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The Research Question in Social Research: What is its Role?

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This paper addresses the role of the research question in social research. It outlines what is taken to be the conventional view in many methodological discussions, namely, that research questions guide decisions about research design and research methods. This position is taken to imply that social researchers typically take the view that research methods need to be tailored to the research questions that guide an investigation. The paper questions how far this position pertains to actual research practice. Drawing on interviews with researchers about their practices in relation to mixed-method research, two discourses were found in the transcripts. A particularistic discourse that reflects the traditional view, whereby mixed-method research is viewed as only appropriate when research questions warrant it, was uncovered. In addition, a universalistic discourse, which sees mixed-method research as more generally superior, was also uncovered. The implications of these viewpoints for understanding the role of research questions are then discussed.

Introduction

For many writers on social research methodology and for practising social researchers, the research question has an important status as the linchpin of the research process. The research question is viewed as a crucial early step that provides a point of orientation for an investigation. It helps to link the researcher's literature review to the kinds of data that will be collected. As such, formulating a research question has an important

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role in many accounts of the research process as a stage that helps to militate against undisciplined data collection and analysis.

The research question is supposed to have a pivotal role because decisions about research design and methods are supposed to be made in order to answer research questions. Textbook writers have almost ritualistically extolled the significance and importance of clear research questions (e.g. Bryman, 2004, pp. 30–33). According to one writer:

> In my view, formulating research questions is the most critical and, perhaps, the most diffi-cult part of a research design …. Establishing research questions makes it possible to select research strategies and methods with confidence. In other words, *a research project is built on the foundation of research questions*. (Blaikie, 2000, p. 58, emphasis in original)

In a similar fashion, de Vaus argued: *'The function of a research design is to ensure the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible'* (2001, p. 9, emphasis in original). It might be supposed that the rather open-ended approach to investigations that is often associated with a qualitative strategy would make research questions less important within that tradition than within quantitative research. However, several writers have emphasized the importance of research ques-tions in qualitative research (e.g. Creswell, 2003, p. 105; Flick, 1998, p. 47; Mason, 2002, pp. 27–30). Mason, for example, wrote:

> [Y]ou will start to make strategic choices about which methods and sources are the most appropriate for answering your research questions. It is useful to engage directly with ques-tions about how and why particular methods and sources might yield data which will help you to answer your questions … (2002, p. 27)

Some qualitative researchers, however, prefer to eschew giving research questions such a prominent focus. In some versions of grounded theory, for example, research questions only come into the reckoning during the course of an investigation or are formulated in only the most general way at the outset. This seems to have been one of the main messages in the original formulation of the approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), but in some later variants the research question occupies a prominent role in relation to the early stages of an investigation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Conversation analysis is a qualitative research tradition that avoids the restriction that a research question brings. Thus, Psathas (1995, p. 45) characterized the tradition as one that involves 'unmotivated looking' in the early stages of a research project. However, most portrayals of the research process in qualitative, as well as in quantitative research entail an account that accords considerable significance to research questions.

The purpose of this paper is not to criticize the view that research questions occupy such a key role. Instead, the purpose is to question its status. By this is meant, how far does it provide a descriptive account of the research process of social scientific inquiry? Clearly, it is likely to be an adequate account of the process of *some* social research. However, in this paper I will be concerned with the matter of whether these writers are providing in their accounts of the relationship between research questions on the one hand and research design and research methods on the other a satisfactory description

of the decision-making process in social research. Instead, it might be suggested that what they are providing is a normative account of the research process rather than a descriptive one. It is these twin issues—the questioning of the status of accounts of research questions in relation to other aspects of the research process and the suggestion that the account is normative rather than descriptive—that provide the focus of this paper.

