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Running head: NOT A PARADIGM

Qualitative research is not a paradigm:

Commentary on Jackson (2015) and Landrum and Garza (2015)

Qualitative Psychology

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Qualitative research is not a paradigm:

Commentary on Jackson (2015) and Landrum and Garza (2015)

...paradigmatic commitment will influence the way in which one utilizes methods of data collection and analysis [...] because there is often no one-to-one correspondence between method and paradigm, there is flexibility in the purposes to which many qualitative methods can be put and the particular paradigmatic framework they can serve... (Madill & Gough, 2008, p.259)

The papers by Jackson (2015) and by Landrum and Garza (2015) consider the challenges of combining quantitative and qualitative research. While Jackson focuses on understanding the resistance to qualitative research and its lack of parity with quantitative research in psychology, Landrum and Garza's starting point is the increasing ubiquity of qualitative research and of mixed method designs. However, central to the argument of both papers is that qualitative research is a particular kind of 'thing'. This is a position with which I am in fundamental disagreement. Although each paper offers a careful articulation and sophisticated consideration of issues central to their respective concerns, many of these follow from the understanding of qualitative research as a paradigm so it is on this that I will focus in my commentary.

First, I suggest that separation of 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' in each paper is founded on an over-homogenized picture of qualitative research. Second, I argue that the understanding that quantitative and (over-homogenized) qualitative research are of different, relatively coherent, kinds is premised on a simplified conceptualization of 'paradigm'. Finally, I discuss how these two premises foreclose a range of options in relation to how quantitative and qualitative research might fit together.

What is qualitative research?

Most simply, the concept of qualitative research appears to imply a group of methods that can be defined by default as ‘not quantitative’. However, this excludes features of well-established qualitative methods concerned with ‘amount’. For example, with reference to grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin (1990/1998) recommend identifying the dimensions along which codes range. Jackson concurs that in “distinguishing research as ‘qualitative’ or ‘quantitative’ the presence or absence of quantification per se is not always a crucial or deciding factor” (p.x). However, given that the coding of textual material can also eschew any interest in ‘amount’, I am puzzled that Jackson appears to equate coding with quantification, for instance in his statement that “(m)any qualitative researchers [...] find it helpful to use coding and other types of quantification” (italics added p.x). He also refers to coding of material from an unstructured interview as an example of the mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods. In this regard, Landrum and Garza suggest that quantification, specifically the counting of qualitatively-derived themes, is but one analytic choice, although according to them, one that “fails to respect the proper domains for both types of research” (p.x).

In both papers there is concern with defining the essence of ‘pure’ qualitative research. Landrum and Garza characterize qualitative research as making “descriptive knowledge claims about meaning using ‘descriptive’ data” (p.x) and Jackson argues that “the most uniquely defining features of the qualitative paradigm emerge in their purest form in the open-ended dialogue through which contextually grounded meanings are collaboratively explored” (p.x). My own position is that in a fragmented set of methods it is unhelpful to decide on features uniquely defining qualitative research. The potential negative implications of such a practice are that it excludes, marginalizes, and/or devalues methods falling outside

or near the edge of presented definitions, the fields in which these methods tend to be used, and the research questions they are best placed to address.

Landrum and Garza's central characterization of qualitative research is that it is 'descriptive'. This underestimates the ability of most qualitative methods to produce findings of conceptual and analytical sophistication and excludes methods that aim to achieve these ends, such as those that are explicitly theoretically-informed. It also implies an uncritical view of qualitative data as transparent media of information exchange (i.e., descriptive of the world) as opposed to heterogeneous texts generated in a self-reflexive and/or co-constructed manner (Potter & Hepburn, 2006). Such complexities are demonstrated well in their interesting examples hence creating some disjoin with their definitional emphasis on description.

Jackson's central characterization of qualitative research is that it is 'dialogic' and he rather devalues the study of documents, artifacts, self-reports, and semi-structured interviews stated "by their very nature, to be more fixed and hence limited, unless opened up with supplementary dialogue" (p.x). This negative evaluation does not take into account how appropriate such material might be to addressing particular research questions. However, there are problems with Jackson's position even if accepting his prioritization of dialogue. Dialogism is a longstanding approach within literary criticism (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 1990) and has been adapted as a qualitative method for the social sciences (e.g., Sullivan, 2012). Bakhtin conceptualizes all discursive activity and production of texts as inherently oriented to another, even if that audience is only imagined or consists, for example, of one's own conscience, and in this way is always meaningfully dialogical. Developed as a groundbreaking theory of the novel, dialogism would appear to belie Jackson's characterization of similar kinds of material - documents, artifacts, and self-reports, and even semi-structured interviews - as lacking dialogue.

