
Interviews and Questionnaires as Mixed Methods in Population Geography: The Case of Lone Fathers in Newcastle, Australia

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A mixed method approach was adopted to study the experiences of lone fathers, using a classic triangulation approach of interview and questionnaire data. This study utilised an empirical realist framework of scientific enquiry, with the 'soft' individual interview data seen as an adjunct to the 'hard' aggregate quantitative methods. A review of this study found that the interviews worked well as a pilot study in a classic mixed methods framework. The questionnaires provided a range of information about the characteristics of this group of lone fathers, but it was the interviews which provided astonishing depth on the causes of marital breakdown and post-marital conflict, and on the discourses and other structures which sustain social processes. In this study, the interview techniques could have been used differently, in a different framework of analysis (that of critical rather than empirical realism) without the support of other mixed methods. **Key Words:** Australia, interviews, questionnaires, mixed methods, qualitative research, quantitative research, lone parents.

Introduction

The resurgence of intensive qualitative research in geography (Eyles 1988; Eyles and Smith 1988) has fostered a proliferation of interview-based studies, especially in feminist geography in new and sensitive areas of research (see for example, Clark 1991; Valentine 1993a, 1993b; McDowell and Court 1994; Gregson and Lowe 1995). The interview as a research method has also become the subject of renewed debate, particularly in the pages of *The Professional Geographer* (Schoenberger 1991, 1992; McDowell 1992; Herod 1993). Interviews are often used as key elements in a mixed methods approach in the social sciences.

I consider some methodological aspects of interviews undertaken as part of a mixed methods strategy in a study of lone fathers in Newcastle, Australia, the ethical/methodological and substantive content of which is reported elsewhere (Winchester 1996). The current paper examines the role of interviews in contributing to mixed methods and focuses particularly on the limitations imposed by empirical realist notions of social science. It is argued in this paper that, although interviews are often used as part of a mixed-method approach, they can successfully be used as a stand-alone technique. If interviews are undertaken in a critical realist framework in order to uncover underlying

structures and causal mechanisms of social processes, they do not require questionnaire methods as a quantitative prop.

The research methods considered here were used in a project on the geography of one-parent families, a social group which suffers from economic and social disadvantage (see, for example, Rose and Le Bourdais 1986; Dyck 1989; Winchester 1990). Two issues arising from those interviews are used as examples in this brief study; they are the legal system as it pertains to families, and the institution of the family itself. While there have been numerous geographical studies of lone mothers, who represent the vast majority of lone parents, there have been relatively few geographical studies of lone fathers and non-custodial parents. Using semi-structured interviews as a pilot study with lone fathers was considered a suitable method to establish hypotheses for further research in an area of personal sensitivity that is poorly developed in geography. The interviews were used as a pilot study in order to develop a questionnaire to be used with a larger group of lone fathers.

It is argued in this paper that a mixed-method approach, which uses interviews with questionnaires, is based firmly within the hegemonic analytical framework of human geography. This may be termed 'empirical realism' within which empirical phenomena are identified as part of an open social system. Most interviews are used in

this way. The recent call by Baxter and Eyles (1997) for more replicability and rigour in interviews is indicative of this form of inquiry. An alternative approach to empirical realism is that of critical realism. Critical realism identifies structures, meanings, and discourses without recourse to measurement or quantification to lend academic respectability. Interviews may be used within a critical realist framework to analyse underlying structures and meanings of social processes. On reviewing the mixed-methods approach adopted in the lone father project, it was felt that greater understanding and deeper meaning could have been drawn from interviews alone, used in the critical realist framework.

The Quantitative/Qualitative Debate and Mixed Methods in Human Geography

Mixed methods are becoming increasingly significant in human geography in the wake of a renewed interest in qualitative methodologies. Concerns with the over-quantification of geography and social science are relatively long-standing (see, for example in geography, Taylor 1976; Johnston 1980; and in social science more generally, Glaser and Straus 1967). In the 1980s, there was an increasing recognition of the lack of objectivity in much supposedly value-free research. The re-evaluation of objective social science was furthered by the development of humanist and phenomenological approaches within geography, which entailed the growing use of literature, art and other non-traditional sources (a useful review of such work is contained in Cloke et al. 1991, 57–92). These qualitative sources have been used in an attempt to understand the subjective meaning of social action rather than merely to recount its superficial characteristics. The trend towards a resurgence of qualitative sources and methods in geography has been chronicled in and stimulated by the publication of a number of volumes on qualitative methods (Eyles 1988; Eyles and Smith 1988). The debate between the qualitative and the quantitative has given rise to a focus on mixed methods (see, for example, Brannen 1992b).

