5. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODS, VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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5.1. INTRODUCTION

Research methods fall into two separate camps (though there may be overlap between them) – namely, quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods focus upon the collection of numerical data about the object of study with the emphasis on statistical analysis. Qualitative methods seek to get at the meanings of the event or behaviour (Morant and Finlay 2001) (table 5.1).

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<th>QUANTITATIVE METHODS</th>
<th>QUALITATIVE METHODS</th>
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<td>Focus</td>
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<td>Detect patterns across large amounts of data</td>
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Table 5.1 - Quantitative and qualitative methods.

5.2. CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

"Child sexual abuse (CSA) refers to the use of a child for sexual gratification" (Carr 1999 p806). Intra-familial sexual abuse occurs within the "family" (eg: stepfather-stepdaughter, father-daughter) and extra-familial is where the abuser resides outside the family home (eg: friend of family, stranger, teacher).
5.2.1. Epidemiology

Epidemiological studies seek to collect large amounts of data in order to establish the rate of a behaviour in the general population. Depending upon the definition of CSA, prevalence rates vary from 2% (narrow definition; eg: penetration) to 60% (wider definition including, for example, touching) (Carr 1999). Such quantitative data allows the establishing of patterns like gender differences among victims, age of victims and perpetrators, and types of abuse.

But such studies tend to use official reports which miss cases not reported at the time or at all, particularly by victims ashamed to admit such experiences (Glaser 2002).

5.2.2. Two Key Methodological Problems

1. Different prevalence rates of offending behaviour are produced depending on the source of the information. Helweg-Larsen and Larsen (2005) showed different rates of child sexual abuse of under fifteens in Denmark. From the National Patient Register, which contains data on individual's physical and mental health, an average incidence of 0.06 per 1000 children was calculated.

From the National Crime Register, a rate of 0.5 per 1000 was found, but when police interviews with victims were used, the figure doubled (1.0 per 1000). The latter source is self-reported by victims, and tends to be higher than official records for most crimes (Brewer 2000).

2. Honesty in the answers of offenders is a crucial area to evaluate. Details may be exaggerated or down-played as part of impression management by such individuals as well as cheating on tests.

For example, Gannon and Polaschek (2005) found that child molesters deliberately faked their answers during assessment and treatment on cognitive distortion scales. These measure distorted beliefs about sexual behaviour with children (eg: a child's normal affection towards an adult is sexual; the child wanted and initiated the sexual behaviour). The child molesters (both treated and untreated) were able to fake "good" answers to appear to disagree with the cognitive distortions, while non-sexual offenders and non-offenders naturally disagreed with such distortions.
5.2.3. Psychometric Instruments

These are structured, standardised questionnaires and interviews which can be used to assess behaviour and, based on the score, place the individual's behaviour in relation to norms. Here are two examples used with victims.

i) Interviewer-rated - eg: Child Impact of Traumatic Events Scale (Revised) (Wolfe et al 1991). This is a structured interview involving seventy-eight items to measure the effects of sexual abuse on the child including post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, and self-blame (table 5.2).

- Some people believe that I did a very bad thing.
- This happened to me because I acted in a way that caused it to happen.
- I have difficulty concentrating because I often think about what happened.

(0 = Not true; 1 = Somewhat true; 2 = Very true)

Table 5.2 - Sample items from Child Impact of Traumatic Events Scale.

ii) Parent-rated - eg: Child Sexual Behaviour Inventory (Friedrich et al 1992). Parent(s) complete thirty-five items about behaviour problems that can arise from sexual abuse (table 5.3).

- Stands too close to people
- Touches private parts when in public places
- Uses words that describe sex acts
- Makes sexual sounds (sighing, moaning, heavy breathing, etc)
- Tries to put mouth on mother's or other women's breasts

(Responses choices are “never” (0), “less than once per month (1), ”1-3 times per month (2), and “at least once per week” (3))

Table 5.3 - Sample items from Child Sexual Behaviour Inventory.

5.2.4. Search for Patterns

Much research in relation to CSA (and forensic psychology generally) is interested in finding patterns and types of behaviours, and in categorising different groups of offenders.

For example, Firestone et al (2005) studied 119
incest perpetrators, and divided them into two groups based on the age of the victim - six years or younger, and adolescent. Both groups showed sexual preference for children and difficulty with normal sexual functioning. Those with young victims had more psychiatric problems including substance abuse, and a higher risk of recidivism. Traditionally, incest perpetrators tend not to re-offend compared to paedophiles generally (Bradford 2006).

There are also differences between men who molest their biological daughters or their step-daughters. Sexual arousal towards children is lower in the former group (Greenberg et al 2005).

5.3. RESEARCH ISSUES

5.3.1. The Role of the Researcher

There is concern about the researcher influencing and biasing the results, and the worry that subjectivity will be involved in the findings. This is the view of scientific and quantitative approaches. Qualitative approaches challenge such concerns, and even highlight how the researcher's experiences can become an asset to the research.

This can be seen in the work by Fox (1996), herself a victim of CSA, in interviews with a perpetrator and a victim to create a three-person account of the events. The three "voices" of Fox (researcher, abuse survivor), Sherry (victim, step-daughter) and Ben (perpetrator, step-father) are interwoven "so that a single perspective is not privileged". The two interviewees were questioned separately in an informal, unstructured style on a number of occasions.

In relation to the issue of subjectivity, Fox noted:

> Although the words presented in this text are Sherry's and Ben's I chose how to present them. At first I attempted to get their stories "right", but then I realised that we are always in the process of revising ourselves.. The telling of my own abuse story has changed over time until now I question whether I ever had the story "right".. In the end, I was less concerned with "rightness" and more interested in the "practical value".. of how the account contributes to current understanding and prevention of abuse.

5.3.2. Other Issues

Quantitative approaches tend to be associated with positivism, which assumes that facts about the social
world exist "out there" waiting to be discovered by researchers. So there are acts of CSA and the aim of research is to measure them as accurately as possible. Qualitative approaches challenge positivism and the existence of facts about social behaviour: "people, unlike the objects of scientific study in the natural world, attach meanings to their actions. These meanings are products of distinct value and conceptual structures which mediate between what is in the world and how it is perceived by members of a social group.. at a given time" (Taylor 1992 p25)  

Pawson (1989) highlighted the "imposition problem" where the researcher, without necessarily meaning to, constructs their findings by their definition of CSA, by asking some questions and not others, and by the structure of questions and replies available. With the "correspondence problem" (Taylor 1992) respondents may interpret the questions differently to the question-setter/interviewer.

5.5. REFERENCES


This can be called relativism, where "truths about the world are produced for pragmatic reasons and not discovered" (Turner 2001).


