# A Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Reasoning in the UK’s National Centre for Research Methods: Research Methods in Practice

**FINAL REPORT**

**Christian Greiffenhagen (Loughborough), Michael Mair (Liverpool), Wes Sharrock (Manchester)**

[**http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2049/**](http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2049/)

# 1. AIMS

Within the social sciences, ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ approaches are commonly differentiated in terms of official statements of their respective methods. The goal of this project was to investigate how these differences play out in practice. Although the two chosen Nodes, BIAS and Realities, could not be said to be entirely typical of either quantitative or qualitative approaches, they take avowedly different methodological stances and therefore served as case studies to consider both similarities and differences in their methodological practices. The project was thus a largely unprecedented attempt to examine social science’s own research practices sociologically.

# 2. THE STUDY

This was a small-scale project, running from November 2009 to May 2010. The research team consisted of one research associate (Michael Mair) who was appointed half-time for five months, and two co-investigators (Christian Greiffenhagen and Wes Sharrock). We started with some background reading about the two Nodes (webpages, research articles, and other documentation) before informally meeting with all of the researchers. We also took part in research group meetings and were able to observe a few instances of research work (mostly collaborative but also individual, where we were ‘talked through’ what the researcher involved was doing/working on).

At Realties, we

* conducted 17 interviews;
* participated in 2 workshops / talks;
* attended 12 group meetings;
* and observed 3 one-to-one analysis, review and preparation sessions.

At BIAS, we

* conducted 10 interviews;
* participated in 3 workshops / talks;
* attended 2 group meetings;
* and observed 6 one-to-one analysis and review sessions.

There was thus limited opportunity for observing researchers engaged in hands-on research *work* (nine occasions in total). This was partly due to the short time frame of the project, but also a consequence of the many other activities that researchers were engaged in (teaching, workshops, administration, etc.). Nevertheless, we felt that we able to get (and were complimented by both for achieving) a good understanding of what the two Nodes were trying to do.

# 3. OUTCOMES

## 3.1 Translation

One way in which the ‘qualitative-quantitative divide’ becomes noticed is through mutual incomprehension. Indeed, in our initial interviews the reciprocal *mis*understanding of work on either side of ‘the divide’ displayed at NCRM meetings was marked by those we spoke to. Consequently, one of the aims of this project was to give each Node a good account of what the other Node was trying to achieve.

We gave internal presentations (at Realities on 28th April and at BIAS on 13th May) in order to check whether we had produced a reasonable, recognisable account of those aspects of their work we were able to observe. These presentations formed the basis of our final presentation at the *Qualitative and Quantitative Dialogues in the NCRM* Seminar at the University of Manchester (18th May), which was attended by members of Realities and BIAS as well as an audience of researchers from across the NCRM and beyond.

Our characterisation of Realities focussed on the fact that what made them methodologically distinctive was their focus on generating more data in order to ‘get closer’ to their phenomenon. Based on the idea that current methods do not get close enough to the experiences we, as social actors, have of multiple forms of connectedness (‘relationalities’) with place, with others, and with the physical/sensual world around us, Realities pursued specific kinds of innovation. Explicating these forms of connectedness and, through them, the personalisation of the everyday, meant observing four methodological rules of thumb: try, as much as possible, to (1) employ multiple data collection methods, so as (2) to capture the multi-dimensionality of ordinary experience, in (3) an open way that does not impose pre-conceived ideas of what should be considered relevant at the outset, and (4) see the research process as a whole, where writing is not simply reporting but part of doing justice to the phenomenon under consideration. Within-node collaboration was central to the work Realities was involved in. There was external collaboration around methodological ideas and concepts, but these were not directly part of doing the research.

In contrast, researchers at BIAS predominantly focussed on ‘getting more out of’ existing data. Starting with the idea that all databases have their limitations, BIAS, in its work, sought to compensate for those limitations by combining different datasets using different kinds of models. The aim was to produce generic, ‘off-the-shelf’ modelling tools for use by social scientists working on particular kinds of problem. While the aim was to produce generic tools, this work began with ‘exemplary’ datasets which operated as testing-grounds for the statistical models BIAS researchers were seeking to develop. Models were the end-point of a process that involved, among other things, (1) developing a comprehensive understanding of the particularities of specific datasets, (2) developing an understanding of the substantive interests that had led to that data being collected, (3) developing an understanding of the technical statistical problems connected with manipulating data of that kind and (4) finding ways of working through the myriad practical problems that inevitably arise when performing complex computational tasks. While within-node collaboration was a feature of BIAS’s work, that work also involved external collaborations with subject specialists, i.e. researchers involved in the collection of the data being worked on, or who worked in that field and so were familiar with those forms of data.

