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Is It Necessary to Articulate a Research Methodology When Reporting on Theoretical Research?

Abstract

In this paper the authors share their insights on whether it is necessary to articulate a research methodology when reporting on theoretical research. Initially the authors, one being a supervisor and the other, a PhD student and a colleague, were confronted with the question during supervision and writing of a thesis on theoretical research. Reflection on the external examiners' reports about whether a research methodology for theoretical research is necessary prompted the writing of this paper. In order to answer the question, the characteristics of theoretical research are clarified and contrasting views regarding the necessity or not of including a research methodology section in such a thesis, are examined. The paper also highlights the justification for including a research methodology in a thesis that reports on theoretical research, investigates the soundness of such justification and finally draws conclusions on the matter.

Keywords: PhD thesis, external examination, research methodology, theoretical research, philosophical and analytical research, critique of educational questions

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to address the question: Is it necessary to articulate a research methodology when reporting on theoretical research?

Before we attempt to answer this question it is necessary to discuss the distinction between research methodology and research methods as these two terms are used in the paper. These two terms are usually used interchangeably in the literature; however there are conceptual differences between them. Research methodology encompasses a broader conception of the process of the research process whereas research methods, in a narrow sense, refers to the research instruments. Some scholars confuse research methods (e.g. data collection methods such as interviews, questionnaires or focus groups) with research methodology (e.g. phenomenology, ethnography, critical theory, grounded theory, etc.). According to Birks and Mills (2011, p. 4), the research methodology describes the philosophical framing of the study and 'is a set of principles and ideas that inform the design of a research study' and the research method as the practical procedures used to gather and analyse data, while admitting to a considerable amount of interplay between the research methodology and the research method.

The above question emerged during the writing process of a thesis that reports on theoretical research, and resurfaced again when we reflected on examiners' comments on a relatively recently examined PhD thesis (Small, 2012), entitled "Conversations about values in education in South Africa 2000-2005: A theoretical investigation". The candidate explained that her conceptual investigation was located within a qualitative research paradigm, following an interpretive meta-

theoretical approach. She identified her research design as ‘philosophy as social practice’, and her research method as philosophical investigation. She undertook an investigation into the constitutive grammar of these conversations about values in education. She argued that the Department of Education (DoE) initiated conversations about values in education and engaged in a less than rigorous manner with concepts, which she suggested, results in conceptual confusion or lack of conceptual clarity.

The question was fore fronted by contrasting comments in this regard on the part of examiners of the thesis. One examiner declared unequivocally that it is unnecessary to articulate a research methodology (hereafter referred to as research methods) in a research methodology chapter for a thesis that reports on theoretical research:

I don't think a thesis such as this needs a methodology chapter such as what the candidate provides in chapter three. This is a philosophical/conceptual analysis based on the internal logic of a set of arguments, which, in our instrumentalist times is sorely lacking: there's no need for a separate chapter to justify its research methodological choices.

A second examiner appeared to be appreciative of the articulation of a research methodology and stated:

In an innovative creative manner, well within the legitimate boundaries of philosophical, analytical research within the qualitative research approach she has explained her methodology and adhered to rigorous theoretical argumentation and logical coherence. She demonstrated that she could design a suitable research plan which will produce the kind of analysis that fulfilled the aims of the research... The application of the research methodology, namely philosophy as social practice is viewed as a new realm for research in policy analysis.

In our attempt to address the question as articulated in the outset of this paper, firstly, we look at the type of thesis that reports on what we characterise as “theoretical research”. In the process we clarify what is to be understood by “theoretical research”. Next, we examine contrasting views regarding the necessity or not of including a methods section in such a thesis. Then, we examine the justification presented in a thesis that reports on theoretical research, for including a methods section, and briefly investigate the soundness of such justification. Finally, we draw conclusions regarding the necessity for including a methods section on a thesis that reports on theoretical research.

