

Qualitative Research: Incredulity toward Metanarrativeness

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Abstract

Qualitative research methods enjoy increasing popularity. Presumably, words and pictures appear to be more informative than numbers. Although the main drawback of qualitative approach is the time it takes to collect the data, and data analysis is complex and vexing, the epistemic nature of qualitative research paves the way towards relativist/democratic perspective in education. Henceforth, the present writers compatible with the stance of qualitative research in education claim that the ideology of qualitative research centers upon the notion of skepticism towards metanarrativeness. That is, narratives cannot claim to encompass everything and explain everything. Moreover, though the supremacy of qualitative research is highlighted, it is highly suggested to find judicious ways in order to mix the two—qualitative and quantitative methods.

Keywords: positivism, anti-positivism, quantitative method, qualitative methods, relativism

1. Introduction

Finding an unambiguous and definitive statement as to what qualitative research in education actually is, turns out to be difficult (Shank, 1995) since the ideology of qualitative research appears to rely on the notion of skepticism towards metanarrativeness; in fact, every phenomenon cannot be explained in an absolute sense. In other words, qualitative research reinforces what Lyotard (1984) refers to as the incredulity towards metanarrativeness.

In The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1984), Lyotard highlights the increasing skepticism of the postmodern condition toward the totalizing nature of metanarrativeness and their reliance on some form of transcendent and universal truth.

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In a sense, reality is not a tangible phenomenon that can be reached by proving or disproving a set of hypotheses. On the glorification of doubt, Rinpoche (cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001) asserts "our contemporary education, then, indoctrinates us in the glorification of doubt...; we have to be seen to doubt everything, to always point to what's wrong and rarely to ask what is right or good" (pp.5-6). In this regard, Kuhn (1970) asserts that the direction of science is caused by doubt. Most change initiatives fail not because of a lack of vision, but because people cannot come to an accurate and insightful view of reality. This relativist look, as Lancy (1993, cited in Shank, 1995) claims, relates to the close interrelations of topics, theory, and methodology in qualitative research. In a sense, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) maintain "qualitative inquiry is an umbrella term for various philosophical orientations to interpretive research. For example, qualitative researchers might call their work ethnography, case study, phenomenology, educational criticism, or several other terms" (p. 9).

Few important qualitative studies in education appeared prior to the 1960s (Bogdan, 2009). From then on, there has been a heated debate among scholars regarding the employment of qualitative methods. One central reason that drives the present writers to provide a response to the scholars who cast doubts upon the nature of qualitative research is the fact that the findings of no two qualitative data sources will generate exactly the same interpretation (Russell & Gregory, 2003); thus, the results may not be generalizable to a larger population. This lack of generalizability should not be listed as a demerit since the epistemology of this type of research is defined in this way. That qualitative research is time consuming is also another issue that the type of research is critically looked. It has to be time consuming (Bilak, 2010) because as Russell and Gregory (2003) assert, "much of the art of qualitative interpretation involves exploring why and how different information sources yield slightly different results" (p. 36). Furthermore, what qualitative researchers place emphasis is the notion of uniqueness and individuality on the part of participants. Lack of attention to individuality (uniqueness) makes quantitative researchers seek for universals; thus, disregard contextual particulars (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. On the Philosophy

In order to expatiate on the main thesis of the paper, the researchers prefer to provide a contrastive look at two schools of philosophy: positivism and anti-positivism. Positivism, as a version of empiricism (Richards & Schmidt, 2002), was earlier coined by the French philosopher, Auguste Comte, who believed reality can be observed (Mack, 2010). In other words, Comte's concept of positivism was based on scientific objectivity and observation through the five senses rather than subjective beliefs. In other words, positivism defines knowledge solely on observable facts and does not give any credence to non-observable entities such as feelings and values (Mack, 2010). In fact, as Mack elucidates, "positivism maintains that the scientist is the observer of an objective reality" (p. 2), not the constructor of this reality. What is implied is the fact that the abstract issues have no place in this trend of philosophy. In fact, to them everything, provided that they are objective and immediately observable can be discovered by setting up experiments in a carefully-controlled conditions. Thus, according to Mack, the purpose of the positivist school of thought is "to prove or disprove hypothesis" (p. 2). To end up, positivism is closely tied to quantitative methodologies and experimental method of data collection and analysis.

Anti-positivism, in contrast, which is naturalistic in nature holds individuals are part of the ongoing action being investigated, and their model of a person is not the plastic version favored by positivist researchers (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). According to Beck (1979, cited in Anderson & Bennett, 2003), the purpose of social science is to understand social reality as different people see it and to demonstrate how their views shape the action which they take within that reality. Since the social sciences cannot penetrate to what lies behind social reality, they must work directly with man's definitions of reality and with the rules he devises for coping with it (Cohen, et al., 2000).

Compatible with quantitative research influenced by the school of empiricism, researchers are willing to beg questions, and rarely do they seek for substantive answers (Slife, 2004). Elsewhere Slife and Melling (2012) assert that quantitative methods would have to delve into the philosophies that underlie the methods in question; henceforth, few answers are provided to the raised questions.

