

‘3 Rs’ of assessment research: *Respect, Relationships and Responsibility* – what do they have to do with research methods?

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Introduction

This article developed from a speculative email to Dr Helen Colley from the Education and Social Research Institute (ESRI) at Manchester Metropolitan University. I had read one of her conference papers which used a qualitative case study method to explore the interaction of formal and informal attributes of competence-based assessment (later developed into a journal article; Colley and Jarvis, 2007). I wanted to understand how she had gathered some of the rich contextual data in her work which covered a set of social interactions around assessment activities in various vocational settings. Following this initial contact it was clear that there was an overlap between methodological considerations being discussed at ESRI and ideas that were floating around between some members of the Research Division at Cambridge Assessment. These issues centred on the merits and challenges of using qualitative research methods, and how these could contribute positively to the study of assessment. These discussions resulted in the convening of a well-attended research seminar in Cambridge on the 31st October 2007. This seminar, involving Helen and Professor Harry Torrance was called ‘*How can qualitative research methods inform our view of assessment?*’ This article is based on the paper that I delivered at that seminar, with a few additional elements reflecting some of the comments received that afternoon.

The idea for a qualitative methods seminar was prompted by two separate but related issues. The first relates to the Research Division’s growing involvement with the wider research literature in the vocational learning field. This literature sometimes draws heavily on qualitative methods to gather rich data about learners and learning conditions in a variety of contexts. An increasing awareness of this vocational literature has also made me more conscious of my own limited understanding of this area of methodology, and so to some extent the seminar grew out of a desire to share research practitioner knowledge and to help to contribute further to the Division’s combined research capacity.

The second ‘alliterative’ prompt for the seminar came from three overlapping themes. The first arose from hearing a lecture given by Randy Bennett at a University of Cambridge International Examinations research conference in 2006 (Bennett, 2005). This paper was then the subject of a response from Tim Oates (Oates, 2007). Finally, another of my recent research projects had led me to pick up a reference to some work by Ann Oakley (Oakley, 2000). I argue that the inter-related strands of the 3Rs of respect, relationships and responsibility that are inherent to these three references can be used to explore some of the issues that influence the instigation and practice of assessment-related research at Cambridge Assessment.

Respect

Randy Bennett argues that research has an important role in reinforcing the integrity of and respect for an organisation as it is perceived by others. He considers the way that non-profit assessment agencies can come to occupy a niche in the educational assessment market place by ‘taking on the challenges that for-profit agencies will not, because those challenges are too hard, or investment returns might not be large enough or soon enough’ (2003, p.9). An important aspect of this integrity arises from the ability to ask those questions that the other agencies do not. A research division, through its interactions beyond its host organisation and access to outside academic linkages, can view the host organisation from a different perspective to those whose main concern is at an operational level. This gives research an obvious strategic role, enabling researchers to draw upon such perspectives to generate important research questions.

Relationships

Tim Oates (2007) argues that there has been a strong traditional link in the UK between independent assessment agencies, such as Awarding Bodies/Examination Boards, and the communities that they serve. He goes on to point out that this relationship has supported an important accountability function by keeping such agencies responsive to the needs of those that they affect most directly, these principally being the schools and learners with which the agencies interact. Again, I would maintain that research has an important role to play in this interaction through providing evidence of the ways that the practices of our own organisation influence the learning and experiences of others. Here I think it is important to introduce the concept of ‘subjective agency’ since this is important to the points that follow. Altieri (1994) suggests that subjective agency is an account of human agency in all its dimensions, from psychological through to political, and an important aspect of this agency involves an agent being able to reflect ‘self critically’. I argue that this can be translated across to our own ‘institutional self’, where we can reflect critically on our own position within the wider educational system. This has a number of methodological implications which are discussed later. The key notion of ‘subjective agency’ also brings us to the third ‘R’.