Typically the gulf between qualitative and quantitative methods has been presented as a series of dualisms. Dualisms have characterised much of recent western thought and have become naturalised and gendered. The association

of fathers with home and children, for example, breaks up and problematises the naturalised dualisms which on the one hand associate home with women, children and caring, and on the other associate men with work, and its characteristics of aggression and crisis (Massey 1995). The dualistic nature of thought positions the quantitative with work, science, objectivity, reason and masculinity, while the qualitative is aligned with home, nature, subjectivity, passion and femininity. There is no doubt that the gendered power relations which exist throughout the western world contribute to the suppression of qualitative methods as legitimate research tools; they are both feared as an expression of unbridled femininity, and reviled as unscientific and unreliable.

Qualitative and quantitative methods have been considered in this dualistic tradition as occupying opposite ends of the spectrum. Hammersley (1992) lists seven 'polar opposites' between qualitative and quantitative methods in general, while Mostyn (1985) considers dualisms between qualitative and quantitative interviews (Table 1). Brannen (1992a) characterised qualitative approaches as viewing the world through a wide lens and quantitative approaches as those using a narrow lens. A dualistic view of methods is highly problematic: it represents quantitative methods as focussed, objective, generalisable, and, by implication, value-free (Hammersley 1992, 51). As the 'other', qualitative methods are seen as fuzzy, subjective, non-replicable and value-laden. Qualitative methods therefore tend to be justified in two ways, both

Table 1 Dualisms Identified between Qualitative and Quantitative Methods (after Mostyn 1985; Hammersley 1992)

Qualitative methods	Quantitative methods
Qualitative data	Quantitative data
Natural settings	Experimental settings
Search for meaning	Identification of behaviour
Rejection of natural science	Adoption of natural science
Inductive approaches	Deductive approaches
Identification of cultural patterns	Pursuance of scientific laws
Idealist perspective	Realist perspective
Qualitative interviews	Quantitative surveys (questionnaires)
Smaller sample size	Larger sample size
Longer interviews	Shorter surveys
Non-random samples	Random samples

of which acknowledge the primacy of the quantitative. Either qualitative methods are presented as soft and subjective, an anecdotal supplement to the 'real' science, or qualitative methods are argued to be just as objective as the quantitative. Brannen (1992a) exemplifies this latter approach, in arguing that the wide lens is still a search for generality, which uses and recounts, but is not solely interested in, the subjective experience of individuals. In reviewing my own approach to the lone father interviews to be used as a pilot study for what I saw initially as the 'main' questionnaire, I feel in retrospect that my methodology had internalised the dualistic message. I fell headlong into the trap of minimising the value of the qualitative and adopted mixed methods as a safe option.

If qualitative methods are seen as anecdotal supplements to the real substance of scientific enquiry, it is not surprising that researchers have been concerned for the reliability of analysis and its lack of statistical validity (Mostyn 1985, 122; Schoenberger 1991; Baxter and Eyles 1997). Such concerns are reflected in the justifications given by researchers for their sample size, sampling method and analytical methods. Such justifications are easiest for mass questionnaire-type surveys which may be analysed quantitatively, as these fit in to the expectation and assumption of a reality based on empirical observation. Justifications of this type are common in research grant applications, ethics clearance applications and resulting publications (Winchester 1996). Small sample sizes and non-random sampling, including the use of snowball methods and key informants (see, for example, Tremblay 1982; Wearing 1984; Donovan 1988; Miles and Crush 1993) are difficult to justify in this tradition of positivist methodology because of issues of reliability and replicability (Baxter and Eyles 1997). Qualitative interviews, when used as the main research method, sit uncomfortably in this framework because of the assumptions about the empirical realist nature of social science and its accompanying appropriate methodology.

The validity of qualitative interviews cannot rest on their representativeness or whether they are capable of generalisation in an empirical way. Rather their validity rests on whether they can help elucidate the structures and causal mechanisms which underpin observable behaviour. In other words, in an empirical realist view of social

science, qualitative interviews may be merely an adjunct to other methods, while in a critical realist view they are absolutely essential. Critical realism looks beyond the empirical, recognising that underlying structures are complex and may be different from the observable events and discourses to which they give rise (Sayer and Morgan 1985; Allen and McDowell 1989; McDowell 1992). In the context of critical realism, it is argued that non-quantifiable and non-replicable data, particularly experiences and attitudes, can be used in a holistic sense to derive meaning and causal explanations.