Quantitative research is used for statistical analysis because it produces hard numbers (AIU, 2012). Besides, quantitative researchers are inclined towards making their topics observable and turning the observables into numbers. Such ideology inspired by empiricism asserts that knowledge is discovered through our sense. Indeed, quantitative research does not really know what to expect (Tuner, 2013). However, that only the observable are susceptible to be studies is debatable. Although such positivist thoughts appear to be plausible, there are some pitfalls. The main attack from anti-positivist has been on their mechanistic and reductionist view of nature that excludes ethics and moral responsibility

As mentioned earlier the epistemology of quantitative research is deeply rooted in empiricism. Nevertheless, "empiricism is an inherently limited epistemology" (Slife & Melling, 2012). It deals with the observables and disregard nonobservables. However, no one denies that to understand unobservable construct such as love, it might be necessary to understand hugs, kisses, etc. Thus, the way of getting to the truth is rigid and narrow. Truth is obtained in an absolute sense if phenomena can be observed. This disadvantage in epistemology—ways of knowing— is "part of the reason that qualitative methods were formulated—they deal better with the important nonobservables of our experience" (Slife & Melling, 2012. P. 724).

Unlike quantitative methods, "qualitative methods open up all experiences to knowledge status" (Slife & Melling, 2012, p. 724). Qualitative research is concerned with nonstatistical methods of inquiry and analysis of social phenomena. Creswell (2007) outlines eight characteristics of qualitative research: (1) conducting the research in a natural setting; (b) using the researcher as a key instrument to the study; (2) studying multiple sources of data; (3) analyzing data inductively; (4) focusing on the participants' meaning; (5) establishing an emergent design; (6) applying a theoretical lens; (7) interpreting data subjectively; and (8) developing a holistic account (pp. 37-39). Importantly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) do believe that the qualitative researchers are a human instrument because they are —"responsive, adaptable, holistic in approach, has an ability to expand an existing knowledge base that adds depth and richness to understanding, lends processual immediacy, is able to clarify and summarize, and can explore atypical and idiosyncratic responses" (p. 102). In this regard, Levin (2010) maintains "quantitative research and statistical analyses do not tell the story about this issue" (p. 8).

2.2. Advantages of Qualitative Research

In the literature, a number of advantages are attributed to qualitative research. As to Epstein (1988), descriptive, inductive and non-invasive techniques for data collection are respected as central features of qualitative research. In this regard, compatible with inductive nature of qualitative research, Osterhout et al (2008) also suggests through non-invasive measurement of the human brain, for instance, we can readily detect certain changes in the brain. Moreover, a qualitative approach to research takes advantage of the notion of flexibility and in-depth analysis (Babbie, 1986). Qualitative researchers are apt to flexibly develop questions. By raising questions on the spot, a qualitative researcher can gain a deeper insight towards the respondent's beliefs, attitudes, or situation. In other words, what makes qualitative research distinct from quantitative is the fact that unlike the data in quantitative research, in qualitative research, the data are not so rich and deep. Although there are fewer participants in qualitative research, the researchers generally know more details about each participant. In contrast, quantitative researchers collect data on more participants, so it is not possible to have the depth and breadth of knowledge about each (Henninger, 2009).

Qualitative research is primarily good for generating hypotheses rather than testing hypotheses (Sifle & Melling, 2012). Henceforth, the researchers have to expect to some extent that there would be no guarantee that people will reliably respond (Bilak, 2010). Indeed, lack of response reliability on the part of participants is not among the pitfalls listed for the qualitative research. This is a matter of the quality of criteria. However, there is no clearly defined set of quality criteria available for judging. In fact, whether there are criteria by which qualitative research can be judged is a matter of reflect. To several scholars (Smith, 1984, cited in Hammersley, 2007), any attempt to apply criteria to qualitative research leads to confusion and inconsistency, because the criteria are incompatible with the basic philosophical underpinnings of this type of inquiry. Conversely, to several scholars (e.g., Hammersley, 2007), the task of judging quality cannot be reduced to a finite set of explicit criteria that can substitute for judgment. To Hammersley, the criteria in the form of guideline can play an important role in the work of a qualitative researcher. Indeed, any guarantee on the part of participants to respond reliably, can be achieved if the informants have a solid background knowledge regarding the ethics of research that is provided through guidelines.

2.3. Power in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a means to *“empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study”* (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). The place where individuals are given the power and freedom to conduct their lives in their own ways, the survival of such individuality entails doubts. *“Doubt about the validity of one’s convictions breeds relativism”* (Hiley, 2007, p. 102). In a sense, qualitative research is inclined towards relativism. In the history of educational research, so many paradigms have emerged, but from a relativist look, in general, and qualitative method, in particular, no paradigms can be compared with one another. In the same line, the findings of a qualitative researcher cannot be valid for another context because such research is context-bound.