The type of thesis that reports on theoretical research

The thesis under consideration which reports on theoretical research does not include a separate chapter on a review of the relevant literature in the fields and the development of a conceptual and/or theoretical framework. The reason for this can be explained with reference to work of Paltridge (2002, pp. 125-143) who focuses on four general thesis formats. Three of these thesis formats are of relevance here. Firstly, there is the ‘simple’ traditional thesis that Paltridge identifies as follows (2002, p. 131):

A study with a ‘simple’ traditional pattern is one which reports on a single study and has a typical macro-structure of ‘introduction’, ‘review of the literature’, ‘materials and methods’, ‘results’, ‘discussion’ and ‘conclusion’.

This thesis format translates into a well-known single study which is presented, with minor variations in what Boote and Beile (2005, p. 10) refer to as “the traditional five-chapter empirical dissertation”. This type of thesis usually has the following chapters: Background; Literature Review; Research Methodology; Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Research Results; and Conclusions and Recommendations. The second thesis format that Paltridge (2002, pp. 131-132) focuses on is the ‘complex’ traditional format which consists of a number of related studies. This type of thesis would usually contain the following: ‘Introduction, Review of the Literature and Materials and Methods’ sections, as does the ‘simple’ traditional format. The remaining chapter would then report on each of the individual studies and conclude with a general and overall ‘Conclusions’ chapter.

A third dissertation format is the ‘topic based’ dissertation which, according to Paltridge and referenced by Boote and Beile (2005, p. 10), is “often used in education, especially for theoretical, philosophical, humanities-based, and qualitative dissertations”. Such a dissertation would not conform to the traditional simple dissertation format. Paltridge (2002, p. 132) identifies this type of dissertation as ‘topic-based’ thesis, which is characterised as follows:

This type of thesis typically commences with an introductory chapter which is then followed by a series of chapters which have titles based on sub-topics of the topic under investigation. The thesis then ends with a ‘conclusions’ chapter.

The thesis under discussion that reports on theoretical research conforms to the ‘topic-based’ format. It comprises a single study – values in education (Small, 2012) – its format therefore cannot be characterised as a ‘complex’ traditional format. Neither is its format a ‘simple’ traditional one since it does not have separate ‘Literature Review’ and ‘Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings’ chapters. The two chapters are often infused in various chapters of the thesis or, as Boote and Beile (2005, p. 10) say, “interspersed throughout the dissertation”. The thesis under discussion was devoid of fieldwork, and is therefore characterised as ‘theoretical research’. The question that arose was whether it was necessary to include a methods section in a thesis reporting on theoretical research where no fieldwork was carried out. The next section presents the contrasting views regarding this question.

Contrasting views

As stated earlier, the undertaken research, which we characterise as theoretical research was entirely text-based and was devoid of fieldwork. There is a view that a thesis reporting on text-based research does not need a separate research methodology section or chapter and that an attempt to articulate a research methods section for text-based research is a futile exercise. In this regard Clingan (2008, p. 2) writes:

Textual or theoretical research does not require a methods section because it would be rather an ineffective process to write: “I read one hundred and three books, listened to six professionals in the field, read multitudes of current articles on the subject, thought about and weighed all of that, and came to the following theoretical conclusion”. That method... becomes obvious as the material is presented and therefore does not need to be described in a discrete methods section.

Clingan (2008) appears to imply that the methods employed by a researcher engaged in textual or theoretical research will reveal themselves in the reading of the completed text. However, we contend that Clingan's claim appears to be underpinned by a limited conception of 'methods'. In the extract below, Clingan (2008, p. 2) articulates what, according to her, 'research method' entails:

The methods section of a thesis, dissertation, or any research paper or article is the section that describes any and all specific steps and procedures that were taken to gather data. It tells the reader exactly how the research process was carried out. Methods describe in specific detail the actual steps carried out to give each reader (and evaluator) the following specific information: what exactly you did to gather your data, enough information to determine whether they see the process as objective and well-served, and the steps involved so that someone could essentially repeat the research if desired.

