Polarization in Research Methods Application: Examining the Examiner

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Abstract: This paper emerges as a reaction to the assertion of polarization or dichotomies in research method. The aim is to find out whether this assertion by some writers of research methods application, 'hold water' within academia. To that extent, the study designed a survey questionnaire to elicit the opinions of PhD supervisors and examiners from three North West region of England: University of Bolton, Salford, and Manchester. The study addresses the issue of polarization in research methods by investigating whether some researchers become dogmatic in the application of research method through supervision and examination of prospective researchers, PhD students? If so, what does that posture represents? Can a supervisor-student relationship be marred by these preferences? This research paper attempts to answer these questions from supervisors'/examiners' perspective. A purposive and referral sampling methods were adopted to reach supervisors, who otherwise, would have declined to partake in such an incisive study. The findings of the study confirm some of the relationships between research philosophies and research approaches, and most importantly reveal the sentiments of the surveyed population on the apparent rivalry between research philosophies and approaches. Furthermore, the paper presents the candid observations and opinions of the writers on the qualitative/quantitative debate. The major limitation of the study is the abysmal response from the surveyed universities. This will in no doubt detract from the overall impact of the findings of the study.

Keywords: examiner(s), supervisor(s), polarization, qualitative research, quantitative research, research philosophy

1. Introduction

Research methods, essentially, are to give the researcher the needed mechanism to carry out effective investigation in his/her field of study. A research method largely defines the design of the problem under investigation (Saunders et al., 2009; Khotari, 2006; Kumar, 2011). Whatever the preferred research method, there are three distinct main approaches to addressing any research problem: Qualitative, Quantitative, and mixed methods (Bryman, 2006). This means that based on the approach, a research study can be either qualitative, quantitative or a mixture in nature. These research approaches and their application have their roots in one research philosophy or the other. In other words, the research philosophy which defines the assumptions constructed about the phenomena of interest and so predefines the ontological, epistemological and methodological scope of the study (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Thus, according to Bryman (1984), much of the research literature considers, to some extent, the research philosophy to determine, by and large, which approach the researcher should adopt. It is therefore fairly straight forward to determine the likely approach of a study from the underlying philosophy.

On the basis of research philosophies, researchers identify themselves as interpretivist, positivist, critical realist, pragmatist, etc.; with their differences, at the lowest ebb, separating or grouping them into those who espouse the qualitative methods (Caelli et al., 2003 ; Seale, 1999); those who predominantly approach research problems quantitatively (Sharf, 1995; Polit and Beck, 2008); and those who consider a blend of the two approaches as the best option (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Howe, 1988) .

Speaking on the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods in his book, *Doing Qualitative Research*, Silverman (2010), notes, "In the context of this book, I view any such dichotomies or polarities in social sciences as highly dangerous. At best, they are pedagogic devices for students to obtain first grasp on a difficult field; they help us to learn the jargons. At worst, they are excuses for not thinking, which assemble groups of researchers into "armed camps", unwilling to learn from one another'. The scholar continues, 'the fact that simple quantitative measures are a feature in some good qualitative research shows that the whole "quantitative/qualitative" dichotomy is open to question'.

Saunders et al. (2009), point out that there is nothing like pure quantitative study or pure qualitative study. Again, Sekaran and Bougie (2010), explain that the choice of a quantitative or qualitative method should be informed by the type of investigation under consideration. Debates have been ongoing, tackling which method is better than the other. The reason why this remains unresolved until now is that each has its own strengths and weaknesses which actually vary depending upon the topic the researcher wants to discuss. (Experiment-resources.com, 2009)

Miles and Huberman (1994) agree that quantitative and qualitative research methods need each other more often than not. In their book *Qualitative Data Analysis*, quantitative researcher Fred Kerlinger is quoted as saying "There's no such thing as qualitative data. Everything is either 1 or 0". As if responding directly to Fred Kerlinger's assertion, researcher D. T. Campbell, states "all research ultimately has a qualitative grounding". Miles and Huberman (1994), note that the quantitative/qualitative debate is to all intents and purposes fruitless.

There are fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative methods. Typically, qualitative data involves words and quantitative data involves numbers. Qualitative research is inductive and quantitative research is deductive (Saunders et al., 2009). Again, in qualitative research, a hypothesis is not needed to begin research. However, all quantitative research requires a hypothesis before research can begin. Does this make one more scientific than the other?

This study surveys the opinions of PhD supervisors and examiners in the Greater Manchester locality of North West England on the subject and their views on the impact such an inclination could have on supervisor-student relationships. More specifically, the study will answer the following questions:

Q1. Do supervisors/examiners' philosophical inclinations make them prefer one research approach to the other?

Q2. How do supervisors/examiners view the qualitative/quantitative debate?

Q3. How do supervisors/examiners feel about an inclination towards a particular research method?

