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Social Science Methodology Today: Diversity or Anarchy?*

A striking feature of the methodological literature in the social sciences is its sheer size, and the fact that it continues to increase at a rapid rate. Another is the diverse, not to say contradictory, character of this body of writing. Forty years ago, there was considerable consensus about the nature of social and educational inquiry, how it could be pursued, and what it should aim at producing. Today, there is little wide agreement. In this talk I will discuss some specific issues about which there is currently sharp dispute. These include the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods, the role of interviews, and the nature of the products of research or the uses to which they can be put. These by no means exhaust the disputes to be found in the methodological field, but they do provide us with some insight into the tensions and conflicts that now operate within that field. In relation to the first issue, while in some quarters there is strong advocacy of 'mixed method' research, other influential voices challenge any attempt to combine quantitative with qualitative strategies, on the grounds that this ignores fundamental differences in philosophical assumption and/or political orientation. As regards the second issue, in the past, debates over the role of interviews had focused to a large extent on the relative advantages of structured versus relatively unstructured forms of questioning. However, today, some qualitative researchers express doubt about whether interview data can tell us anything about what people think, say, or do outside of interview situations. Finally, there are important debates surrounding how research can and should contribute to evidence-based policymaking or practice. Having outlined some of the arguments in these areas, I will conclude by reflecting on whether what is currently displayed in the field of methodology is a refreshing diversity of approaches or a dangerous anarchy.

Notes

Different positions on the relationship between quantitative and qualitative approaches to social research:

- 1) That quantitative methods are superior.
- 2) That qualitative methods are superior.
- 3) That quantitative and qualitative methods are complementary.
- 4) That quantitative and qualitative approaches derive from incompatible philosophical traditions and are therefore incommensurable; so that as researchers we must simply make a personal commitment to one or the other; the two approaches should not be mixed or combined.
- 5) That the distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches is fundamentally mistaken, so that a more subtle set of distinctions is required.

* Paper given at the 11th CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) Conference, University of Antwerp, September 2004.

References

Some sense of the diversity of qualitative approaches to social and educational research can be gained from:

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Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds.) (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, Second edition.

Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., Delamont, S., Lofland, J., and Lofland, L. (eds.) (2001) *Handbook of Ethnography*, London, Sage.

On rejection of the idea that natural science involves reliance on following an explicit method, see in particular the work of Polanyi and Kuhn:

Polanyi, M. (1959) *Personal Knowledge*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Polanyi, M. (1962) 'The republic of science', *Minerva*, 1, 1, pp54-73

Polanyi, M. (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday.

Kuhn, T. S. (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. Second edition.

There is some excellent secondary literature on Kuhn, see:

Bird, A. (2000) *Thomas Kuhn*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Hoyningen-Huene, P. (1993) *Reconstructing Scientific Revolutions: Thomas S. Kuhn's philosophy of science*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. (First published in German in 1989.)

Sharrock, W. and Read, R. (2002) *Kuhn: philosopher of scientific revolution*, Cambridge, Polity.

The work of John K. Smith provides an example of the tendency on the part of some qualitative researchers to present quantitative and qualitative approaches as incommensurable paradigms:

Smith, J. K. and Heshusius, L. (1986) 'Closing Down the Conversation: The End of the Quantitative-Qualitative Debate Among Educational Inquirers', *Educational Researcher*, 15, 1, pp4-12.

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For an example of current arguments for mixed methods research, see:

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See also Bryman, A. (1988) *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*, London, Unwin Hyman, and Brannen, J. (ed) (1992) *Mixing Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Research*, Aldershot UK, Avebury.

On discourse analysis see, for example:

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Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology*, London, Sage.

van Dijk, T. A. (ed) (1997) *Discourse Analysis as Social Interaction*, London, Sage.

MacLure, M. (2003) *Discourse in Educational and Social Research*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Some sense of recent disagreements among discourse analysts can be gained from the following articles:

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Wetherell, M. (1998) 'Positioning and interpretative repertoires: conversation analysis and post-structuralism in dialogue', *Discourse and Society*, 9, 3, pp387-412

Schegloff, E. A. (1998) 'Reply to Wetherell', *Discourse and Society*, 9, 3, pp413-6.

Billig, M. (1999) 'Whose terms? Whose ordinariness? Rhetoric and ideology in Conversation Analysis', *Discourse and Society*, 10, 4, pp543-558.

Schegloff, E. A. (1999) "'Schegloff's texts" as "Billig's data": a critical reply', *Discourse and Society*, 10, 4, pp558-72.

Billig, M. (1999) 'Conversation Analysis and the claims of naivety', *Discourse and Society*, 10, 4, pp572-6.

Schegloff, E. A. (1999) 'Naivete vs sophistication or discipline vs self-indulgence: a rejoinder to Billig', *Discourse and Society*, 10, 4, pp577-82

Kitzinger, C. (2000) 'Doing feminist conversation analysis', *Feminism and Psychology*, 10, 2, pp163-93.

Hammersley, M. (2003) 'Conversation analysis and discourse analysis: methods or paradigms?', *Discourse and Society*, 14, 6, pp751-81.

For the radical critique of interviews, see:

Atkinson, P. A. and Silverman, D. (1997) 'Kundera's *Immortality*: the interview society and the invention of the self', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3, pp304-25.

Dingwall, R.. (1997) 'Accounts, interviews and observations', in Miller, G. and Dingwall, R. (eds.) *Context and Method in Qualitative Research*, London, Sage.

Gubrium, J. F. and Holstein, J. A. (2002) 'Introduction', in Gubrium, J. F. and Holstein, J. A. (eds.) *Handbook of Interview Research*, Thousand Oaks CA, Sage.

Murphy, E., Dingwall, R., Greatbatch, D., Parker, S., and Watson, P. (1998) 'Qualitative research methods in health technology assessment: a review of the literature', *Health Technology Assessment*, 2, 16, pp1-260.

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On discursive psychology, see:

Edwards, D. (1997) *Discourse and Cognition*, London, Sage.

And on situated cognition, see

Lave, J. (1988) *Cognition in Practice: Mind, mathematics and culture in everyday life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

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On the turn to practice, see:

Stern, D. G. (2003) 'The practical turn', in S. Turner and P. Roth (eds.) *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Oxford, Blackwell.

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