The problem of measurement is the critical shortcoming that quantitative research is deeply suffered from. What is lucid is that the participants in a research are not granted the power of making decision on the educational, social, and occupational issues. And research is respected a powerful weapon at the hands of not only researchers but others. Henceforth, developing a sense of political clarity will allow participants to view themselves as subjects in the process of development and not objects without a voice. Having a political clarity on the part of researchers gives participants a sense of trust that takes charge of their own action. They act as a producer rather than a mere consumer in the related field.

Besides, qualitative researchers are willing to interpret the meanings hidden between and within the lines. In effect, qualitative researchers know what to expect; in other words, the researchers may only know roughly in advance what they are looking for. Metaphorically, the researchers gather data in order to plug them into the bigger picture (Tuner, 2013). What Tuner claims is that with quantitative data, the bigger picture cannot be traced. Thus, the interpretation and understanding the personal experiences is less inserted in the printed words. In a sense, the individual experience and interpretation is not invariant. However, quantitative methods do not search for those issues which are not fixed or observable. What is significant for quantitative researchers is the notion of generalizability; that is, a sample of universe would be the representative of the whole universe.

Henceforth, the study of unique events in quantitative methods is totally disregarded; in fact, what is ignored in quantitative methods to research is the notion of professionalism.

Fulcher and Davidson (2007) claim that professionalism is in close line with the concept of a democratic approach to education held by John Dewey. Within democratic approach, individualism is an individualism of freedom, of responsibility, of initiative, not an individualism of lawlessness.

Moreover, in qualitative research words and pictures appear to be more informative than numbers. In quantitative research, in contrast, variables can and should be translated into numbers. Nonetheless, there are several areas (e.g., medical research) in which data cannot easily be analyzed due to ethical issues. In fact, when only outward behavior is taken into account, this will leave a huge lacuna especially in human behavioral studies. Furthermore, there are lots of variables that are not apt to be translated into the language of numbers (Slife & Melling, 2012). Thus, as to Slife and Melling, this is not logical to say that quantitative information is not helpful. It is plausible to say that the information obtained quantitatively is thin. Henceforth, quantitative researchers are not much concerned with how a variable in a given context can be improved. Furthermore, whether the result obtained, in a quantitative research, is valid or not is a matter of concern. That is, no one knows to what extent the participants are skillful in using and translating the numbers. Thus, as Slife and Melling (2012) put forth "questionnaires that provide non-numerical responses, such as *always, sometimes, and never*, are often coded after the study in numerical form" (p. 726). In disfavor with quantitative research, Slife and Melling go on to hold that qualitative researchers contend that translation of numbers omits and distorts important information.

Quantitative researchers are compatible with the doctrine of determinism. That is, behavior is solely influenced by natural causes; it does result from free will or choice (Heiman, 1995, cited in Slife & Melling, 2012). To Slife and Melling (2012), the deterministic characteristic of quantitative research "precludes researchers from ever finding anything resembling a free will"(p. 728). Indeed, quantitative research ignores the fact that "human beings possess some modicum of agency in the meanings of their lives" (Slife & Melling, 2012, p. 728).

Indeed, quantitative research is not susceptible to recognize the individuality and uniqueness of human beings and therefore can be guilty of grouping people into set categories because it is easier to analyze (Barker, 2013).

Due to its mechanistic and reductionist nature, quantitative research, as Baker contends, oversimplifies human nature.

Slife and Melling go on to hold that qualitative methods "do not assume that human beings are not at the mercy of natural laws that determine their every thoughts and behaviors" (p. 728). In a sense, if so, no meaning is possible. Meaning requires possibilities. In fact, the goal of psychology is not to find the patterns of law, but patterns of meaning, whether personal or cultural (Slife & Melling, 2012). As Kruger (1988) maintains, "meaning does not lend itself to reductive analysis" (p. 148). Although it is possible, for example, to reduce a kiss to a series of muscle movements stimulated by hormonal secretions, this reduction is viewed by the qualitative researcher as, at best, incomplete, and, at worst, misleading. To be fully understood, a kiss must be understood in context: is it a sexual advance, a greeting, or a good-bye? (Kruger, 1988).

3. Conclusion

The present paper is not willing to endorse what is suggested by empiricist philosophers that only the observables can be studied. However, we cannot disregard the stance of quantitative approaches to research only for this reason that such an approach is inspired by an empiricist philosophy since as Slife and Melling (2012) claim, the hallmark of science is not a particular philosophy, but investigation, in all possible forms. All methods are interpreters not describers of reality. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are in an attempt to seek for reality. None of these methodologies appears to be meticulous. As Slife and Melling (2012) assert they are more like a particular prism to reality. Henceforth, the present writers do believe in order to compensate the too many shortcomings, qualitative and quantitative methods are needed to be mixed. However, the mixed- method research is much more difficult to conduct than it might first appear (Slife & Melling 2012). Indeed, in mixed methods, qualitative procedures are used from a quantitative perspective. Thus, a judicious mix of both quantitative and qualitative data/research is usually ideal. These two types of research can be combined to equal an even larger scale research project that would yield a lot of information (AIU, 2012).

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