Sources of Data

My questioning of these issues derives from two sources. First, it derives from interviews I conducted with 20 social scientists during the course of a study in 2004 of their practices in relation to, and views about, research that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. These researchers are essentially a purposive sample generated from an examination of papers published in books and journals during the period 1994–2003. The interviews were conducted with a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were concerned with the researchers' views on, and practices in relation to, the integration of quantitative and qualitative research. The typical interview lasted around 45 minutes. Interviewees varied between senior figures in the field and relatively new researchers. They conducted their research in at least one of the following fields: sociology, social psychology, human and cultural geography, media and cultural studies, and organization studies. In the course of these interviews, I felt that there was sometimes an ambivalence among my interviewees concerning the status and role of research questions in relation to mixed-methods research.[1] The interviewees were not asked specifically about research questions, so the evidence presented is an unanticipated outcome of the interviews arising from interviewees' spontaneous comments. In other words, while interviewees were asked about their practices in relation to mixed-methods research, they were not asked to consider those practices in relation to research questions. The interviews were analysed for a variety of themes using a coding scheme within NVivo and for consistencies and inconsistencies within the overall narrative of each interview. Second, my questioning derives from an examination of accounts of social research which sometimes reveal a similar uncertainty about the role of research questions and even a rejection of the view that research questions drive research. As part of the preparation for the interviews, a wide range of published materials regarding mixed-methods research were examined. In the course of this examination of published work, issues regarding the connection between research questions and mixed-methods research occasionally cropped up and were noted. I will draw on both these sources of evidence.

Between Two Discourses: Interviews with Social Researchers

On the basis of an examination of the interviews, it is useful to distinguish between two discourses concerning the role of mixed-methods research in relation to research questions and research topics. The distinction would be relevant to mono-method research too, but that will only be touched on later in this paper.

One discourse is a *particularistic* discourse which implies that mixed-methods research should only be used when it is appropriate to an investigation's research questions. Judgments of the appropriateness of any approach—whether mixed-method or mono-method—are to do with suitability for a study's research questions. The particularistic discourse is essentially the conventional view outlined by writers such as Blaikie (2000), Bryman (2004), Creswell (2003), Flick (1998) and Mason (2002), and concerning the need to tailor decisions about how research is done to research questions. The particularistic discourse specifies that decisions about methods and other aspects of the conduct of research stem from the research question(s). In other words, researchers have to tailor their decisions about such things as which methods to employ to the research question(s) they are asking.

The other is a *universalistic* discourse, which is antithetical to the views of these writers in suggesting that a research approach (which in the present case is mixed-methods research) may have a universal suitability. In other words, unlike a particularistic discourse, a universalistic discourse entails the view that mixed-methods research will tend to provide better outcomes more or less regardless of the aims of the research. The relevance of the universalistic/particularistic distinction is not just that the universalistic discourse was sometimes employed, but also that interviewees sometimes shuttled between the two discourses over the course of a relatively brief interview that was typically of just 45 minutes' duration.

Universalistic Discourse

Some interviewees proposed a largely universalistic view of mixed-methods research. Respondent 5 suggested:

> Well I think, I think you—with that combination, ideally you should get an optimal mix of validity, which might actually mean a certain amount of reproduceability without getting too locked into a kind of a fully positivist agenda, but I mean I think there's a lot there that—that's valuable. You get that with a—a close engagement with the processes of meaning making as well, as far as the media are concerned. So it ideally promises a—a mix of a—an overview of a process that has a—that makes statistical sense in terms of tendencies and probabilities but with an exploration of what's inside the process too …

Respondent 9 developed a universalistic theme when he suggested that familiarity was a major consideration in decisions about research approach and method. He argued:

> But I think, in reality, in many instances, what you find is that people accept the importance of what you can get from qualitative methods but just simply keep researching in their own way, using more traditional methods, simply because that's what they're familiar with.

The same interviewee developed a further universalistic theme when he suggested that another set of factors associated with decisions about research approach and methods was related to the anticipated likelihood of getting research published:

> In general most researchers prefer to keep researching in a—in a particular way, in a more accepted way, in a more traditional way, because on the one hand that way can be justified

> in terms of the scientific paradigm and on the other hand I suspect it's because they think they'll have a better chance of getting it published.

In other words, this researcher is essentially saying the many researchers conduct their investigations in a habitual way and not necessarily with recourse to the specific research questions they are asking. Another indication of a reference to such a habitual use of a research approach was presented by Respondent 10, who recognized that mixed-methods research could be done badly, just like any other form of research, but averred that he found it more interesting to do and more interesting to read.