Both Nodes accepted these characterisations as accurate portrayals and were generally enthusiastic about being involved in this project. Furthermore, as a consequence of this, Realities and BIAS have written a proposed future collaboration in their Phase 3 Node bids.

## 3.2 Comparison

The overview of the two Nodes served as the basis for a comparison of how the differences of qualitative and quantitative research played out *in practice*. This question formed the second half of our final presentation, and results were also presented at *Vital Signs 2: Engaging Research Imaginations* (Manchester, 7th-9th September). The core of that comparison is as follows:

*(i)* *Stereotypes* are *misleading*

* Quantitative researchers are no more ‘mechanical number crunchers’ than qualitative researchers are ‘idiosyncratic quote pickers’.

*(ii) No ‘global’ differences in ‘styles’ of reasoning*

* Researchers did not reason ‘quantitatively’ or ‘qualitative’ respectively.
* This is not to say that there were no differences between each Node’s research practices – the differences were very real – but that the nature of those differences lay elsewhere than ‘opposing styles of reasoning’ (in their orientation to their respective disciplinary situations, in the nature of the phenomena and problems addressed, in the materials used, in the training required, in the goals of the inquiry, etc.).

*(iii) Remoteness, not opposition*

* At the level of research *practice*, there was very little opposition. The qualitative-quantitative divide is not, at a general level, directly relevant to the work of research itself, but the fact that the central engagements of the respective nodes was with either quantitative or qualitative methods ensured very different background understandings, distinctive research problems and tasks, with the problem of data quality being much more significant for the qualitative than the quantitative node. The two nodes were thus not in competition with one another, nor were they trying to undermine the other’s methodological procedures.
* The divide may be better characterized in terms of remoteness. The concerns of one were not the concerns of the other; the work of each could happily proceed with no awareness of the other, they did not overlap. Outside of the NCRM there would be little reason for contact.

In these and any further publications and presentations we have stressed the value of detailed accounts of research practices. Those detailed accounts proved helpful to both Nodes in thinking about the work of the other, but, we believe, such accounts are also helpful for thinking about method in social science. As the first comparative foray into this area we are aware of, we hope it will serve to elucidate aspects of research as it is conducted that emphasise its status as a form of practical action.

## 3.3 Outputs

Articles and working papers:

* Greiffenhagen, C., Mair, M. & Sharrock W.W. (2011) ‘From Methodology to Methodography: A Study of Qualitative and Quantitative Reasoning in Practice’, *Methodological Innovations Online*, 6(2): 93-107
* Mair, M., Greiffenhagen, C. & Sharrock, W.W. (2013) ‘Social Studies of Social Science: A Working Bibliography’, *NCRM Working Paper Series*, No. 08/13

Presentations:

* Greiffenhagen, C., Mair, M. & Sharrock W.W. (2010) ‘Research Methods in Practice: A Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Reasoning in the ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods. Part 1: Realities’, University of Manchester, April 28, 2010
* Greiffenhagen, C., Mair, M. & Sharrock W.W. (2010) ‘Research Methods in Practice: A Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Reasoning in the ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods. Part 2: BIAS’, Imperial College London, May 13, 2010
* Greiffenhagen, C., Mair, M. & Sharrock W.W. (2010) ‘Research Methods in Practice: A Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Reasoning in the ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods’, *Qualitative and Quantitative Dialogues in the NCRMI*, University of Manchester,May 18, 2010
* Greiffenhagen, C., Mair, M. & Sharrock W.W. (2010) ‘Research Methods in Practice: The Qualitative-Quantitative Divide Revisited’, *Vital Signs 2: Engaging Researching Imaginations*, University of Manchester, Manchester, September 7-9, 2010
* Mair, M., Greiffenhagen, C. & Sharrock, W.W. (2011) ‘Research Methods in Practice: A Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Reasoning in the ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods’, *National Centre for Research Methods Annual Meeting 2011*, University of Surrey, January 13, 2011
* Mair, M., Greiffenhagen, C. & Sharrock, W.W. (2011) ‘Mixing Methods in Practice: A Comparison of ‘Mixed Method’ Research in the ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods’, *Realities Interdisciplinary Dialogue*s, Engaging Qualitatively and Quantitatively: Methodological Tensions? New Ways of Thinking about Mixed Methods, University of Manchester, April 4, 2011
* Mair, M., Greiffenhagen, C. & Sharrock, W.W. (2013) ‘Putting Society on Display: Understanding and Statistical Practice’, *American Sociological Association Annual Conference*, 2013, New York, August