As I have argued elsewhere, qualitative research is best conceptualized as a fuzzy set in which methods cohere around some key characteristics with no one set of characteristics adequately encompassing all qualitative research (Madill & Gough, 2008). Hence, while qualitative research is often considered to focus on lived experience, on its own this feature would exclude qualitative analysis of material crafted impersonally for a public purpose, such as policy documents. Qualitative research is sometimes characterized as interpretative. However, statistical analyses also require interpretation and some qualitative researchers, maybe most notably conversation analysts, often downplay the role of interpretation in their research (Ten Have, 2007). Another common assumption is that all qualitative research is social constructionist, but methods span the spectrum of epistemological stance, for example, from relativist to realist forms of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Nor are all forms of qualitative research inductive or discovery-oriented, as evidenced by top-down, theory-led approaches such as those which are psychoanalytically-informed (e.g., Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Moreover, qualitative research is not necessarily democratic, emancipatory, or conducted within a human science framework.

Jackson situates qualitative research within these latter set of values: qualitative research is a “democratic type of inquiry” (italics added, Jackson, 2015, p.x) which promotes “psychological and social emancipation” (italics added, Jackson, 2015, p.x). Although he does not use the terminology in his paper, by situating it within symbolic interactionism, Jackson also conveys a human science view of qualitative research (Greening, 2006; Plummer, 2000), for instance in its purported aim “to discover, facilitate, and support the full range of personal and symbolic forces that naturally impel participants to seek psychological and social well-being [...] and its aspiration to individual autonomy and social integration” (p.x). However, this view of qualitative research excludes, for example, poststructuralist and some feminist approaches (see Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000) that might critique this

outlook as unreflectively instantiating a culturally-specific, semi-elitist model of subjectivity: researchers who believe they are able, and want, to empower others and participants as naturally motivated to self-actualize, to seek social harmony, and who can access individual agency.

On the other hand, qualitative approaches compatible with (post)positivism may also be excluded from both Jackson's and Landrum and Garza's conception of qualitative research. This covers certain realist (Madill, 2008) forms of thematic analysis, including iterations and aspects of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), framework analysis (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, & Redwood, 2013), and consensual qualitative research (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005). Rather than accepting the legitimacy of (post)positivist modes of qualitative research, this cluster of epistemologies appear to be construed as the *prima face* province of quantitative methods. So qualitative research is, for example, described as sometimes "accommodated to the goals and criteria of quantitative research" (italics added Jackson, 2015, p.x). Similarly, while Landrum and Garza recognize that it cuts both ways, they refer to "incursions of quantitative into qualitative practice" (italics added p.x), arguing that "(t)he benefits of truly collaborative mixed methods cannot occur when each or either model is corrupted to the purposes of the other" (italics added p.x). The positions articulated in both papers fail to acknowledge that (post)positive forms of qualitative research can be compatible on their own terms with some forms of quantitative research and can aim legitimately for convergent understanding (Madill et al., 2000).

Are 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' different kinds of research?

An implication of over-homogenizing qualitative research is the ability to define it as relatively coherent and to contrast it to quantitative research as fundamentally two different kinds of things. Landrum and Garza conceptualize research as existing on a continuum with

pure qualitative and pure quantitative research existing at each pole, and with a problematic middle region characterized by ‘qualitizing’ (in quantitative research) and ‘quantitizing’ (in qualitative research): “as soon as one begins to count themes, one is no longer conducting qualitative research and not really conducting quantitative research either” (2015, p.x).

Hence, although conceptualizing a continuum, Landrum and Garza are interested in maintaining a boundary between the quantitative and the qualitative, variously described as domains, approaches, types, modes of description, interpretative frameworks, models, research, and types of data. Interestingly, they do not use the word ‘paradigm’ in their paper, although it might be implied in the statement that “(b)oth types of research have a set of usually implicit philosophical assumptions [...] motivated by fundamentally different questions and producing fundamentally different knowledge claims” (p.x). Jackson, on the other hand, while acknowledging that the concept is problematic, identifies qualitative and quantitative research clearly as two different paradigms: “well-developed traditions like those of qualitative and quantitative research [...] defined by their overall coherence [...] can therefore be reasonably designated ‘paradigms’” (p.x).