Responsibility

Acknowledging that the activities of our own organisation directly influence the lives of others brings with it responsibilities. Ann Oakley

states that 'the goal of emancipatory social science calls for us to ensure that those who intervene in other people's lives do so with the most benefit and the least harm' (2000, p.3). Oakley's position is to make sure that any activities that are likely to affect others are based on sound research evidence. In our case, understanding impact might involve space for the voices of those affected by educational assessment, and this has obvious implications for the methods chosen to achieve this.

The common strand that unites the three 'R' elements is the conceptual importance of the ability to act 'self-critically' and to understand how an organisation interacts with, influences, and is influenced by, the system within which it operates. So what does this mean for method?

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) would suggest that one of the key criticisms of research might be that its practices are limited by its traditions and habits of thought. A key tenet of Bourdieu's theoretical stance is that professional practices are constrained by the structural factors pertaining to their position. He also cautions that any research questions that are being generated could be partial if they only rely on established orthodoxy. This is because these orthodoxies have been connected with the organisation's historic position within the field and thus are unlikely to question conventional perspectives. This places the onus on researchers to first of all recognise the constraints affecting their practice and to constantly question the prevailing techniques. The importance of this final point is made by Oakley. She argues that the historical development of scientific thought has been marked by the presence of some methods that have traditionally only occupied spaces at the edge of the dominant vision. This concept also links to the process of paradigm shift identified by Thomas S. Kuhn to explain how scientific thought develops through the relative capacities of dominant and emerging paradigms to adequately explain different phenomena (Kuhn, 1970).

The notion of 'subjective agency' has important implications for research methods because it is based on assumptions that encourage the use of qualitative research methods. To explain this notion the contested assumptions about the nature of social reality that have dominated a polarised discourse in social science need to be considered. Cohen and Mannion (1994) highlight the way that social science has typically been characterised as having two polarised views of social reality; 'objectivist' and 'subjectivist' (Figure 1). Those who have an 'objectivist' (or positivist) tendency argue that social science mirrors natural science, where a hard, external, objective reality exists with universal laws or constructs waiting to be detected, quantified and measured. This perspective supports the use of controlled experimental methods to analyse the relationships and regularities between selected factors, using predominantly quantitative techniques. This paradigm has been used in one recent Research Division project which investigated whether giving test takers a graded outcome

affected their motivation (Johnson, 2007). The project constructed matched experimental and control groups of test takers, subjected them to different testing conditions, measured their outcomes through a survey method, and analysed these outcomes quantitatively. Whilst this analysis implied a significant relationship between the conditions and outcomes, it also carried within it an inherent frustration that any interpretations being made about why these significances existed could not be any more than weak conjecture.

Polarised discussions about method paradigms are still present within some academic discourses. This is particularly the case in the context of the US where debates about 'scientifically-based research' have followed in the wake of the *No Child Left Behind* agenda (Bliss *et al.*, 2004; Maxwell, 2004). Some would argue that arguments that focus on the polarisation of objectivism and subjectivism are less useful than discussions about scientific realism since this provides an opportunity to overcome harmful polarised confrontation and a potential foundation on which to develop research dialogue. House (1991) outlines the scientific realist position. He argues that knowledge is both a social and historical product and that the task of science is to not only invent theories to explain the real world, with its complex layers, but also to test such theories through rational criteria developed within particular disciplines. Furthermore, causalities need to be understood in terms of 'probabilities' and 'tendencies'. This is because behaviour is considered to be a function of agents' basic structures and that events are the outcomes of complex causal configurations.

