

Foundations Essay Assignment

2

by Rachel Waters

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| FILE | CPT898-1544819.DOCX (38.32K) | | |
| TIME SUBMITTED | 10-JAN-2016 03:46PM | WORD COUNT | 4545 |
| SUBMISSION ID | 51273589 | CHARACTER COUNT | 25833 |

Assignment Cover Sheet



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| Student Number: | C1544819 | | |
| Module Code: | CPT898 | Date: | 10.1.16 |
| Essay Title: | Foundations of Social Science Research Assignment 2 | | |
| Required Word Count: | 3000 | Actual Word Count: | 2953 |

[Feedback](#)

Introduction

I will begin by introducing my research topic and question. I will go on to discuss issues of validity, reliability and ethics relevant to my particular study. Throughout the essay I have attempted to make clear the link between my chosen design, methods and approach to validity and ethics, and the philosophical underpinnings of my research which is within a relativist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology.

Good

Research question

Risk is ubiquitous in social work as in our society in general (Beck 1992; Kemshall and Wilkinson 2011). Social workers are required to focus on risk management in a context of accountability, public scrutiny, censure and blame (Kemshall and Pritchard 1997). It is argued that risk rather than need has become the key factor in allocating services (Kemshall et al 1997; Heller 2015)

Excellent

The majority of the literature on risk in social care focusses on its negative aspects, harmful outcomes for clients, practitioners, services and the public (Adams 2001). It has been criticised for 'constructing an overly deterministic and negative story of risk in social work' (Stanford 2008, p. 210) which leads to a focus on avoiding and eliminating risk (Stanford 2011).

In contrast, there is a developing area of research focussing on risk taking which is undertaken by clients and their social workers with the expectation of positive outcomes. Risk taking can be defined as 'undertaking a course of purposive action which may result in beneficial or harmful outcomes for the individual as well as others' (Titterton 2005, p. 52). The literature on risk taking has developed partly in response to the dominant negative risk paradigm (Titterton 1992) and is linked to emerging political agendas around personalisation, and the recovery approach in mental health services (Heller 2015) both of which emphasise the right to personal autonomy and risk taking (Ramon et al 2006; Littlechild et al 2011).

Good

Some authors have discussed the importance of risk taking as a human right and as essential to quality of life (Wynne-Harley 1991; National Centre for Independent Living 1999, cited in

Kemshall and Wilkinson 2011 p. 156; Titterton 2005). Others have emphasised the importance of resilience and coping in risk taking (e.g. Boeck & Fleming 2011).

Current practice in social work has been described as 'pre-occupied with risk averse practice, 'stifling creativity and innovation' and 'detrimental to recovery and rehabilitation' (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2008, 2010a, Mental Health Act Commission 2007, cited in Boardman and Roberts 2014, p. 5). More positively framed client situations which include potential gains, strengths and resources result in cautious but more positive decision making by social workers leading to better outcomes for service users. (e.g. Kahnemann and Tversky 1979, cited in Parton and O'Byrne 2000, p. 146; Turnell and Edwards 1997; Milner and O'Byrne 1998).

My study will explore how social workers construct risk taking in their practice. Knowledge about how social workers construct risk taking will provide a basis on which further work can be undertaken to increase the positivity in social workers framing of their clients' situations.

The conceptualisation of risk within social work research is ambiguous and discussion of this is beyond the scope of this essay¹ however, one important debate relevant to my study is whether risk is an objective measurable phenomena or whether it is something subjective and socially constructed (Shaw and Shaw 2001). My study is based on a relativist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology in which risk taking is understood as socially constructed through interaction. From a post-structural perspective meaning is constituted through language and hence my study focusses on the language used by social workers to create the meaning of 'risk taking'. I aim to explore how ideas about risk taking are established through social workers talk and how these ideas are put into practice in their interventions.

My research question is 'How do social workers in a community mental health team construct risk taking in their practice?'

Design

¹ Shaw and Shaw (2001) provide an overview of the major perspectives used in risk research.

I have chosen to use a case study design, one of the most commonly used designs in social work research (Shaw and Holland 2014) and particularly suitable for investigating how and why questions (Yin 2014). Yin (2014) defines a case study as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real world context' (p. 16). In my research risk taking is the contemporary phenomenon and the community mental health team is the real world context where risk taking is constructed and influences client interventions. A case study will enable me to examine the detail in participants' talk in a way that quantitative methods such as surveys would not (Humphries 2008) and although compatible with all epistemologies, the case study 'can excel in accommodating a relativist perspective' (Yin 2014, p. 17). The construction of risk taking happens through social interaction within and external to the whole mental health team however, for reasons of interest and pragmatism I will be focussing on the construction of risk taking by social workers. My particular case could be called instrumental in that I am studying the case (team) to provide insights into a particular issue – how social workers construct risk taking (Stake 2000).

