

# Qualitative research methodologies are more reliable than quantitative as an indicator of belief.

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## Introduction

Before discussing relations between the concepts in the statement “Qualitative research methodologies are more reliable than quantitative as an indicator of belief”; the meanings and utilisation of concepts *belief*, *qualitative* and *quantitative methodologies* will be discussed below.

## The concepts

The concept *belief* has a large breath of meanings; Schwitzgebel asserts/suggests that a belief system of an individual or group of people is a set of declarative views regarding the state of the affairs or world (a propositional attitude). These declarative views are assumed to be true by the individual or group<sup>2</sup>. In a spiritual and religious sense, belief refers to a wider spiritual or moral foundation, generally called faith<sup>3</sup>. Christen et al. state that a belief system of a group has a kind of expected coherence, so the members share to some degree similar beliefs regarding their propositions<sup>4</sup>.

For the purpose of this discussion it is assumed that *belief* is positioned in a spiritual environment and in a group setting; like a religion (like Islam, Catholic) or (sub) culture (like atheism, pagans, new age).

The meaning behind *more reliable* is in this discussion not seen as a ranking, but more as a validity of a methodology type<sup>5</sup>.

The concepts *qualitative* and *quantitative* methodologies also need context, as the epistemology of these methodologies will determine if they are fit for studies around *belief*. This epistemological question is described by Bryman as: “What is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline?”<sup>6</sup>; Should social research utilise the same principles, procedures and ethos as natural sciences (called positivism) or should it use fundamentally different principles than natural sciences (called interpretivism)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Schwitzgebel, "Belief," In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed Edward N. Zalta. (2010), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/belief/>.

<sup>3</sup> John Bishop, "Faith," In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed Edward N. Zalta. (2010), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/faith/>.

<sup>4</sup> M. Christen et al., "A spin-based measure of the coherence of belief systems" (paper presented at the NDES 2009, Rapperswil, 21 June - 24 June 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Determining which methodology type is better is seen as outside the scope of this discussion. It is assumed that if researchers use at a considerable scale a certain methodology type, it is a valid methodology type to determine the properties of belief.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Bryman, "Social research strategies," in *Social research methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Bryman furthermore points out Von Weigh's position by writing that natural science studies the explanation of human behaviour, while social research studies the understanding of human behaviour<sup>8</sup>. Weber's definition of social research is that it "attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effect."<sup>9</sup> Weber's statement can provide a link between positivism (explaining) and interpretivism (understanding)<sup>10</sup>.

### Qualitative and quantitative methodologies

Methodologies for qualitative research, which Silverman derived from Gubrium and Holstein (1997), are: participant observations by total-researcher, researcher-participant or total-participant; unstructured interviewing; analysis of audio/video recordings; and in case of the postmodernism idiom: any data source<sup>11</sup>.

Quantitative methodologies are according to Bryman: surveys; experiments; analysis of previously collected data (official statistics); structured observations; and content analysis of written communications<sup>12</sup>.

Differences in epistemology point to the possible distinction between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. For these two methodology types, Stake provides a list of three distinctions<sup>13</sup>:

- ◆ understanding and explaining;
- ◆ personal and impersonal role of researcher<sup>14</sup>; and
- ◆ discovery or construction of knowledge.

Gorard refers to Thomas Popkewitz (1984), who dovetails the qualitative and quantitative distinction:

To some extent all methods of social science research deal with qualities, even when the observed qualities are counted. Similarly, all methods of analysis use some form of number, such as 'tend, most, some, all, none, few', and so on. This is what the patterns in qualitative analysis are based on ... Words can be counted and numbers can be descriptive. Patterns are, by definition, numbers, and the things that are numbered are qualities.<sup>15</sup>

The idea to dovetail qualitative and quantitative is supported by many other people like Silverman<sup>16</sup>, Stake<sup>17</sup> and Bryman. Bryman discusses several advantages of combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies<sup>18</sup>;

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>9</sup> Max Weber, *The theory of social and economic organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947), 88.

<sup>10</sup> Bryman, "Social research strategies," 13.

<sup>11</sup> Silverman, "What is qualitative research?," Table 2.6.

<sup>12</sup> Bryman, *Quantity and quality in social research*: 12.

<sup>13</sup> Robert E. Stake, "The nature of qualitative research," in *The art of case study research* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 37.

<sup>14</sup> On a personal note: To make a proper comparison between social research and natural science, a distinction between the personal or impersonal role of subject/object of study is also important. In most social research the subject is expressing his/her data in his/her value-rich environment. In natural science the object normally has no value-rich environment. But that is for another time.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Gorard, "Introduction: the role of numbers in research," in *Quantitative methods in social science* (London, New York: Continuum, 2003), 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> David Silverman, "What is qualitative research?," in *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analytic talk, text and interaction* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 37.

