



MARK J. FORSHAW argues that it is time to...

Free qualitative research from the shackles of method

AS we are all aware, psychology has changed, throughout its short life. It is possible to identify trends in its history. It has been through periods dominated by introspection and philosophical inquiry, it has flirted with psychophysics, and it has been the home of experimentation. But now many psychologists have chosen to eschew numbers and other tools of the scientist – we call them qualitative researchers.

The method of choice for such researchers is the rejection of the logos – a term popularised by Derrida, and generally used to refer to an inherent, fundamental meaning or truth that sits at the heart of a ‘text’ (anything that could convey a meaning, from a book, to non-verbal gestures, to laughter). Qualitative researchers take a largely relativist position, focusing on the text and all that it may ‘convey’ or ‘mean’.

A view that multiple interpretations exist is becoming commonplace. Even the bastion of hard science, physics, has embraced this to some extent, through the fog of quantum mechanics. A lot, possibly all, depends on where you are standing when you look or how you choose to measure something. Contemporaneous with this move to qualitative methods has been a spring towards postmodern approaches to epistemology. The two go hand-in-hand.

One of the reasons why qualitative methods are on the rise is that there has been a sense of unease about the desire to uncover truths, find things out, and generally to progress. Critical psychologists rightly point out that paradigms change, and our research is

influenced by culture and mind-set rather than being the dispassionate ‘science’ that many might claim.

We have to ask ourselves what we are heading towards. Some qualitative researchers might suggest that we are not moving at all. Perhaps much qualitative research is not really about travel, but about standing still and admiring the countryside. Indeed, one could argue that the same applies to positivistic, reductionist,

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quantitative work. As a part-time postmodernist, I for one have no issue with this. However, as such, this static wonderment ought to require no strict methods.

Yet a lot of qualitative research still retains the odour of the Enlightenment Project (the era in history, arguably extant, in which science, rather than art or religion, was seen as the way to capture and examine reality). We remain committed to rationality, reason, objectivity, rigorous method and the pursuit of replicable, verifiable and valid evidence. We speak of the richness of data, whilst rejecting, in part, the concept of richness, since all things are rich and poor, junk and treasure.

There is a worrying double-standard in effect: on the one hand we are turning our backs on ‘truth’, but on the other we are working out methods to understand texts and prescribing how we should tackle understanding them. Qualitative methods, like traditional quantitative ones, seem to involve an explicit or implicit ‘rigour’ of some sort. I cannot see what this means, or what it is for. For those qualitative psychologists who believe in a fixed truth, there is no contradiction. However, those who believe in the inexhaustible possibilities in the text ought not to be making any attempts at rigour. One

underpinning philosophy of much qualitative research is that there is no single expert on any issue and no right way to do things.

This leads us to doubt the concept of rigour as a route into a hierarchy of qualitative researchers, from those who dabble to those who devote themselves. Tobin and Begley (2004, p.390) state: ‘Rigour is the means by which we demonstrate integrity and competence...a way of demonstrating the legitimacy of the research process. Without rigour, there is a danger that research may become fictional journalism, worthless as contributing to knowledge.’ However, a great many constructionists and qualitative researchers alike would rightly assert that ‘rigour’, ‘legitimacy’, ‘fiction’, ‘journalism’, ‘worth’ and ‘knowledge’ are entirely nebulous and value-laden notions.

Abandon the contradictions

The time has come, perhaps, to abandon, once and for all, this contradiction, and to bravely accept our position. Give up trying to do things ‘properly’ and telling others what our version of properly actually is. Where does this lead? Well, back to where we began, essentially. There was a time, thousands of years ago, when the earliest philosophers examined things and wrote down what they thought about them. A version of this method of inquiry still persists today in the form of literary criticism. This is where we might find ourselves if we give up our pretensions of doing ‘proper’ research. Why cling to the vestiges of a paradigm we think mistaken? Do we lack the courage of our convictions?