Respondent 12 stated categorically about mixed-methods research: 'Well, I suppose I think that everyone should be doing it' and repeated a few moments later 'I suppose I think everyone should be doing both and be, you know, less moralistic about right and wrong'. She also indicated a universalistic stance when she suggested: 'but if I was designing the ideal project, I would always say combine the different approaches because you'll get a more interesting story but you've got to draw that story out, that's not easy'. Respondent 3 also proposed a universalistic response:

> So having both can be of great assistance in helping each one in—you know, to interpret the other. If you've just got one, you don't have that capacity, so that's how I would—there's no once and for all answer, that it's always qualitative that's better or quantitative that's better but they do different things and they should be looked at together.

In this comment, the researcher suggests that mixed-methods research offers opportunities that mono-method research does not. There is an element of particularism in the comment ('there's no once and for all answer, that it's always qualitative that's better or quantitative that's better'), but the respondent then goes on to say that quantitative and qualitative data 'should be looked at together' since doing so allows the researcher to interpret one using the other. The latter suggests a universalistic stance with respect to mixed-methods research in relation to research questions.

Such examples of a universalistic discourse are striking because of their departure from the notion that a research approach should be moulded to research questions.

Particularistic Discourse

Quite often in the course of the interviews, the conventional view of research questions driving the research process would be provided. Respondent 1, discussing the use of mixed-methods research, took the view:

> … so its [mixed-methods research's] use depends upon what your research questions are what sorts of methods you should choose—that's always the first step, but I think there's actually become a bit of a fetishism about using mixed methods …

In this comment, the interviewee expounds the conventional view of research questions influencing the choice of research methods, but interestingly implies that one approach to research has become popular and that it may be that some researchers are selecting this approach to a certain extent regardless of the research questions, which implies a universalistic orientation. He also describes some research that he conducted in which a certain style of analysis was proposed which the research team wanted to

carry out 'regardless of the research questions'. When asked about the mixed-methods research that he read, he suggested that it has the potential to be more persuasive than mono-method research, 'because I think you do see more dimensions of the same phenomenon'. This last comment is difficult to square entirely with the view that an approach to research should be geared to research questions, because seeing more dimensions of a phenomenon is likely to be a feature of any investigation irrespective of the research questions asked.

Respondent 2 answered about mixed-methods research:

> I think it's—I—mean, I don't think it's necessarily a good or a bad thing, I think it depends on how you want to access research questions and answer them and whether it's appropriate for the particular questions that you have.

In a similar way to Respondent 1, she recognized a potential problem 'when people just do it because it's expected or do it without thinking about how it relates to the research questions'. Another researcher (Respondent 7) asserted the importance of not doing mixed-methods research because it is deemed to be 'a good thing' and of making sure that research methods are 'appropriate to the research problem'.

Shifting between Universalistic and Particularistic Discourses

In the course of their interviews, some interviewees shifted between a universalistic and a particularistic discourse. For example, Respondent 4 took the view that research questions were key to whether mixed-methods research should be employed when he suggested that such a decision is 'task driven'. However, he then went on to propose: 'Yeah, I can't imagine many—I cannot imagine there are many research topics that wouldn't benefit from having both elements'. He also proposed that: 'As long as we're talking about that kind of quantitative material, I would be unhappy for any of my PhD students not to include some kind of survey, questionnaire, if you like quantitative material, as part of their work'. This respondent thus shifted from a particularistic discourse to one that is far more redolent of a universalistic discourse that portrays mixed-methods research as having a general superiority when he says that he could not think of many research topics that would not benefit from including both quantitative and qualitative research.

Respondent 15 described an approach to a project that employed both quantitative and qualitative research: 'But, but basically what it was, is OK, let's really think about the design here, so if we're going to ask these kind of questions, we want this kind of knowledge, what method do we—what methods do we need?'. However, she also went on to propose: 'I think you know, if you put together what some quantitative and some qualitative methods have to offer, in the different ways in which they tell us about context, you get a really—you could get a really profound picture really, you know.' Here again, we see a movement from a particularistic to a universalistic discourse.