Madill and Gough (2008) consider major attempts at identifying research paradigms in the social sciences. These paradigms can be thought of in broad terms as positivism, postpositivism, critical-ideological, constructionist, and another, depending on the author, including participatory (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), craft knowledge/action research (Tom & Valli, 1990), and personal essay (Donmoyer, 2001). Central to my position here is that, although some of these paradigms may lend themselves to quantitative or qualitative methods, there is often no necessary correspondence between method and paradigm. In footnote 6, Jackson does allude to the possibility in his scheme of a third paradigm relevant to social research termed ‘aesthetic textual analysis’ but provides no rationale as to why he excludes such methods from his understanding of a qualitative research paradigm. If this had

been explored, it might have provided a challenge to his premise that qualitative research is, indeed, one paradigm. Jackson does incorporate a nuanced picture of qualitative methods as diverse and fragmented in his paper, for example in footnote 12, but does not follow this through as a serious critique of his binary quantitative-qualitative conceptualization.

Madill and Gough (2008) outline the four most common ways of interpreting what is meant by the term ‘paradigm’: model examples, shared beliefs, epistemological stances, and worldviews. These understandings of paradigm are not mutually exclusive but are nested within each other at different levels of specificity (Figure 1). Jackson draws on all four interpretations of paradigm at different points in his paper but without unpacking how these understandings have importantly different emphasis in relation to methodology (i.e., paradigm complementarity; shared meanings, joint action, and axiology; paradigm incommensurability; and paradigm proliferation, respectively) and implications for research practice (i.e., eclecticism; pragmatism or utilitarianism; specialism; and fragmentation, respectively).

Hence, Jackson argues that qualitative and quantitative research “represent genuinely discrepant worldviews” (*italics added p.x*) and, in the section on *The Qualitative Paradigm*, differentiates their ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions compatible with an epistemological stances interpretation of paradigm. Jackson also draws on a shared belief (typically of small research communities attempting to solve specific problems) and a model examples interpretation of paradigm, for example in his statement that paradigms can be derived “when particular problems are confronted in the real world and addressed in specific research strategies – the so-called exemplars” (*p.x*). In fact, a model examples definition of paradigm is central to his thesis that the controlled experiment and the collaborative contextualized dialogue are the prototypic exemplars of the quantitative and qualitative paradigms respectively.

Jackson does not consider how increasingly specific interpretations of the paradigm concept are increasingly conducive to paradigm integration such that, at the level of model examples, drawing on different paradigms in a particular project need only be the accepted practice. Moreover, he does not explore the possibility that, contrary to his central assumption, there may be no one qualitative paradigm from his own observation that “each of these methods has its own unique features, and we may wonder if any of them can be seen as a prototype or exemplar for the qualitative paradigm” (p.x). A reasonably straightforward implication is that the collaborative contextualized dialogue, if it can be considered a prototypic exemplar, may be an exemplar for a certain kind of qualitative research only.

Jackson suggests that the question of prototypes or exemplars “has not received much attention from authors in the qualitative tradition” (p.x). I would like to consider two serious attempts to do so. First, Elliott (2007) suggests that ‘thematization’ is the cohering method of qualitative research. And, while making no foundational claims, the importance and flexibility of ‘thematic analysis’ is outlined very usefully in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) decision-point procedure. Braun and Clarke articulate different routes that can be taken in creating themes that, interestingly, demonstrate some overall coherence, but also capture key differences between major qualitative methods. Second, Rennie (2007, 2012) argues that ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ are two different kinds of research but sees the marginalization of qualitative research, partly, as a by-product of its relative fragmentation. Hence, he provides a detailed account of what he terms, methodological hermeneutics as a unifying meta-methodology for qualitative research grounded in pragmatism. This entails educating and articulating the meaning of text through abduction, theorematic deduction, and induction, application of the hermeneutic circle, and providing evidence of validity (understand rhetorically) enhanced by researcher reflexivity.