If we accept that the principal purpose of research is simply to offer an interpretation of a text, then there is no need to follow methods which dictate thoroughness and a regimented path. Let us simply collect data, read, think, and write. We cannot cast aside our baggage, and try as we might we cannot expose ourselves to the world by including a paragraph or two in each paper where we make a token play

WEBLINKS

The Association for Qualitative Research:

www.aqr.org.uk

Everything Postmodern: www.ebbflux.com/postmodern

at 'reflexivity'. A researcher may consciously accept that their processes and products are inextricable from their personal histories, whims, value systems and ideologies, but if there is one thing which psychologists ought to be aware of it is that we are also driven by unconscious and semi-conscious needs and drives which we are not able or willing to publicly articulate. Consequently, when we speak of reflexivity, we only really deal with a small portion of our relevant life. The rest is hidden, from the reader, and from ourselves.

What I am proposing is that some researchers who feel no need to hold fast to 'method' adopt the relatively 'loose' approach taken by those who write about literature. They read novels, and they develop theories, or collages of ideas, which may or may not resonate with those of other readers, but which certainly generate debate. Evidence takes the form of quotations from those novels, or extractions from their plots. They draw out themes, and support those themes with such evidence.

This is, of course, sounding rather familiar. The language may differ, but this is what qualitative researchers also do, but often under the mask of a different enterprise: that of understanding. Not just that, but understanding which shares many of the characteristics of positivism which those engaged in qualitative research so commonly try to distance themselves from.

I am uneasy with the colour of much of our current research, which on the one hand posits that objectivity is impossible and that any interpretation is valid and valuable, whilst almost equally proposing that the researcher's interpretation is particularly valid because it is the result of a long process of research involving a long-winded method and a carefully documented paper trail. The assumption that hard work and a thorough process produce the best results is a mistaken one. Sometimes it does, sometimes not. By insisting that our methods are 'thorough', whatever that means, we pretend to ourselves that we are working at a level of profundity when it is quite likely that 'superficial' readings can yield something of value.

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A related point in the qualitative coding of texts is the concept of saturation, especially in the case of grounded theory. Saturation is the point where a text has been squeezed dry of its content or meanings, or feels that way to its interrogators. Much store is placed on the reiterative techniques of revisiting data until nothing more can be drawn out. However, it is also accepted, generally, that there are infinite interpretations possible of any given text, and that the exploration of a text will change depending upon temporal and other contexts. One cannot claim to have reached a saturation point and yet hold that saturation is an impossibility.

An empty treasure chest?

My postmodern, poststructuralist method of choice would probably be entirely akin to a form of loose literary criticism. Read, think, posit. Tag on a theoretical approach if you will. Take an atheoretical stance if you wish, but let me know if you think you have succeeded, since it is unlikely that you can remain atheoretical for long. Most of all, read, think, posit. Spend weeks if it suits you, spend minutes if you prefer. The conclusion of your research will be the same: a set of interpretations and some suggestions as to what might be.

Just try to resist the temptation to think that you are solving something. None of us are. Pushing a sealed treasure chest around the floor is not the same thing as picking the lock and opening it. Even if we could pick the lock, there is no guarantee that there is really anything inside. This is what

the radical psychologists told the quantitative researchers some years ago. It may well be true. If it is, however, it applies to everyone.

There are many 'camps' of qualitative research, but the time may be right for a major schism to occur between those that truly reject the notion of the logos and those that use qualitative methods but as a tool for uncovering reality. The truth-hunters have every right to use qualitative methods, of course, and furthermore have every reason to develop thorough, regimented, strategic ways of tackling texts. However, if the stance of a particular qualitative researcher is in rejecting the logos and in

accepting the social construction of knowledge, and all the baggage that brings, then one might suggest that 'thoroughness' and 'method' are simply restrictions on creativity and invention. If everything is a perception or an invention, does it matter how long it took to perceive or invent? If there is no logos, why do I need to work hard not to find it?

■ *Mark Forshaw is Principal Lecturer in Psychology and Mental Health at the Centre for Health Psychology, Staffordshire University. E-mail: m.j.forshaw@staffs.ac.uk.*

References and further reading

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DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Does rigour equal quality?

Is qualitative research by its nature fragmentary or is there a genuine community of qualitative researchers?

As more and more students seem to be choosing qualitative research, are we witnessing the decline of the statistically-based project?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' to psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute (members only) via www.psychforum.org.uk.