Respondents 8 and 13 seemed to move during the interview between a universalistic and a particularistic stance. Respondent 13 remarked: 'Mixed methods project, hopefully, will get as I said earlier on, you know, get a picture that is as close as possible to

the "reality" of the lives of the respondents'. But later he acknowledged: 'I just don't think that any research methodology or research method is so perfect that it is applicable, to the same degree of success, or could be used to the same degree of success in all contexts'.

In one case, an interviewee shifted in the other direction during the course of an interview, namely from a universalistic to a particularistic discourse. In some earlier comments, Respondent 8 had a rather universalistic tone. For example, he noted at one point that it is generally easier in his field to get quantitative rather than qualitative research published, and took the view that that is a reason for including some quantitative research in a qualitative study. Also, Respondent 8 suggested:

> And the second point, which I keep banging on a lot is how do we generalize some case studies and if you adopt purely qualitative methods, then it's very hard. There have been lots of case studies done but it's very hard to aggregate.

These two comments seem to point in the direction of a universalistic discourse: it is best to include quantitative research in a study because it will make outputs easier to publish and it improves the ability to generalize findings. Such considerations would seem to be separate from ones to do with the goodness of fit with research questions. However, he later said:

> So, the combination of methods, I think is really—it needs to be seen in the light of answering the particular research problem and just throwing all the methods in together is a recipe for disaster, I think. I'm sure there's probably projects which have tried to do that.

Here Respondent 8 employed a particularistic discourse with the research approach needing to be tailored to the research problem. And again:

> So in that sense, mixed methods are stronger than the other two [quantitative and qualitative research on their own], for asking a particular type of question. But for the generality of social science question, they're not the answer at all, and certainly I wouldn't want to say that they are. For certain types of questions—you know the classic ethnography is the answer, and it continues to be so, I think.

Later in the interview he seemed to veer back towards a universalistic discourse:

> … my concern in my field, about a lot of research is that it did become too purely qualitative, there wasn't enough endeavour to ask causal or generalizing type questions. And that's why some mixture of methods is—is use … —is a discipline if you like. Centrally, within case studies, so that we can say, what's going on in this case? Are we confident that what the researcher is saying is true and have we got enough data on it so that we can put it together?

In the following remarks, Respondent 11 seemed to move back and forth between universalistic and particularistic discourses:

> … really a combination is the best way to get at the questions that I'm trying to answer. So that's something—obviously, the—one chooses one's method in—as a function of what the research question is and what kind of approach seems appropriate to tackle it. In terms of the interest and satisfaction you get out of your work, I think being able to combine the methods is interesting because it gives you a broader perspective on the problem, and it's interesting to be able to think about the two methods side by side. But for the most part it's

> just something which is driven by the nature of the research questions and the strategy that
> one needs to take to tackle them.

The particularistic discourse can be seen in the remarks in the second sentence and at the end of the passage about the nature of the research questions. However, there are other comments that suggest universalistic considerations: the suggestion that combining methods gives a broader perspective and it being more interesting to think about the two approaches in tandem. There is a further interesting comment in the first sentence, when the interviewee said that 'a combination is the *best way*' (emphasis added) to get at the questions in which he is interested. This comment raises interesting questions about how researchers produce a link between research approach and research question. This issue will be returned to below.

A variation on the theme can be discerned in comments by Respondent 6. This interviewee hinted that he felt that mixed-methods research could be more persuasive than mono-method research, but that so far as he was concerned this was not necessarily the case:

> … so it is very persuasive I think, to the reader, but my own personal view is—I'm
> persuaded, I'm persuaded by a quantitative piece of research, I'm persuaded by a qualita-
> tive piece of research—it doesn't have to be a mixed method piece to hit all the stars. If the
> research is set up appropriately, it could be either/or, or mixed.

However, he then went on to suggest that there were pressures from funding bodies and other agencies for research to be done in a certain way.

> And again it's probably the—being very pragmatic, that in order to get funding from x or
> y, you need to fall into line to their expectations as to what is a good research design, with-
> out actually thinking about is that a research design—is that the appropriate research
> design for this research problem or this research issue?