Good

Good

2

My data collection method is as yet undecided however, my preference would be to use naturally occurring talk (Potter 2011, cited in Silverman 2011) including case notes and recordings of case discussion meetings. Participants' accounts in interviews do not necessarily reflect what they actually do in practice (Taylor and White 2000) and the use of interviews in discursive psychology research raises a number of difficulties relating to this (Potter and Hepburn 2005). Interviews with social workers may result in me learning about how social workers construct risk taking in the context of an interview with a university researcher. However, using naturalistic data in social work raises ethical issues relating to client and participant confidentiality and welfare which may prevent access. In this situation I will need to use interviews, however in my analysis I will be aware that the interview is a particular type of interactional object and pay attention to how participants use language to perform particular roles in the research interview context (Hepburn and Brown 2001; Potter and Hepburn 2005). I will also need to take into account my own contribution within the interviews to the construction of risk taking.

3

Good

A discourse analysis is time consuming and each interview, set of case notes or recording of a meeting will contain a large amount of data (Georgaca and Avdi 2012). I will aim to gather

data relating to at least 5 different service users and/or to interview approximately 8 social workers. In terms of amount of data, I will aim to reach data saturation; as Woolcot (2012) suggests 'keep asking as long as you keep getting different answers' (cited in Baker and Edwards 2012, p. 4). Good

Analysis

I will take an eclectic discursive psychology approach to analysis which will allow me to explore both discourse as 'talk in action' and Discourses as 'bodies of knowledge' (Walker 1988, cited in Taylor and White 2000, p. 39). Good

Drawing on techniques from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis I will explore the ways in which language is used within the data. I will also draw on Foucauldian ideas to explore dominant concepts and frameworks which may be drawn on in the construction of risk taking. EXP

Validity and reliability

The concepts of validity and reliability are generally used in a straightforward way within quantitative research however there is debate as to whether and how the concepts of validity, reliability and generalisability can or should be applied to qualitative research (Lather 1993; Noble and Smith 2015). Good

Noble and Smith (2015) provide useful definitions of validity and reliability as they can be applied to qualitative research. Validity refers to the 'integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data', and reliability is described as 'consistency within the employed analytical procedures' (p. 34). Good

Sparkes (2001) sets out four ways in which qualitative researchers have approached the issue of validity in their research: Replication uses positivist conceptions of validity and reliability based on a realist ontology although different procedures may be used than in quantitative research (Silverman 2000).

The parallel perspective recognises the different epistemological bases of qualitative research and has developed a different set of criteria for judging qualitative research including credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This 'parallel approach' to validity in qualitative research (Sparkes

2001) has been criticised because although it takes account of the different epistemological bases of qualitative research some of the procedures used to achieve the new criteria such as member validation and triangulation depend on foundationalist assumptions. Some of these problems are particularly relevant to my social constructionist discourse analysis. For example, Coyle (2000) questions the worth of member validation in discourse analysis in which participants may not be fully aware of the discourses in which they are positioned and they may use them unintentionally.

Some researchers have developed diverse meanings for validity (Sparkes 2001) which better fit their specific research aims. For example catalytic validity (Lather 1993) is relevant to emancipatory research and refers to the extent to which the research was able to alter the consciousness of the participants and enable them to change their reality

Good

Other researchers have abandoned the use of the term validity altogether choosing to use different criteria to assess the quality of qualitative research such as impactfulness (Richardson 2000), allowing the reader a vicarious experience of the life or lives being studied (Lincoln 1993), evocation (Ellis 1995) and believability (Blumenfeld-Jones 1995).

I have chosen a number of ways to increase the rigour of my research based on my understanding of the four approaches outlined above and also of the critiques of them particularly from a social constructionist perspective.

Good

Reflexivity

Despite continuing debates as to the nature of reflexivity and how it can be used in qualitative research it is generally accepted that reflexivity can increase the rigour of qualitative research including the dependability and confirmability of findings (Houghton et al 2013; Darawsheh 2014).