It is clear that Clingan (2008) associates a methods section very closely with data gathering and analysis in respect of research that involves fieldwork and that she works with an extremely narrow conception of 'methods', a conception Ruitenberg (2009, p. 316) refers to as a Baconian conception that equates 'method' with 'technique'. Bridges and Smith (2006, p. 133) also referred to Bacon's attempts during the 17th century to "formulate research methods for the social sciences that can be applied regardless of the acumen of the researcher". Clingan (2008) indeed equates 'method' with 'technique' when she refers to the requirement in the last line of the extract above from her paper that a good methods section makes it possible for the research to be repeated at a future date.

Apart from a limited conception of 'methods', Clingan's (2008) view has also positivist overtones if she implies that the same results will be obtained if the research can be replicated. This may happen, for example, in physics where experiments can be repeated and, provided the correct techniques are followed, the same results will be obtained. But this is patently not the case with qualitative research in education and in other social sciences. If a different researcher carries out the data gathering process, responses to the same questionnaires or interview questions may yield vastly different responses depending on a number of factors such as the context within which the research is carried out, the personality and manner of presentation of the researcher.

Ruitenberg (2009, p. 316) articulates a broader conception of 'methods' when she claims that:

Methods... refer to the various ways and modes in which philosophers of education think, read, write, speak and listen that make their work systematic, purposeful and responsive to past and present philosophical and educational concerns and conversations.

In other words, 'methods' refer to everything the researcher in philosophy of education carries out in the course of the research. In respect of the necessity for researchers engaged with theoretical research, Ruitenberg (2009, p. 316) argues as follows:

Education is commonly seen as a social science... with perspectives from the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities. One of the consequences is that the philosophers of education are expected to be able to answer questions about their methods just as their social science colleagues do.

Ruitenberg (2009) appears to be bowing under pressure from outside the discipline of philosophy of education itself to articulate the methods used when engaging in theoretical research devoid of field work. The articulation of ‘methods’ is a stringent requirement when reporting on data gathering processes. The fact that philosophers of education are under pressure from outside to articulate a ‘methods’ section in their research reports does not present a sufficiently compelling reason for such articulation. However, Ruitenberg (2009, p. 317), referring to the essays within the 2009 edition of the *Journal of the Philosophy of the Education Society of Great Britain*, which attempt to explain what philosophical methods were used for when the essays were written, observes that:

The essays in the current volume... provide articulations of particular modes of philosophical thinking, reading and writing that are of value for the elucidation or critique of educational questions.

Ruitenberg (2009) claims that it is important to articulate one’s method of doing philosophy of education since such articulation contributes to the clarification or critique of educational questions.

A justification for including a methods section in a thesis that reports on theoretical research

The PhD research took place within a qualitative methodological paradigm. Concomitant with the qualitative methodological paradigm, the metatheoretical approach was an interpretive approach. The research attempted to interpret and understand the Department of Education’s conversations about values in education in South Africa. This was a theoretical study that did not rely on fieldwork for data gathering; therefore philosophy as practice was identified as research design.

The assumptions that underlie the view that philosophical investigation is a valid research method are the following. Philosophy must not be regarded simply as a worldview, which is what people might have in mind when they refer to their “philosophy of life”. Philosophy must be viewed as an activity. One does philosophy; you do not have philosophy. The distinction here is one that sees the word ‘philosophy’ as a verb, and not as a noun.

A social practice may be understood as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity”, according to MacIntyre (1984) quoted by Sheffield (2004, p. 761). This places an emphasis on philosophy as activity. Within this conception of philosophy as practice we identified philosophical investigation as a research method. Philosophy as a research method comprises “an analysis, clarification and criticism of the language, concepts and logic” (Sheffield, 2004, p. 763) of DoE conversations about values in education. This enabled us to uncover assumptions about education and schooling underlying DoE conversations about values, establish the extent of continuity amongst DoE conversations, establish the extent of conceptual clarity of DoE conversations and uncover meanings assigned to value concepts.