Discourses of scientific realism also offer the opportunity to overcome potential problems encountered by research. The frustration in the grading and motivation research project reported earlier resonates with some recent concerns expressed by practitioners from the healthcare field. Some clinicians, for example Greenhalgh (1999) and Rapport *et al.* (2004), argue that whilst scientific Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) methods have been successful in proving the efficacy of particular medical interventions, such methods fail to take account of some of the messy, individualistic, 'irrational' reality that can ultimately affect the success of those treatments. Rapport *et al.* argue that 'only through an appreciation of the integration between human experience and bioscientific treatments of disease, be it within historical, sociological, medical or ethical genres, can we hope to reach clarity of understanding that befits the problem' (2004, p.6). This kind of perspective helps to explain why RCT methods might find it difficult to explain why some individuals just fail to take their medication, which in reality leads to the reduced overall efficacy of such interventions.

Realist discourse implies the need for a wider research paradigm which considers individuals within their own context. What these clinicians argue for is another 'way of knowing' that accommodates a subjectivist outlook. This perspective emphasises that the social world differs from inanimate natural phenomena largely because of our involvement with it, and that 'reality' is something open to interpretation and which is difficult to control. This perspective also suggests that research should focus on the way that individuals construct, interpret and modify the world in which they find themselves. It also suggests that research evidence should take context into consideration since this can be an influence on behaviour. An important consideration is also to reduce the distance between the researcher and the research subject, since shared frames of reference can facilitate the making of legitimate inferences. The complexity inherent in this subjectivist outlook leads to some exciting methodological possibilities.

Figure 1: Social science and 'ways of knowing'

Objectivism/positivism	Subjectivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A tangible, external, objective reality exists • Methods used to analyse the relationships between selected factors in the world • Tends to involve deductive, quantitative identification and measurement of constructs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social world differs from inanimate natural phenomena largely because of our involvement with it • 'Reality' is something open to interpretation and is difficult to control • Methods try to understand the ways in which individuals create, interpret and modify the world • Tends to involve inductive, qualitative aspects

Questioning the objectivist paradigm in practice can lead to the adoption of mixed qualitative and quantitative techniques. This sort of discussion has already caused a stir in the medical humanities where some have referred to this area of methodology as 'the edgelands' (Rapport et al., 2004). They use this metaphor to conjure up the cluttered geographical crossover areas where urban and rural landscapes merge, suggesting that overlapping research paradigms might be similarly messy when they converge. Research beyond the positivist paradigm requires a terrain where new approaches to knowing can be explored. Again, recent work in the Research Division can be characterised by such a metaphor, with one example being the marker annotation project (Crisp and Johnson, 2007). This project used a mixture of a controlled verbal protocol elicitation technique with semi-structured interview and observation methods to gather data about the annotation practices of members of different marking groups. This analysis used a community of practice metaphor to frame an understanding of the patterns within the data, inferring connections between the individuals in the study. A more recent project, the *OCR Nationals* holistic assessment project (Johnson, *in press*), replicated this method but complemented it further by gathering ethnographic observational data of individuals' working in their normal context. This approach then also allowed for the consideration of how value systems might have influenced the behaviour of the participants.

I think the metaphor of 'the edgelands' is very useful for two reasons. First, it implies the need for researchers to consider how methods might be combined to make findings more powerful. Schulenberg (2006), in a paper examining police officers' discretionary decision-making processes with young offenders, argues that mixed methods allow triangulation, complementarity (where findings gained through one method offer insights into other findings) and expansion (of the breadth and scope of the research beyond initial findings). This resonates with the sentiments of Pope and Mays (1995) who also argue that mixed methods can add value to medical evidence gathering because 'qualitative methods can help to reach the parts that other methods cannot reach'. Secondly, I think 'the edgelands' metaphor is very useful because it reminds us that there are areas of activity where we might have a limited understanding and where our efforts need to be directed. One example of this might be in the areas of so called 'non-standard' learning contexts and the learners within them who are affected by educational assessment.

In conclusion, the Research Division has a critical role in supporting the integrity of Cambridge Assessment. Implicit in this is the need to engage in the areas where assessment affects the lives of others. This means not only asking the difficult questions but also having the appropriate methodologies to try to answer them. An important aspect of this entails our continued interaction with other researchers beyond our own institution.

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