He also felt that 'the structure pushes you to making decisions about picking off, picking off the shelf the tailor made mixed method approach and it might not necessarily be appropriate'. A key reason in this interviewee's view was that, due to the constraints of limited time and funds, researchers and funding bodies are engaged in risk reduction strategies. The funding body looks for the adoption of methodological principles that are relatively tried and tested, while the researcher seeking funding adopts these principles because they are perceived as being more likely to be viewed favourably for funding and to result in a relatively successful project if funding is awarded. Whether such a view of funding bodies' thinking is correct is not the issue here: it is the perception that is significant.

An interesting slant on this kind of issue is provided by Respondent 7, who described a mixed-methods investigation in which the funding agency had sketched out a methodology that it wanted. The research team decided additionally to include a quantitative component in order to 'back up' the qualitative findings. This aspect of the research did not go well for a variety of reasons, so that the expectations of the funding agency needed to be managed. This had led the interviewee to adopt a particularistic stance in subsequent studies when he said: 'I think you know you've got to have a completely clear idea in your head about why you're

combining them and unless you've got a watertight methodology then it can really fall down'. However, when asked about mixed-methods research that he had read, he suggested:

> I suppose—yeah, it does depend on the parameters of the research and on the aims and objectives and how they're set and how you relate to them. But, instinctively I'd say yes it would—it would provide better quality. I think there are certain things that you can learn by adopting different approaches, you know, including things like focus groups and if they do work well, if you can record them well, you know they are, they can provide a different dimension that you'd never get from purely a quantitative approach …

In this case, the interviewee's rather wounding experience appears to have led to a position that is couched in particularistic terms, but he later adopts a universalistic discourse. Again, we see here a certain unease about whether mixed-methods research should be seen in particularistic terms, especially as a consequence of a bad experience, or in terms of a universalistic discourse that is privileged by the interviewee 'instinctively' preferring a mixed-methods research approach.

Overview of the Interviews

Two points stand out from the interviews. First, several of the interviewees endorsed universalistic stances in connection with the role of research methods in relation to research questions. This universalistic discourse stands in contrast to the particularistic stance that is advanced in textbooks which suggest that the research process needs to be dovetailed to research questions. Second, several interviewees shifted between universalistic and particularistic discourses. In drawing attention to this feature of some of the interviews, it is not being suggested that the interviewees were confused or guilty of sloppy thinking. Instead, two possibilities are suggested. One is that the textbooks are in fact outlining a normative position, which has only limited implications for actual research practice. Because of the skills and background of researchers—issues that the interviewees indicated in interviews were important aspects of their decision making—concerns other than the fit between research questions and research methods come into play. The other suggestion is that in fact researchers are more ambivalent about the role of research questions than the textbook accounts allow for. In the context of mixed-methods research, researchers may have a general impression that such a research approach is desirable, but feel that the implications of research questions for methodological choices are not as obvious as textbooks imply. This allows methodological preferences to manifest themselves. Either of these suggestions implies that the textbook account, with its emphasis on particularism in relation to the relationship between research questions and research methods, may be limited.

A further striking finding to emerge from the interviews is how little philosophical issues (such as epistemological considerations) enter into discourses about the selection of research methods. This finding too suggests that formal accounts of the research process, such as those sometimes found in textbooks, do not reflect how researchers think about their research practices.

Other Sources

The published literature on combining quantitative and qualitative research also provides occasional hints of unease about the supposed connection between research questions and research methods. A particularistic discourse is common among commentators in this field. Comments like 'It should be the nature of the research question that leads to a choice to use mixed methods—never the reverse' (Bazeley, 2003, p. 389) are legion. This comment is taken from a handbook concerned with mixed-methods research that is full of similar particularistic statements, including those by the editors, who referred to the 'dictatorship of the research question' (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 679). However, this is not to suggest that universalism does not appear as an occasionally competing discourse. As an example of the occasional intrusion of a universalistic discourse, comments such as the following can be encountered:

> Although we believe that a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is useful for all research areas, the perception among many researchers is that a mixture of methods is suitable only when particular questions are raised. (Currall & Towler, 2003, p. 521)

Similarly, it was suggested in the same volume that 'mixing methods that bring together the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods will enhance research in the field' (Rocco *et al.*, 2003, p. 604). Thus, intimations of a universalistic discourse find their way into a domain where a particularistic discourse tends to hold sway.