Good

Darawsheh (2014) defines reflexivity as a 'continuous process of self-reflection that researchers engage in to generate awareness over their actions, feelings and perceptions' (p. 561). Taylor and White (2000) suggest that within a social constructionist perspective reflexivity should go further and include 'epistemic reflexivity' which includes an awareness of the 'dominant professional constructions' which influence social work practice (p. 35).

Good

Excellent

My background as a mental health social worker will bring both benefits and disadvantages to the research. My knowledge and experience of social work and of associated systems, processes and experiences may make understanding social workers interactions and/or building rapport easier and social workers may be more willing to confide in someone who they know has 'been there'. However, as a social worker myself I have been professionally socialised into some of the same dominant discourses which I am trying to identify in my research which may prove problematic. Peer debriefing and keeping a reflective journal could help me to uncover any unconscious assumptions or biases (Noble and Smith 2015). In addition reflexivity regarding epistemology, methodology and data analysis will help ensure that the research is transparent, another criteria of quality relevant to qualitative research (Georgaca and Avdi 2012, Darawsheh 2014).

Good

Good

Explicit consideration of issues of power in the research process

The practice of power is an important issue in social constructionist research and some writers have argued that research in this tradition should pay attention to the practices of power enabled by the use of validity as a concept for legitimising or delegitimising research. Scheurich (1996) argues that despite the modification of validity as 'trustworthiness' (Aguinaldo 2004) in the parallel approach, it still operates in the same way as the original positivist conception to produce a binary distinction between legitimate (trustworthy) and non-legitimate (non-trustworthy) research. Aguinaldo (2004) attempts to address the issue of validity in social constructionist research by moving away from a one off binary decision—(research as valid or invalid) to a process whereby the reflexive researcher considers the practice of power in the research and considers ways in which the research 'does, can or might function to incite and foreclose, emancipate and oppress.... when applied to different time and contexts, and evaluated from different social locations' (p. 134). I would like to apply this consideration of power to my research; for example, I will consider my use of power as a researcher to emphasise or minimise particular interpretations of participants' accounts and how I am restricted by other practices of power such as requirements to produce a certain 'acceptable' type of research report.

Good

Inclusion of rich detail

The inclusion of a high level of detail such as thick verbatim accounts from participants and rich detail regarding context will enable the reader to make their own judgements as to whether the findings are representative of the data and also whether the findings are generalizable to other similar settings. (Georgaca and Avdi 2012; Noble and Smith 2014).

Deviant case analysis

This procedure is used in conversation analysis and other qualitative methods. It involves making detailed investigations into instances of discourse, rhetorical strategies or constructions which do not fit with the general pattern of my findings. Perakyla (2011) argues that 'the meticulous analysis of deviant cases gives strength, impetus and rigour to the development of analytical arguments' (p. 371).

Generalisation from case studies and in discourse analysis

Perakyla (2011) discusses two ways in which case study research can be generalizable. Firstly, in finding the generic from the particular; through studying a single case a researcher can come up with results that can be applied at a more generic level. In terms of discourse analysis Goodman (2008) explains how discursive findings can be seen as 'highlighting generalizable actions performed by a rhetorical strategy' (p. 268) where it can be demonstrated that a particular action is achieved across contexts by different speakers employing a particular rhetorical strategy. This kind of generalisation often requires a comparison across several discursive studies which may not be possible within the scope of my research. The second type of generalisability in case study research refers to the 'notion of possibility' (Perakyla 2011, p. 376) in which the possibility of social practices is considered generalizable. This can be seen in Stanford's (2008) study of social workers' constructions of risk where she argues in her conclusion that '[participants'] stories are powerful illustrations ...of ...how as practitioners we can harness our commitment, vision and courage to take a stand against the moral conservatism of risk' (p. 218). I envisage that in my research this type of generalisation could be possible although the nature of the presentation may differ from Stanford's 'appeal for action' depending on how I evaluate the findings.

Good

Good

Usefulness

The usefulness of research both theoretically and in real world application (Georgaca and Avdi 2012) is relevant not only to validity but is also an ethical issue concerning whether the inconvenience or disadvantages for participants are outweighed by the potential benefits of the research. I explained earlier how I hope my research will benefit social work as a profession. I also envisage that the participants may find interviews useful as a chance to reflect on their practice and talk about difficult cases. In addition I am interested in whether my slightly different, more positive focus on 'risk taking' will impact on the findings in terms of more positive constructions of risk (taking) than previous research focussed on 'risk'.