Interview-based studies generally have been justified within the hegemonic empirical realist framework by one of three strategies. Conceptually, the weakest of these is to argue that much qualitative research consists essentially of non-generalisable case studies (see, for example, Donovan 1988). Case studies may have a long and illustrious tradition in geography but they take us little further along the path to explanation unless their structure and meaning is elucidated (or at least hinted at). A second strategy appropriate to some large-scale studies is to argue that they have generated sufficient data to allow general, and sometimes quantified, conclusions to be drawn from their research (see, for example, Wearing 1984; Oakley 1986). More usually, qualitative interviews are justified as a complementary technique, as an adjunct or precursor to quantitative studies from which generalisations can be drawn, and as explorations in greater depth as part of multiple methods or triangulation (Burgess 1982). Different types of complementarity are exemplified below.

The triangulation approach sits firmly within the empirical realist tradition and offers cross-checking of results and methods in order to provide fresh insights into a given social problem. It has, however, been argued that data generated by different methods cannot simply be aggregated as they can only be understood in relation to the purposes for which they were created (Brannen 1992a, 13). Nonetheless, both types of data will shed some light on the general problem under consideration. There is no doubt that the 'use of multiple methods and research techniques has proved both difficult and enlightening' (Laurie 1992, 164). England combined structured interviews with questionnaires in a study of women's spatial entrapment in suburban clerical employment; in that study a specific

effort was made to 'select women whose commutes were representative of the broader sample' (England 1993, 234). A triangulation approach was adopted in England's study to provide a counterbalance between the general and the individual: 'to identify the particular circumstances and contingent conditions of the firms and women, which give specific empirical expression to wider socioeconomic factors that structure their practices' (England 1993, 227).

Interviews have been used as pilot studies for pre-testing and for the further analysis of questionnaire results (Brenner 1985, 148). Pre-testing may provide a source of hunches and hypotheses to be used in the development and refinement of research instruments (Brannen 1992a, 24). In a study of within-household resource allocation, preliminary interviews aided conceptual clarification of complex issues (Laurie 1992). Such issues included the 'pooling' of household resources, and the role of the couple in households of multiple adults (Laurie 1992). These clarifications were then incorporated into subsequent questionnaires. Interviews have been used to develop the results of questionnaires, for example, when respondents have brought problems to light (Brenner 1985, 148). They may also help elucidate anomalous findings from surveys: Brannen (1992a, 26) cited a study of the migration of council tenants where post-questionnaire interviews were carried out with migrants who had moved exceptionally long distances.

Baxter and Eyles (1997) have called for greater rigour in interview methods. Their article suggests that such rigour might be derived from credibility, reliability and transferability of the results used. The article suggests some useful evaluation of research procedures, particularly the internal audit. However, the definitions (of rigour, transferability and so on) used by Baxter and Eyles imply that interviews should meet the 'objective' standards of quantitative empirical social science, and that they should both conform to the existing literature and be generalisable to other places and social groups. Their call for rigour, while recognising that interviews may stand alone as a research method, falls clearly into the empirical realist mould, as the interviews themselves are required to have the characteristics of objective social science.

All such approaches that emphasise complementarity, multiple methods, and triangulation

justify the interview component in the empirical realist tradition as an adjunct to the real measurable science. However, even studies which are entirely interview-based have often relied on observable phenomena for explanation of causal mechanisms and structures. In social science, interviews in their own right are used as a primary technique in developing 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Straus 1967). In such techniques the work 'is directed by what is discovered and by logistical difficulties' (Donovan 1988, 186). Interview responses have been recorded and analysed in order to work out 'hypotheses and concepts in relation to the data being collected' (Donovan 1988, 186). However, the justification for new research projects should not have to be couched in terms of the empirical regularities and hypothesis testing of an empirical realist social science, when an intensive qualitative study set in a critical realist framework may have, or at least searches for, deeper explanatory power.

The Lone Father Survey: Clues From the Interviews

The interviews were undertaken as a pilot study with eight men individually, each of whom was an active member or office-bearer of a support and lobby group in Newcastle for lone fathers, the Lone Fathers' Association. These men ranged in age from their mid-20s to their late 40s, were predominantly employed in trades and industry, and all were non-custodial parents. All of them had experienced frustration and difficulties with access, custody and maintenance arrangements for children, and had been involved in legal action.