A further way in which the 'dictatorship of the research question' stance may not hold sway for some researchers is that they may adopt mixed-methods research for tactical reasons, such as the following: to secure funding, to get research published or to gain the attention of policy makers. For example, there is sometimes a view that including quantitative evidence in a predominantly qualitative study or some other combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence is more likely to be looked upon favourably by funding bodies, journal referees and editors, and policy gatekeepers. The possible role of such agents was pointed to in the previous section in connection with Respondents 6 and 8, while Respondent 9 implied that concerns about publication lay behind the adoption by many researchers of a traditional research approach.

McKendrick (1999) noted that population geographers sometimes conduct mixed-methods research because of unease among policy makers regarding the small samples that are common in qualitative research. Similarly, Rocheleau (1995, p. 462) wrote that in a study she conducted in the field of political ecology, she and her research team decided 'somewhat cynically' to include a questionnaire survey even though it was anticipated that the qualitative data would yield far greater insight. However, it was felt that the questionnaire data would be more familiar and acceptable to key individuals with an interest in the policy implications of their work. Similarly, Milkman (1997) wrote that she included a questionnaire in her study of General Motors because she felt that she would be more likely to gain access to the organization.

It may be that some researchers conduct mixed-methods research in fields (such as organization studies) or professional cultures (such as the USA) in which there is a

strong preference for quantitative research in order to increase the likelihood of their work being published. As such, mixed-methods research becomes a risk reduction strategy of the kind referred to by Respondent 6. For example, Guba wrote, in connection with the USA, where there is a greater predilection for a quantitative research approach than in the UK, of his worry that in encouraging colleagues and students to flirt with qualitative research he might be 'making it difficult for them to get jobs, to be published, or to be promoted or tenured in the face of the hegemony still enjoyed by adherents of positivism' (1996, p. 46). What Guba was acknowledging here was that, in some social scientific fields, the predilection for certain styles of inquiry may militate against other approaches to research. This would imply that the arguments that qualitative researchers proffer concerning the potential relevance of their approaches for the research questions they seek to answer are overridden by the general intellectual preferences at certain times and in certain quarters. It is precisely this kind of concern about the publishability of purely qualitative research (other than in qualitative research journals) that may have led some researchers to adopt a mixed-methods approach.

Insight into this possibility is suggested in a discussion by Herman and Egri of the background to their investigation of environmental leadership. They wrote that one of the main reasons they included a survey within their qualitative approach was that they 'understood that qualitative research alone would not satisfy many mainstream academics' (Herman & Egri, 2002, p. 132). However, if methods were driven primarily by research questions, such a situation—researchers feeling it necessary to include a research method that they would not otherwise have employed—would not arise. There is the risk that, on occasion, researchers may feel compelled to incorporate elements of research with which they are not entirely comfortable and in which they may not be fully skilled. These observations shed further doubt on the textbook account of the relationship between research questions and methods. This is further underlined in connection with the general field to which Herman and Egri referred—organization studies. In this case, if the particularistic discourse found in textbooks really did prevail, the cogency of authors' arguments concerning the appropriateness of their research approach for their research questions should determine judgments about the appropriateness of their methods.

Discussion

The textbook account of the research process presents the link between research question and research methods as follows:

$$\text{Research question} \rightarrow \text{Research methods}$$

The evidence from the interviews conducted and from other sources suggests that this is not always a reasonable description of the connection between research questions and research methods. The interviews imply that researchers sometimes discuss the relationship between research questions and research methods in a way that is

inconsistent with the textbook account or that they exhibit some ambivalence and uncertainty about it.