Ethical Issues

In undertaking my study I will be guided by the University Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SREC) and the Economic and Social Research Councils Framework for Research Ethics (2015). In addition I will need to adhere to the Data Protection Act (1998) and, as a registered social worker, the Care Council for Wales Code of Professional Practice for Social Care (2015).

The SREC and ESRC guidelines emphasise three aspects of ethical issues: informed consent, anonymity/confidentiality and minimisation of harm. In general they take a consequentialist position (Bentham 1781/2000, cited in Israel 2015, p. 10) focussed on minimising potential harmful outcomes. Following this approach I will be taking all standard procedures to address these issues such keeping data in a locked cabinet, anonymising all data during transcription, treating informed consent as an ongoing process, omitting details which may reveal a participant's (or their client's identity), arranging for support for participants after interviews etc.

I will also be taking a critical approach (Israel 2015) in dealing with ethical dilemmas which cannot be predicted, in particular drawing on Gilligan's (1977/ 1982) Ethics of Care in which moral action is based on emotion rather than abstract principles and ethical decisions are grounded in care, compassion and relationships. The focus on hierarchies of power and the relationships between researched and researcher (Brabeck and Brabeck 2009) is appropriate to my epistemological position and will provide a basis for decision making in situations which are not covered adequately by guidelines or principles. I will use a

Good

hypothetical example (based on use of interviews for data collection) to demonstrate why I believe this is the best approach for my particular study:

A young new social worker reveals during an interview which is well intentioned but against the professional code of conduct and which is placing her in a potentially dangerous situation. In this situation a consequentialist position is of limited use as I cannot accurately predict the consequences of me reporting the situation, a criticism also made by Sinnott-Armstrong (2003). Neither does a deontological stance (Kant 1785/2005, cited in Israel 2015) focussed on my intentions feel helpful; although I may have intended to 'do the right thing' (Israel 2015, p. 12) this would not be of comfort if the participant concerned lost her career as a result of my decision to report her behaviour, or if the social worker was harmed because of her practice which I knew about but did not report. A principlist approach can also be problematic (Hammersley 2013). A general principle of beneficence does not help to decide whose benefit is most important. In reporting the practice I may benefit the client, the team and the social work profession but the outcome for the participant could be extremely negative.²

An ethics of care (Gilligan 1977/1982) will allow me to take into account my emotional response to this confession, the specific context and my relationship with the participant. The nature of the relationship we establish in the interview will impact on whether I feel protective of her, and to what extent I feel responsibility for her welfare over that of the client or team. Assuming I did not believe she was unsuitable to be a social worker I would feel an obligation as a human being to protect the participant as she has chosen to trust in me and I am in a position of power over her future. Taking into account my social work experience and counselling training I would choose to spend time after the interview talking through the situation and helping her to decide on a course of action to address the problem. However, to protect myself I would also discuss the situation with my supervisor.

A critical ethics of care approach will allow me to make context specific decisions (Whiteman 2012) based on my relevant knowledge and experience (Allen 1996) which help to address the 'messiness and complexity of field relations' (Israel 2015, p. 19).

² The code of professional practice for social workers in particular states that I hold a responsibility for the welfare (or reputation) of each of these stakeholders.

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Excellent

Foundations Essay Assignment 2

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

78/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

This is a very well written essay which demonstrates that you have exceeded the expected level of learning outcomes for this module.

You clearly demonstrate a critical understanding of the implications of your choices, of reliability and of potential ethical issues.

The essay is well written in an accessible style for the non-expert and is exceptionally well referenced.

You can improve you mark by:

Noting my comments in the text;

Saying a little more about your choice of the case study method - you could have provided a stronger justification for this choice.

Being more concise in discussing the context of your research (although, you do present a clear and accessible account of debates in your field) and instead using the opening few pages to say a little more about your aims and objectives.

PAGE 1

QM

Feedback

See "General Comments" at end of the print-ready version of this paper for general feedback on your assessment - note that I am using a grading form which is visible if you click on the far right icon at the bottom of the window (it looks like a tiny office block)

PAGE 2

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Good

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Excellent

Excellent

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PAGE 3

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EXP

Expand this point more fully.

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Expand this point more fully.



Comment 1

The foregoing discussion is good but could have been a little more concise on the context but saying more about your research aims

PAGE 4

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Good



Comment 2

Explain why



Comment 3

What alternatives have you considered and why have you discounted them?

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PAGE 5

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Expand this point more fully.

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