It is expected that the findings of this incisive study will add to the debate while presenting the opinion of an important constituency on the issue.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sampling

Three universities, Bolton, Salford and Manchester, were targeted for the study but only supervisors and examiners from the universities of Bolton and Salford participated. The sampling frame was the databases of all PhD supervisors and examiners within the three universities. With the exception of a few survey questionnaires that were administered face-to-face, the bulk of the questionnaires were mailed to the supervisors and examiners via their university email addresses. In all, over ninety questionnaires were administered to the three universities. No response came from the University of Manchester and the remaining two universities produced only ten responses. The response rate was thus slightly above 11%. A good comprehension of survey practice which guided this study can be found in (Kelly et al., 2003; Krosnick, 1999; Sanders et al., 2009).

2.2 Participants

All the ten respondents were PhD Supervisors, with three doubling as examiners as well. Two of the supervisor-cum-examiners were professors from the social sciences and engineering faculties and the third, a doctor, also from the social science faculty. Thus, many more supervisors participated in the study than examiners. Majority of respondents have worked as supervisors between one and five years. Six of the respondents were from Bolton and four from Salford.

2.3 Data collection

A carefully worded survey questionnaire was designed to elicit the views of supervisors and examiners for the study. There were a couple of demographic variables. Respondents were asked to indicate their title, gender, number of years as a supervisor/examiner and their faculty.

The questions were generally centred on research philosophy and its implication for PhD students' research projects. Most of the questions were closed-ended. Written answers were to be provided for the few open-ended questions. The questionnaire took about ten minutes to complete but this was no incentive to attract satisfactory participation.

2.4 Procedure

Confidentiality of responses and anonymity of respondents were clearly communicated and so respondents completed the questionnaires based on informed consent. Respondents returned the completed via emails soon after completion. Three questionnaires were administered in person. No incentive was given for participation.

2.5 Results

All responses were coded and analyzed with SPSS. Being as study to survey perception and opinion, only simple frequencies and cross tabulations were run on the data collected.

Frequencies

As noted earlier the response rate was abysmal, with only ten supervisors and examiners choosing to participate against an expectation of between fifty and seventy respondents. So the results provided represent the views of a minority in the studied universities. This downside notwithstanding, the results are worth communicating given the incisive character of the study.

The ten respondents came from the social sciences and engineering faculties. Other faculties targeted were the Humanities, Health Sciences and the Sciences. Three respondents identified themselves as primarily interpretivist, positivist or critical realist. The remaining seven saw themselves as espousing a combination of the research philosophies. All respondents claimed that their choice of research philosophy (ies) is based wholly on personal reasons. Probing this claim to know when personal reasons inform a supervisor's research philosophy would have been interesting as a parallel study showed that almost all PhD students' acclaimed philosophical stance is informed by their research approach. Only a few attribute their philosophical stance to their supervisors' leadings.

Twenty percent of respondents indicated that they were qualitative researchers. Ten percent, on the other hand, were inclined to both approaches with each treated as an independent approach based on the research problem at hand. The rest of the respondents did not have any inclination towards either of the approaches. Their views corroborate advocates of either of the approaches, whether seale's (1999) qualitative, or Polit and Beck's (2008) quantitative. They would go along with a blend of the two, as echoed by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie's (2004). Eighty percent of respondents agree that an inclination towards a particular research philosophy could lead to polarization of research methods, where a supervisor/examiner may have strong preference for a particular method to the neglect of others. In the same vein, majority of respondents believe that a supervisor-student relationship may be affected negatively if there is an inclination towards a particular research method. Such a tendency, if negatively pursued, could limit the student's research experience and is likely to breed discontent and disagreements.

With respect to students' research projects, the respondents indicated that supervisors and examiners attraction to particular research methods could lead to negative consequences if not managed well. These may include:

- Wrong outcomes
- Wastage of resources
- De-motivation of students

Respondents were unanimous in their call for institutional intervention if supervisors' and examiners' inclination towards particular research methods leads to strong disagreements.

Respondents indicated categorically that supervisors and examiners should not at any point impose their research method preferences on their students. This reflects the awareness of half of respondents who have witnessed supervisor-student relationships that have turned sour because of disagreements on the choice of research methods. The weird incidence of a supervisor/examiner

insisting on a particular research method(s) without regard to the subject under investigation or the student's research objectives has been witnessed by only 10% of respondents.

The assertion by Silverman (2009) that a researchers' inclination to particular research methods is an excuse for refusing to learn from one another was put to the test. Eighty percent of the respondents agreed with the assertion. The remaining two did not respond to the question. Proffering their opinion on how supervisors and examiners can be convinced to be more tolerant of other research methods they may not find appealing, the responses included open mindedness of supervisors and examiners, personal learning and supervisors and examiners becoming active reviewers of academic journals. This comes alongside the opinion of others who believe convincing supervisors and examiners who might have such stance would be a difficult task.

The qualitative/quantitative debate is indeed not likely to end in any time in the foreseeable future. Fifty percent of respondents believe there are pure qualitative or quantitative methods that do not consider the other in any conceivable way. This opinion comes in sharp contrast to that of the other fifty percent of respondents who are of the opinion that there is not such study as pure qualitative or pure quantitative.