Another possible way of seeing the connection is as follows:

Disciplinary/policy/funding expectations

Research question   Research methods
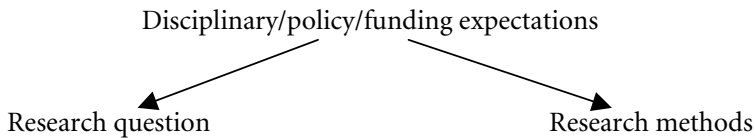
This way of viewing the relationship between them is to suggest that any apparent connection between research questions and research methods has the character of a spurious relationship, i.e. a relationship that arises because a third variable influences the two variables that form an apparent relationship. This second characterization implies that disciplines, policy expectations and funding requirements influence both the nature of research questions asked *and* the methods employed. In other words, the way research questions are formulated and how data are collected and analysed are influenced by researchers' beliefs about the following: disciplinary requirements concerning what should pass as acceptable knowledge; policy makers' expectations concerning the kind of knowledge they require for policy; and expectations of funding bodies.

Yet another possible formulation is:

Methodological commitments

Research question   Research methods

or
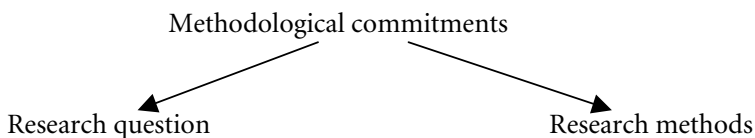
Methodological commitments→Research question→Research Methods

Several interviewees pointed to the role of skills in decisions about methodology. For many, there is a 'comfort level' (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman, & Handson, 2003) whereby they essentially frame research questions in a manner that will lead to particular choices of methods. Gorard, Rushforth, and Taylor (2004) noted the possibility of such an effect in the interviews they conducted on methodological issues in educational research. They quoted one researcher discussing the widespread use of qualitative research:

> '… you wonder whether they're using that method because they think it's the best method … or whether they don't know any other methods or they don't feel comfortable with or experienced enough with other methods to try using those'. (Gorard *et al.*, 2004, pp. 380–381)

More generally, Gorard *et al.* noted a tendency for choices of research method to be strongly influenced by what they call 'methodological identities'.

Thus, the researcher's methodological predilections, such as a commitment to a quantitative or qualitative research approach, lead to research questions being framed in a way that makes them accessible to a particular research method or possibly a cluster of research methods. A researcher who is a practitioner of discourse analysis is likely to ask research questions that imply the use of that approach.

A further example of the kinds of methodological commitment being referred to can be discerned in Oakley's remark that the 'arrival of feminism as a political and social movement underscored the importance for political reasons of using "qualitative" research methods' (1999, p. 248). She went on to say that qualitative research 'came to be highlighted quite unambiguously as the preferred paradigm' (1999, p. 249). Here, it is a commitment to a style of research that is described as determining choices about research methods. Oakley also described her own position as one that entailed stressing the importance of ensuring that research methods are appropriate to research questions, sensitive to power relations and ethically acceptable (1999, p. 252). However, it is precisely the balancing of these and the many other influences upon researchers' decision making that is likely to influence how far research questions really do shape which research methods are selected. In many cases, choices about research methods are likely to be influenced by prior methodological commitments, perceived expectations of disciplines, journals and funding bodies, and ideological loyalties.

Such considerations imply that the textbook version is one that probably applies to some research, but that researchers frequently acknowledge that it can be a distorted account or they discuss the research process in ways that suggest that it does not always provide a realistic portrayal of the role of the research question. Why, then, do several writers, such as those cited towards the beginning of this paper, propose a view of the relationship between research questions and research methods that is at variance with the way in which some social research is conducted? One possible reason is that the textbook account provides a normative view of the research process: it is outlining how research should be conducted. Proposing that research methods flow from research questions implies a rationality that is likely to be attractive to those learning about or funding social research. Another possible reason is that it conforms to the linear accounts of the research process in empirical papers in journals and elsewhere. Such accounts may be retrospective reconstructions of the research process involved, but the version of the research process implied by a particularistic discourse is nonetheless typically similar to it. Yet another reason is that arguing that decisions about research methods are contingent upon such things as the 'trained incapacities' (Reiss, 1968, p. 351) of researchers or a desire to conform to the requirements and expectations of journal editors, funding bodies and policy makers does not make for a tidy account of the elements of doing research or for one that casts the profession of social research in an unambiguously positive light.