It is not possible here to report in full either the qualitative or the quantitative results. However, I intend to draw out both the ways in which the mixed methods worked, and the ways in which the mixed methods framework constrained the study. In this project, the interviews were used in the empirical realist tradition as a pilot or pre-test for the development of hypotheses and the clarification of a questionnaire schedule. In this way, the interviews worked in the mixed methods framework; from the interviews, a number of hypotheses were suggested. The most significant issue for non-custodial fathers concerned access and custody arrangements and maintenance payments for children,

which loomed as significant problems. Of itself, this was not surprising, but specific issues arose from the interviews which I had not adequately considered, such as a perception of inequitable access to legal aid, and the vulnerability of all separated fathers to unsubstantiated allegations of child physical and sexual abuse:

Joe¹: *I can't get legal aid 'cos I'm working, but she . . . she can just give up her job, go on the dole and get it just like that . . .*

Joe: *Every time she takes me to court I'm a thousand dollars down - she can use the courts to get at me . . .*

Larry: *She alleged sexual abuse - it's the fourteen year old I'm talking about - and never had to give a shred of evidence . . . it's stopped my access . . . I never visit alone now but always take my sister . . . (from a father who was cleared by the court of abuse charges)*

Questions concerning these extremely personal financial and emotional matters, and about the role of the legal profession and support services, were subsequently incorporated into the questionnaire to ascertain the generality of their occurrence.

It was also apparent that attitudes towards the fairness of maintenance depended on the men's own current marital status in relation to the current marital status of the ex-wife and employment status of her new partner (if any). It appeared that the men failed to distinguish between child support (provided by maintenance payments) and spousal support (provided by the state in the form of Supporting Parents' Benefit), and they often complained about the lack of accountability in the way that their support payments were spent. Lone fathers expected their ex-wives to be supported financially by their new partners. Many also expected these new partners to support the children from the previous marriage. Such views are indicative of the legal structures which reproduce the anguish experienced by many lone fathers. However, they also reveal some very traditional ideas of the father as the breadwinner of the family.

Further traditional patriarchal views of the family also arose from the interviews. They included an assumption that the traditional family should be preserved:

Gordon: *It should be harder to get a divorce than what it is . . .*

Brian: (The destruction of the family) . . . *causes moral cancer in our society, recognition of de facto and homosexual relationships . . . a man cannot be a substi-*

tute for a mother; the highest God-given calling for a woman . . . (note that this was one of the most extreme statements)

Another general point that emerged commonly was a lowly evaluation of women's domestic role and a lack of understanding of its complexity:

Patrick: *She doesn't do anything all day . . . just sits around on her fat arse* (of a mother with three school age children)

Gordon: *women don't bother to get jobs. They don't have to because the government provides for them . . .*

The questions that were included in the questionnaire as a consequence of such comments were general ones about the status of the family, and the roles of both parents. The interviews worked in their role of pilot study, in that they generated hypotheses to be tested, which were incorporated as questions in a structured questionnaire. As such, the use of interviews as a pilot study provided a fairly standard complementary procedure to the quantitative analysis of a representative group within an empirical realist tradition.

The Lone Father Survey: Numbers from Questionnaires

The questionnaires undertaken with a larger group of lone parents ($n = ?$) provided more standard socio-demographic and economic information, some of which is summarised in the ensuing paragraphs. This information sets the context in which the study was undertaken and provides a snapshot of the lone father population within the city of Newcastle, Australia. The majority of lone fathers were non-custodial parents aged in their twenties or thirties, with two or three children of school age, and had been separated for about two years. Most had access to their children about the legal norm (two days per fortnight and one weekday night, plus 50% of holidays), but a significant minority (21%) had no access while 11% had sole or joint custody of one or more children. During those periods of access, about 25% of fathers received temporary help with child care from relatives and friends, especially from their own parents. A mere 4% chose to separate themselves from their children, and for a small number of lone fathers (8%) access was no longer an issue because the children had reached the age of majority.

The recent separation of most lone fathers meant that the majority were currently living alone whilst 28% had remarried or were living in a de facto relationship. A rather larger proportion (44%) indicated that their ex-partners were remarried or living in a de facto relationship or 'had a boyfriend hanging round'. The majority of respondents had moved house since becoming lone fathers; 36% had moved once, and 32% between two and four times. A large percentage of these moves (64%) had been made locally and most of their ex-partners still lived in the Newcastle area. The housing status of the lone fathers at the time of the survey showed that 47% owned, were purchasing, building or selling their homes whilst 32% rented privately. Before becoming lone fathers, 88% of respondents owned or were purchasing their own homes whilst only 6% rented privately. Most of the lone fathers had lived in a detached house whilst married (98%) and most still lived in detached houses (reflecting the nature of the Newcastle housing stock). Nearly all claimed to have sufficient space (51%) or extra space (38%).