A summary of the comments made by respondents with regard to study includes:

▪ Open and continuous discussion on the subject is necessary

▪ The war between philosophies and paradigms in unnecessary

▪ The qualitative/quantitative debate is overplayed

▪ A timely study

2.6 Cross tabulations

With cross tabulations various views are combined to obtain insights that may not be apparent from the raw frequencies. For instance, all respondents who identified themselves as interpretivists were from the social science faculty. This finding unconsciously captures the 'novel gospel' preached by Interpretivist advocates including Babbie (2007). Whereas the respondent that claims to be positivist is from the engineering faculty. This relation endorses the assertion of some researchers that positivists are inclined to the sciences (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). Four respondents from the social sciences and one from the engineering faculties indicated that they espoused more than one research philosophy. It was also insightful that the two respondents who opined that they are inclined towards qualitative research approach were from the social sciences faculty as this has been the claim widely (Babbie, 2007). There was no direct relationship between the research philosophies and the research approaches. All respondent who identified themselves as interpretivists had no special preference for the qualitative approach. In fact, as note earlier, majority of respondents had no inclination towards the qualitative or quantitative approach or a blend of the two.

It is notable that the two professors who participated in the survey did not identify themselves with any particular research philosophy though they belonged to different faculties.

3. Discussions

By and large, the literature on research methods associates the interpretivist philosophy with the qualitative approach (Babbie, 2007; Seale, 1999). In the same vein, the social sciences including IT-based programmed are said to be largely interpretive and hence inclined towards the qualitative approach. Given the major setback of the study, however, this trend is perceptible from the findings of the study. Table 1 gives a cross-tabulation outlook of the respondents' faculty and adopted research philosophy.

Table1: Respondents' faculty and espoused philosophy

		Research Philosophy				Total
		Interpretivist	Positivist	Critical Realist	Other	
Faculty	Social Sciences	3	0	0	4	7
	Engineering	0	1	1	1	3
Total		3	1	1	5	10

The scientists are generally considered positivists (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009), and there may be a confirmation of this fact by the respondent from engineering faculty who identified himself as such.

Another critical observation is the split-decision on whether there are research methods that are 'pure' qualitative or quantitative in nature. The fifty percent of respondents who did not believe anything like 'pure' qualitative or quantitative studies included all the respondents who identified themselves as interpretivist, positivist or critical realist. Only respondents who espouse a blend of philosophies have come across such 'pure studies'. None of the literature surveyed for this study underscored such strict application of approaches in a research study. It would therefore be insightful if further studies will delve into this research methods and studies that are wholly or strictly qualitative or quantitative in nature.

From the findings, there is no gainsaying that a supervisor's/examiner's inclination towards a particular research method could have a positive or negative consequence on a student's research work. According to views expressed in the study, institutional intervention should be swift if strong disagreements ensue as a result of such inclinations. But how many students would like to incur the displeasure of their supervisors or examiners by resisting their 'determined intrusion', as far as, their research methods are concerned? This remains a research question.

The abysmal response rate cannot be glossed over. The writers of this paper would want to believe the subject area is a slippery turf for some supervisors and examiners. In fact, some supervisors who did not respond to the survey questionnaire were of the opinion that the questions were 'strong'. Others misconstrued the intentions of the writers to mean 'an attack' on supervisors and examiners. However one interprets this hitch in the study, most of the non-respondents cannot be absolved from a 'calculated attempt to frustrate the study'. It is against this backdrop that the writers agree with suggestions from respondents to have an open and continuous discussion on the subject matter.

4. Conclusion

This short study has presented the opinions of supervisors and examiners on a sensitive debate. A revelation from the three universities studied is that most supervisors and examiners are apathetic to such a discourse. Perhaps, organisers of conferences such as the European Conference of Research Methods should facilitate discussions on research methods in universities so that supervisors and examiners can engage with students on such a 'potentially distractive' subject matter.

This study, in no doubt, will contribute its quota to the quantitative/qualitative debate, which stem from the established philosophies and paradigms. The association between the interpretivist and positivist philosophies and qualitative/quantitative dichotomy was observable. Again, the relationship between science and non-science faculties and their inclined research philosophies was revealed by the study.

While some of the respondents referred to the qualitative/quantitative debated (and by extension, their underlying philosophies) unnecessary and unfruitful, the fact still remains that students would have to justify their research methods at one time of their studies or the other. Thus, continuous engagement on the issue cannot be trivialised.

As trumpeted throughout the study, the major limitation of the study is the abysmal response rate; only ten out of over ninety survey questionnaires administered received feedback from supervisors and examiners in the studied universities. A more representative response would have projected the true position of supervisors and examiners on the subject under investigation. The writers were unable to adopt any corrective measures due to the brevity of time. Nonetheless, the apparent sensitive nature of the study makes the findings from the study worth disseminating and discussing.

It is recommended that in future studies, measures should be taken to secure the best of responses from supervisors and examiners so that finding would be largely representative of the universities studied.

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