On the other hand, it is not in the interests of professional social researchers to present sanitized accounts of research. Teachers of research methods courses have long appreciated that it is often important to get across the realities of research by drawing students' attention to case studies of the inside process of doing social research, such as those presented in Hammond (1964) and Bell and Newby (1977). What is striking

about the material presented in this paper is that a widely held tenet—the notion that research questions are central to social research and that considerations of data collection and analysis are subservient to them—is not as widely held as might be expected from its frequent use in textbooks.

It is impossible to determine whether or how far the findings reported in this paper apply to research that is not based on the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The findings reported here derive from a study of mixed-methods researchers' accounts of their practices. The focus on research questions was not an emphasis that had been anticipated at the commencement of the research reported here. There is no reason to suppose that researchers employing just a quantitative or just a qualitative research approach do not similarly have reservations about the role and significance of research questions in their investigations.

Conclusion

The chief message of this paper is that a widely held principle of social research—that decisions about research methods and approach are subservient to the research questions that guide them—is questionable as a representation of social research practice. When social researchers were asked to reflect on their practices, they did not always provide an account of what they did or of what they believed should be common practice that is in tune with the particularistic discourse regarding the place of research questions that is advocated in textbooks. Instead, a universalistic discourse was often encountered in which certain research methods or approaches were supported with little or no reference to research questions. The fact that some interviewees shifted between the two discourses in the course of a relatively brief interview was particularly striking. It suggests a lack of certainty on the part of some practitioners concerning the degree to which research questions do guide, and indeed should guide, their methodological choices. It implies that the normative view of the relationship between research questions and research methods may be an account about how the research process *should* operate, but it is not necessarily an account of how it operates in practice.

This last finding suggests that the practice of social research is frequently dilemmatic. Researchers face well-known dilemmas regarding the tactical aspects of research—whether to use a structured interview or a self-administered questionnaire for a survey, how structured a qualitative interview guide should be, whether to employ CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) to code interview transcripts and so on—but this particular aspect of the findings implies that there are deep-seated dilemmas regarding the more strategic aspects of research as well. To a certain extent the dilemma arises because the textbook account of the role of research questions, which is revealed in the particularistic discourse, has the character of an idealized scientific norm (Mulkay, 1991). It functions as an occupational ideology that contributes to conveying a sense of the rationality and rigour of its members' craft. However, researchers have to balance this tenet against other exigencies associated with social research. These include the following: beliefs about the requirements of key actors, such as funding bodies and journal referees and editors; a 'gut feeling' that a

certain approach pays dividends when compared to other approaches; and researchers' comfort levels with regard to their skills and training. In addition, it has been suggested that the textbook version neglects the possibility that, for many practitioners, a choice of research approach is made which then frames the kinds of research questions that are asked, though not the specific content of those questions.

Such reflections invite the question of why the textbook version persists in the face of such evidence that is inconsistent with it. The following conjectures may shed some light on this issue. One reason is that it undoubtedly applies to some research and that many researchers perceive that to be the case, regardless of whether it applies to them. A further reason is that journal papers are frequently written in a way that implies the textbook version, and applications for funding are usually written in such a way too. A third possible explanation is that the textbook version bestows a rationality upon the research process that provides a compelling device for legitimating social research to students, funding bodies, policy makers and others. As such, it is as much (if not more) an account of what the role of research questions should be, rather than of what their role actually is. When discussing their research practices in interviews, researchers may find it difficult to sustain the normative account that is portrayed in journal papers and textbooks. One further possible reason is that the implications of research questions for methodological choices (in terms of general approach, research design or research methods) are often not as clear cut as textbook accounts imply. Accordingly, it may be that for some research questions there is greater choice over what design or method to adopt than there is for others, and that such choice allows methodological predilections to come into play. This too may have implications for the extent to which research methods may be taken to flow in a direct way from research questions.

Acknowledgments

Note

[1]   'Mixed-methods research' is being used in this paper as a shorthand term for the combination of quantitative and qualitative research. In doing so, it is not being assumed that this is the only form that mixed-methods research can take, but the increasingly common practice of using the term to denote investigations that combine quantitative and qualitative research is being followed. Further, this was the context within which mixed-methods research was discussed with the interviewees whose views are reported in this paper.

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