Sheffield (2004) presents an argument for viewing philosophy as an important qualitative research method. Sheffield (2004, p. 761) addresses two questions: What exactly are philosophy’s methodological tools and subject matter? Why should philosophical work be understood, at least in part, as a viable research method?

The structure of Sheffield's (2004) argument is based on the following trail. He begins with the claim that philosophy must be viewed as social practice. On the basis of his argument to support this claim he concludes with a "working definition" of philosophic method. It is in terms of this "working definition" that Sheffield (2004) explicates what he calls the "tools" of philosophy, as well as the subject matter of philosophy. The "working definition" finally provides Sheffield (2004) with a way to argue for the relevance of philosophy.

In the next paragraphs we outline Sheffield's (2004) argument. If philosophy was to be shown to be a valid research method, the next question, then, is what are the "tools" of philosophy?

In order to address this question, Sheffield (2004, p. 762) draws on unpublished work of Sherman who provides him with a "working definition" of philosophic method as "the analysis, clarification, and criticism of the language, concepts, and logic of the ends and means of human experience". The conceptual and qualitative nature of philosophic method emerges through this "working definition".

Sheffield (2004, p. 763) points out that the terms analyse, clarify and criticise indicate the tools of philosophic method. The following extract shows the close relationship between analysis and clarification, and then singles out conceptual clarification as one of the responsibilities of philosophers (Sheffield, 2004, p. 763):

In analysis, one reduces complex ideas or explicates human situations into understandable, relational concepts. Through analysis essential concepts that drive practice are extracted... so that they may be more easily understood and debated. Closely related to analysis is clarification... Philosophers have... to challenge and ultimately clarify those constructs we use to make sense of the world; constructs often taken for granted.

Analysis and clarification are accompanied by criticism, which can be viewed as the third task of a philosopher. Sheffield (2004, p. 763) is explicit about the relationship between criticism and value judgment:

Criticism means making judgments as to value. Philosophers judge the instrumental/practical value of those concepts... for driving practices and in that critical, interpretive mode build new and better conceptual understandings... it is also clear that in "extracting" conceptual constructs that drive actual practice (rather than from some imagined practice), philosophy is a very qualitative, experiential method.

The "working definition" also answers the question as to what the philosopher's objects of inquiry are. These are language, concepts and logic. Finally, Sheffield (2004) argues for the relevance of philosophy as a research method. The "working definition" refers to "the ends and means of human experience", and Sheffield (2004) refers to the philosopher as philosopher-as-social practitioner. Based on this view of a philosopher Sheffield articulates the relevance of philosophy as social practice alongside other social practices (2004, p. 763):

Philosophy attempts to make clear the way we think about human experience so that reasonable action (means) might evolve which can lead us to just and socially established goals (ends) within the human experience... Philosophers investigate real problems that might be alleviated through further conceptual understanding. It is, in this regard, a social practice that is very qualitative in nature and one, as a social practice, on par with other, more widely accepted, research practices.

The research of Small (2012) constitutes a theoretical investigation of DoE conversations about values in education, it attempts an analysis, clarification and criticism of the language, concepts and logic of DoE conversations about values in education. Specifically, it investigates DoE arguments for claims made in the relevant conversations in respect to values in education, and it clarifies assumptions underpinning these arguments.

Concluding remarks

There is indeed institutional pressure on researchers engaged with research that does not involve fieldwork to articulate a research methodology. However, if the articulation of a research methodology can assist in clarifying or critiquing educational problems then this would constitute sufficiently compelling reasons for including a methodology section or chapter in a thesis or dissertation reporting on theoretical research. Because of this latter reason, and also because of institutional pressure as a result of a non-negotiable requirement to include such a chapter, the thesis in question included a 'research methodology' chapter. However, the articulation of a research methodology chapter in the traditional sense is not necessary when reporting on theoretical research.

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