<sup>17</sup> Stake, "The nature of qualitative research," 39-40.

- ◆ possibility of triangulating knowledge (if the methodologies support or contradict each other);
- ◆ facilitating quantitative research by qualitative research (and the other way around);
- ◆ providing a general picture by combining the two methodologies:
- ◆ recognising micro level (qualitative) and macro level (quantitative);
- ◆ making sure that both process (qualitative) and structure (quantitative) are covered (and facilitating relationships between variables); and
- ◆ allowing phasing of the research project itself (e.g. start with qualitative phase and base a quantitative phase on that).

### ***Belief and social research***

Which methodologies are best utilised in this *belief* environment?

Platvoet provides an overview of the type of research done in religious studies:

- ◆ psychology; the religious experiences/process related to the development of the psyche and the attitude towards other people;
- ◆ sociology; influence of religion on society at large and other way around; and
- ◆ anthropology; influence of religion on local societies (like family, villages, etc.) and other way around.<sup>19</sup>

He also states that religious studies will utilize similar research methodologies as the above stated social research areas; which are, according to him, most likely qualitative methodologies<sup>20</sup>.

Bryman though states that quantitative methodologies can very well be used in psychology, sociology and anthropology<sup>21</sup>. Several studies related to *belief* utilize quantitative methodologies. The possible existing coherent attitude in groups, can be analysed quantitatively<sup>22</sup>, and the thesis of Berg evaluates previously collected data sets<sup>23</sup> to determine the relation between belief and happiness<sup>24</sup>. Another example of a quantitative methodology is the Post-Critical Belief scale<sup>25</sup>, which is a two dimensional scale linking a person's religious attitude to the amount of transcendence in belief and the amount of literal affirmation to religious texts. Furthermore there is a ten-yearly survey on belief in God by the Dutch<sup>26</sup>. This provides information on: what they believe; if they feel connected to the spiritual/religious institutes; if belief has a place in modern society; and if not where do they turn to.

As a reaction to this large scale survey, an article was published by Van der Graaf (the former general secretary of the Reformed League in the Protestant Church in The Netherlands):

<sup>18</sup> Alan Bryman, *Quantity and quality in social research*, ed. Martin Bulmer, 2nd ed., Contemporary social research (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), chapter 6 and 7.

<sup>19</sup> Jan G. Platvoet, "Empirische godsdienstwetenschappen," in *Inleiding in de godsdienstwetenschap* (Bunnik: Department of Theology University of Utrecht, 1990), 56-57.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>21</sup> See footnote 18

<sup>22</sup> See footnote 4

<sup>23</sup> Quantitative data collected from for instance World Values Survey, US State Department International Religious Freedom Report 2004, International Religious Freedom Report 2004 and Gallup World Poll.

<sup>24</sup> Maarten Berg, "Geloof en geluk in landen," ed. Happiness in Nations: An empirical study on conditions for a happy society (Rotterdam: Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Bart Duriez, Bart Soenens, and Dirk Hutsebaut, "Introducing the shortened Post-Critical Belief Scale," *Personality and Individual Differences*, no. 38 (2005).

<sup>26</sup> Ton Bernts, Gerard Dekker, and Joep de Hart, *God in Nederland* (Ten Have, 2007).

As if one could measure or investigate religion. Faith is very personal and therefore personally much differentiated. The Holy Spirit can never be calculated or mapped<sup>27</sup>.

He continues by stating that survey results are not representative of the views of people who believe and that the results will always be a generalisation. This looks to be a reaction towards quantitative methodologies in general; as these methodologies can suffer from a gap between attitudes and actions<sup>28</sup>.

## Conclusion

The above shows that both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are used in the environment of belief. And these methodologies can be dovetailed in a reliable way to investigate the beliefs of people.

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<sup>27</sup> Jan van der Graaf, "Geloof niet sociologisch te meten," *Reformatorisch Dagblad*(2007), [http://www.refdag.nl/opinie/opinie/geloof\\_niet\\_sociologisch\\_te\\_meten\\_1\\_212482](http://www.refdag.nl/opinie/opinie/geloof_niet_sociologisch_te_meten_1_212482). Translated from the original Dutch text: "Alsof geloof ooit te meten of te onderzoeken zou zijn. Geloof is hoogstpersoonlijk en dan ook persoonlijk zeer gedifferentieerd. De Heilige Geest valt niet en nooit na te rekenen of in kaart te brengen."

<sup>28</sup> Richard T. LaPiere, "Attitudes vs Actions," *Social Forces* 12, no. 2 (1934): 230.

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