Understanding the World in New Ways: A Reflection on the Journey Towards Appreciating the Intrinsic Value of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

In this article I look back at my experience in quantitative research and reflect on how a convergence of events made the pull of positivism particularly strong. Such events included: working in a medical setting, interpersonal relationships with medical professionals, and growing up in a Western culture that places greater value on quantitative than qualitative research methods. I go on to discuss how, through working on my PhD, I made the transition away from this tendency, towards appreciating the unique qualities and intrinsic value that qualitative methods can bring to research. This reflexive piece should be of interest to anyone on their PhD journey within the social sciences.

Keywords: *Quantitative, qualitative, post-positivism, positivism, reflection*

I am in the final year of my PhD, in which I have been working with young children in schools and nurseries. I have found the doctoral process undulating, but as I have moved through the various stages of my work, I have grown both personally and professionally. The PhD process has allowed me to think deeply about my area of interest. I have been in control of the design and execution of the research, in close collaboration with my supervisors. As the originator of the proposal, I am realising my own vision rather than someone else's. Along the way I have refined a number of valuable skills and taken time out to do a policy placement, working alongside civil servants in a government department; an opportunity I would not have had were it not for the PhD programme. However, I have also encountered challenges, many deriving from the fact that I am conducting a piece of qualitative research – a paradigm which I had only encountered briefly before.

In the very early stages of formulating my proposal, it became clear to me that I wished to truly give voice to very young children (some as young as 3), and not fall back on standard procedures of asking parents, caregivers, or teachers to answer questionnaires by-proxy. To do this I would have to design a study using post-positivist, qualitative methods. As

this type of research firmly locates the researcher in the world (Willig & Rogers, 2017), I would also be required to bring myself fully into the work, by naming my underlying theoretical assumptions. This felt truly alien to me. While I understood the appeal of qualitative methods, as a way of going beyond statistics and humanising research (through for example, vignettes or small case studies), I viewed this approach mainly as an adjunct to the 'real' work of quantitative research. I therefore approached my PhD with a positivist mindset firmly in place, unconsciously placing more value on quantitative designs, even as I proposed to work qualitatively.

To explain why I took this position, it is useful to reflect on my past. For over ten years I was employed as a researcher and trial manager at different UK academic institutions, NHS and local government bodies. I worked on a wide variety of projects; mostly experimental, double-blinded, quantitative studies in the positivist tradition. A few years after starting on this career trajectory, I married a General Practitioner and spent time working for an NHS Trust among a number of Psychiatrists, Psychologists and Nurses. For medical professionals, using evidence-based science such as Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) as justification for prescribing certain medication or courses of therapeutic intervention, is a foundation of their work. This can leave little room for accepting alternative forms of research, beyond those vignettes or small case studies. I was very influenced by this medical-model environment that I found myself in. I became committed to positivistic understandings of the concepts of validity, replicability and transferability. I sought ways to definitively answer questions and apply the findings to entire cohorts of people. This seemed the best – and fastest – way to achieve real change. Alongside this, growing up in the UK, I was subject to a Westernised culture of positivism, which has entered the public domain through an increase in evidence-based policy making in areas that traditionally would not have used this approach, such as in schools (Goldacre, 2013). This culture depicts the social world as a reality that is both knowable and measurable (Dunne et al., 2005) and positions quantitative methods such as RCTs (Hariton & Locascio, 2018), as the gold standard approach in the quest to discover the irrefutable truth of causal relationships (Hariton & Locascio, 2018).

Quantitative research felt very linear and natural to me: a straightforward journey from A to B, to be undertaken by a wholly objective observer. It has been argued that as humans we have an irresistible urge to classify the world in an attempt to bring order to uncertainty (Keck, 2009). Being a very organised person, someone who likes to be in control of situations, this style of research thus appealed to me on a deeply intrinsic level. Working within such predefined parameters, also meant I never had to risk giving away anything of myself by declaring my position. Why would I need to talk about myself, when I was simply

trying to answer a question about an area of importance? All of these factors came together to create the deep and lasting impression that quantitative methods were superior. Meanwhile, I subconsciously internalised the rhetoric of qualitative methods as less rigorous, more subjective and unscientific (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), pushing me still further away from them.

And yet, I did believe that this piece of research, my PhD, required a qualitative methodology, if only from a pragmatic point of view. Plus, deep down, I probably always knew that research is influenced by the researcher. How could it not be when we are after all, only human and bring all our foibles and prejudices with us into every area of our lives? And so, with these apparent contradictions in mind, I found myself having to push forward in this unfamiliar world and reflect on my position within it. I have always believed that humans are almost entirely shaped by our surroundings and the prevailing social norms of our cultures. As a younger adult, pre-children, I frequently had nature/nurture debates with my older sister who had a child and was firmly in the nature camp. I was then, and remain now, a firm believer in nurture, even after having my own children. Twenty years ago, I read a book by a clinical psychologist (James, 2002), which spoke deeply to me about the effect our upbringing has on us as adults and these ideas stayed with me. Reflecting on these, and other thoughts, in the context of a module on research design, provided the catalyst I ultimately needed. I came to realise that my position had in fact always been clear; I just had not yet named it. The position with which I most closely identified was social constructionism, within a broader ontology of relativism. I had been persuaded through years of work, interpersonal relationships and a broader Western scientific culture, that quantitative work was the superior research methodology. Yet, in fact, my deepest beliefs completely justified a move into qualitative work: in fact, they demanded it.

There was something very freeing in this epiphany. I felt empowered in throwing off the strict expectations of quantitative research design in my proposal and able to embrace a more elastic, less ordered approach. Photovoice also slotted in nicely as my chosen main research method. Later, as I moved into fieldwork, I began to truly appreciate the value of qualitative research, accepting that a messy, creative style was perfectly legitimate. In fact, it may be the only way of working as authentically as possible with children, with many researchers now favouring creative qualitative approaches with this cohort, attempting to improve on methods designed for use with adults (Robinson & Gillies, 2012). My work with young participants proved unpredictable: things did not always go according to plan and I had to learn to be creative and adaptable. I had to listen to them and read them in a different way to adults and often simply go with the flow. I doubt a strict quantitative approach would

have allowed me that same flexibility and freedom and it probably would not have been as enjoyable for the participants.

I still know that quantitative paradigms have a very important place in research, but I now accept that not everything is reducible down to numbers. Qualitative methods can offer rich, nuanced and meaningful data, which can be equally as enlightening as a 'p' value or a 't' statistic. There is also the potential for beauty in qualitative research. Huttunen and Kakkori (2020) conceptualise its intrinsic value as its ability to awaken novel forms of seeing and thinking. They argue that the most powerful qualitative research will function as a great work of art, enabling individuals to understand the world in a new way (Huttunen & Kakkori, 2020). In aspiring to this ambition, my future research could be taken in a variety of directions. I am particularly interested in learning about how younger cohorts of education practitioners, who themselves have grown up in increasingly digital worlds, might go on to influence the young children in their care, with respect to facilitating nature connection. This would require work with adult participants, but I can now envisage working in a more nuanced and creative way with them, rather than relying on survey and interview techniques. My past endeavours in quantitative research may have been worthwhile, but I now feel emboldened in the present. I am encouraged to strive towards creating something not just meaningful, but potentially aesthetical with my qualitative work in the future. Most importantly, I now know that there is indeed, great value in that.

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