My own opinion is that qualitative research is too fragmented to be considered one paradigm – at the procedural or meta-methodological level – but I see this heterogeneity as creative and productive. However, I am also of the opinion that the paradigm concept, if considered in all its complexity, can provide a useful way of exploring how different research methods may be placed vis-à-vis each other.

How does qualitative and quantitative research fit together?

Landrum and Garza are advocates of methodological pluralism conceptualized as the mixing of qualitative and quantitative research such that the approaches augment each other. Their central argument is that this necessitates respecting the boundaries between the two domains, for example in their fundamentally different guiding questions. Landrum and Garza examine Creswell, Klasson, Plano Clark, and Smith's (2011) three types of mixing qualitative and quantitative data: connecting, embedding, and integrating, thereby acknowledging that mixing methods can be conceptualized and operationalized in different ways. However, they argue that 'integrating' is inappropriate because it violates boundaries "by using one type of data to compare and/or confirm the findings from the other type" (p.x). This fails to recognize, though, that data can be compatible with different paradigms and that coherence between paradigms can be configured in different ways (Madill & Gough, 2008). For example, qualitative and quantitative approaches can be fully integrated in one project and used to confirm, validate, or augment findings when all the methods are appropriate to, and used within, a (post)positivist framework (Madill et al., 2000).

Madill and Gough (2008) demonstrate that, in its focus on paradigm complementarity, methodological pluralism is situated within the interpretation of paradigms as either 'model examples' or as 'shared beliefs' and, subsequently, identify options as to how methodological pluralism can be operationalized: that is, eclecticism, pragmatism, and utilitarianism (Figure 1). The complexity, hierarchical nesting, and decentering of 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' in

this schema offers a challenge to Landrum and Garza's conceptualization of quantitative and qualitative approaches as ends of a 'flat' continuum. The nested schemata is also productive in revealing space for the creation of additional configurations potentially at any level while showing how paradigms understood as 'epistemological stances' and as 'worldviews' tend towards paradigm incommensurability.

Jackson notes that "qualitative and quantitative techniques can be legitimately combined and integrated in certain ways" (p.x) and identifies three different types of mixing methods: cross-paradigm applications in which data commensurate with one paradigm is used to support the goals associated with the other; complementary applications in which methods serve their own paradigmatic goals but are combined with methods from the other paradigm serving their own paradigmatic goals in relation to the same subject matter; and a true integration of techniques from both paradigms. He clarifies that cross-paradigm applications are likely to dilute the strengths of each, complementary applications may incorporate incommensurabilities, and argues that, although true integration may "actualize the vision of theorists who argue that mixed methods research will open up a vast array of research possibilities" (p.x), there are no acceptable guidelines for how to bridge likely incommensurabilities or criteria for judging success. Here, his equating of method – quantitative and qualitative - with paradigm has the effect of eschewing how quantitative and qualitative approaches can serve the same paradigmatic frame. I am in agreement with his critique of efforts to integrate qualitative and quantitative research through "absurdly reductionist checklists" (as quoted, Torrance, 2008, p.517) but offer Figure 1 as a flexible alternative type of conceptualization.

Conclusion

Contrary to the impression I have probably given, I don't disagree with quite a bit of what Jackson (2015) and Landrum and Garza (2015) argue. If accepting their premises that

quantitative and qualitative approaches are necessarily of fundamentally different kinds, and that qualitative research is a relatively coherent thing, each paper offers an interesting perspective on relevant issues. The trouble is that I don't accept either of these premises and, hence, the implications that follow from them. I believe that there is rhetorical utility in the category qualitative research in terms of having an identifiable history in psychology and organizations to support and promote shared professional interests within, for example, the British Psychological Society and American Psychological Association. I hesitate, though, to follow Jackson in suggesting that psychologists focusing primarily on qualitative methods have a common identity. I am of the opinion, however, that "psychological science would benefit from better integration of research methods and paradigms [and that] this may be particularly true for qualitative research because standoffs between specialists will tend to serve the dominant, and relatively unified, quantitative methodologies" (Madill & Gough, 2008, p.267). Unfortunately, Jackson's and Landrum and Garza's vision omits too many ways of doing qualitative research in psychology to provide a comprehensive way forward with this project.

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Figure 1: Criteria for judging inter-method coherence associated with increasingly generalized versions of 'paradigm'

(reproduced with permission from Madill & Gough, 2008)