The majority of lone fathers were employed full-time (74%). Only nine per cent considered themselves not to be in the labour force or looking for work. About half (49%) of those in the labour force were involved in trades and production process operations. Most had completed some form of post-school (tertiary) qualification, 32% in a trade and 23% from TAFE (Technical and Further Education). The range of income was substantial, averaging around \$400 per week. Ninety percent of lone fathers had a car (21% a company car), and most used the vehicle for commuting to work.

Although it is not possible to go through all the questionnaire results here, it appeared that in a number of key respects the group of parents were representative of Newcastle's population. Most had been married but were separated or divorced, worked in the town's industries, and lived in suburban homes. They were exclusively white, and predominantly of Anglo-Australian backgrounds, although 4% came from other north European backgrounds. Although the unemployment level was slightly higher than average for the city, the range of occupations and incomes reflected the employment opportunities available. One of the most marked features of their socioeconomic status was the general downturn which the men had experienced in

their housing conditions, a phenomenon previously noted for many women after divorce (Winchester 1990).

Two key issues which arose from the interviews were included in the questionnaire. These were first, the issues of legal aid and attitudes to the legal system which controls custody, access and maintenance arrangements, and secondly, attitudes to the family as an institution and the expectations placed upon parents according to their gender. The questionnaires provided clear indications that views on these two issues were both strongly and generally held. As with the preceding paragraphs, it is possible to recount percentages: 89% of those surveyed had experience of the legal system in relation to divorce, access, custody or maintenance, an experience that was almost universally painful. Similarly, it was clear that a majority of the men adopted a position which aggressively defended the hegemonic masculine position in the family, seeing the male parent's roles as that of breadwinner and disciplinarian and the female parent's as carer and nurturer.

The crucial issue for this paper is, however, whether the mixed methods together enhanced our understanding of the family law system and the institution of the family as key issues for lone fathers. In hindsight, I felt that the questionnaire revealed nothing of the causal structures and underlying mechanisms which produced a particular geography of combative masculinity in this industrial Australian city. It did not even reveal the discourses whereby such a geography was reproduced. It was the interviews which encapsulated the emotions, the discourses and began to hint at the structures, the complexity of the sexual domestic and financial contract in which these people had become engaged. The discourses included derogatory accounts of women as tramps and gold-diggers, and a constant evaluation of the dramatic individual changes in their lives in monetary terms:

Joe: I lost my wife and children and everything I worked hard for, for ten years, and now I have the privilege of paying \$600 a month for it . . .

Simon: it doesn't cost eighty-five dollars a week to feed a six-year-old girl . . .

The interviews not only posed the research questions, they began to point to the answers in a way that the questionnaires could not.

Conclusion

The questionnaires and interviews provided different types of information about the issues facing lone fathers in Newcastle, Australia. The two types of information, qualitative and quantitative, have typically been seen as complementary. In the case of this study, the complementarity may be more illusory than real. The interviews revealed issues concerning family law and the institution of the family itself which were taken up in the questionnaires, in a classic mixed methods approach. The questionnaires, however, although able to reveal information about the widespread nature of the issues, were not able to elucidate either their causal structures or the mechanisms of their continued reproduction. In this, I did not feel that the particular questionnaire was at fault. The questionnaire was logical, flowed well, achieved an excellent response rate, and contained some open-ended questions. However, questionnaires in general are based on an empirical realist conception of science, where reality can be determined from empirical observations which should be replicable and quantifiable.

The issue here is the empirical realist structure of the methodological enquiry. An alternative approach to this would have been to adopt a critical realist framework, recognising that those interviews in fact provided vital clues to the underlying structures, causal mechanisms and discourses of family break-up. The adoption of hegemonic views of masculinity and femininity, and traditional views of the family, home and work at variance with their lived experience produced inevitable tensions which were fought out over the contested terrain of the family court (Winchester 1996). It is argued here that interviews, if undertaken in a critical realist framework aiming to elucidate the underlying structures and causal mechanisms of social processes, do not require questionnaire methods as a quantitative prop to provide an illusion of academic respectability. ■

Note

¹Names have been changed to protect the identity of those interviewed.

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