, sometimes in combination with qualitative work. Consequently, it would seem appropriate to recommend a mixed methods approach to research in order to attempt to reduce the limitations of both methods and be more in line with the definition of educational research.

(3043 words)

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