

A methodological
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A Methodological Appraisal of “ The Foreground Dynamics of Street Robbery in Britain” Essay Sample

Qualitative research methods are used by a number of researchers in order to establish a theory from data obtained. Bryman (2004) noted that the key differentiation between qualitative and quantitative research methods is that qualitative researchers collect data in the form of words rather than numbers which are generated by quantitative researchers. Qualitative research is generally used to explore people's life histories, or everyday behaviour (Silverman, 2001). ' The Foreground Dynamics of Street Robbery in Britain' is a typical qualitative research article by R. Wright, an American researcher, F. Brookman and T. Bennett who are Welsh researchers.

This essay concentrates on the critical evaluation of their work. The research questions which authors set out to address must be clear, researchable and neither be too large (to avoid a large grant) or too small (that it does not make a significant difference to the area of study) (Bryman, 2000). The research question must also be linked to previous established theory. The research question Wright et al. set out to address was ' the extent to which British street robberies evolve out of similar cultural dynamics'.

The aim was to ' understand how and why would-be robbers moved from an unmotivated state to one in which they are determined to commit robbery'. The research question and aim was clear, researchable, medium sized and was developed after a theory emerged in the United States, that commitment to street culture was promoted by certain cultures. In order to answer the question and test the aim, the researchers generated their

material by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews, no other methods were used.

Semi-structured interviews are interviews where the questions are usually precise, however, the interviewer has the ability to probe beyond the answers given by the interviewee in order to clarify and elaborate the answers (May, 2001). Wright et al. stated that they used semi-structured interviews because participants were free to answer questions without any control or prompts from the interviewer and they considered this as a major advantage. In total twenty seven offenders were interviewed, two of which were female.

The average age of participants was twenty five and the modal age was nineteen. Twenty four were classed as 'white', 'Welsh' or 'English'. One participant was from an Asian background, another was from an Afro-Caribbean background and another was from a Middle Eastern background. The participants were located by the researcher and a psychologist who located suitable offenders serving prison sentences for 'robbery' 'GHB' 'ABH' wounding with intent or any other offence related to fire arms by accessing prison files.

Posters were then distributed in the prisons informing inmates of the study and asking for volunteers, however, the researchers were refused from some prisons because permission was not granted by the establishments. The duration of the semi-structured interview on average was one hour and the agenda covered four main topics. These were the offender's personal and criminal justice history, questions about their most recent robbery, details of

any other forms of street violence they have been involved in and the offender's lifestyle prior to imprisonment.

The semi-structured interview method used by Wright et al. was appropriate for answering their research question because theory-driven, hypothesis-directed questions were asked which were based on the scientific literature about the topic or were orientated to the researcher's presumptions (Flick, 1998). Wright et al. stated that they used the semi-structured interview technique because it is a common method of data collection in prisons and have shown a good concordance between what offenders say in comparison to inconsistent facts in the past (Martin, 2000).

The 'interviewers were able to improvise follow-up questions and explore meanings and areas of interest that emerge' (Arskey & Knight 1999). Arskey and Knight also stated that 'qualitative interviews examine the context of thought, feeling and action and can be a way of exploring relationships between different aspects of a situation'. As the interviews lasted for up to an hour it was suitable for Wright et al. to use semi-structured interviews, Arskey and Knight stated that it is advisable to use semi-structured interviews if the interviews tend to be long.

The authors did not describe their methods fully. Their sampling method and the semi-structured interview schedule was fully described. However, some key points were missed in comparison to other research articles which should have been included. The date of when the research was carried out was not stated by the researchers. The researchers also did not state

whether the interviewees were rewarded for their participation for example by payment.

Although the prisoners were from prisons in the Bristol and Cardiff area it is not known whether the prisoners lived or committed their crimes in a different region in England or Wales or whether they were transferred from another prison which is in different region which may have affected the findings as similar areas may have similar cultures regardless of ethnicity. The data was in the form of words and the interviews were tape-recorded using a digital recorder and were transcribed verbatim. The researchers fail to address in detail how the data obtained was analysed.

As this research is qualitative, the biographical method could be used as an alternative strategy to semi-structured interviews as the interviewer is able to probe into the participant's life history and experiences. However, the researchers may not have used this method because it has a disadvantage of being very time consuming and a large sample would have not been used and therefore the findings would have been difficult to generalise to the rest of the population. The age range of participants used in Wright et al. study can be used as an alternative interpretation of the data presented.

The participants had an average age of twenty five which indicates that the findings may have been different if the age range of participants was higher. Therefore it would be hard to generalise the findings to the population. There were also only two females who were interviewed therefore it would also be hard to generalise the findings to the population. There are a number of

major epistemological strengths and weaknesses. By using a semi-structured interview technique, the researchers were limited.

As with all interviews the participants may lie in order to conform to what they think the interviewers are looking for, thus producing false data. The prisoners may also have withheld information which they thought may have become public in order to protect themselves. Ethical must be considered when conducting a research study. The British Society of Criminology Code of Ethics for Researchers in the Field of Criminology is a guide which should be followed to ensure the highest ethical standards in criminological research.

There are four main areas ethical issues, these are 'harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and whether deception is involved, as cited by Diener and Crandall (1978)¹. According to Bryman (2004) and Arskey and Knight (1999), harm to participants can include a number of effects such as loss of self esteem, stress due to pressure in giving answers which participants believe the researcher is looking for.

Morgan (1972)² cited that 'information may be given to the researchers which may attract media attention at the end of the study and if this occurs, researchers have little control over how the material will be used'. Therefore Arskey and Knight have stated that it is important to have a written agreement expressing the participant's rights in relation to writing and publication. Wright et al. do not mention any aspects in ways of preventing harm to their participants in their research.

Therefore, the reader does not know whether the participants experienced any harm such as stress, loss of self esteem or pressure into conforming to the researchers' needs. Informed consent has been defined by Arskey and Knight (1999) as ' a purpose to safeguard participants' privacy and welfare, and give them a choice of whether or not to take part in a study'. Wright et al. informed inmates of the study and requested suitable volunteers.

The inmates had a choice to participate in the study, and all interviews were tape recorded with the participants' permission, however, Wright et al. failed to mention whether or not there were any benefits, risks or costs to those who participated. The researchers also fell short to explain whether the participants' had the right not to answer certain questions, or to withdraw from the study. The participants should also have the right to know the names of any funders or sponsors and whether the aim is to produce a book on the findings of the study, however it is not known whether Wright et al. did inform their participants' of these points.

Invasion of privacy has been described by Arskey and Knight (1999) as ' not disclosing the identity of study participants, and not attributing comments to individuals in ways that can permit the individual or institutions they are associated with... unless they have consented to being identified. Whether or not information will be kept confidential by researchers can influence individuals whether or not to take part in a study especially if the study is of a sensitive issue.

The British Criminology Code of Ethics states that ' researchers should respect the promise of confidentiality and not pass on identifiable data to

third parties without the participants' consent'. It is more difficult to implement confidentiality in qualitative research than in quantitative research, this is because information which identifies participants' tends to be more scattered in transcripts and is difficult to change or conceal (Arskey and Knight, 1999). Wright et al. asked their participants' at the beginning of each interview to assign themselves with a false name which would be used throughout the research.

This is an extremely important issue as participants' may give the researchers information such as criminal activity they have been involved in which the police have not recorded. Bryman (2004) states that 'deception occurs when a researcher presents their study as something other than what it is'. Wright et al. did not deceive their participants as they were fully aware of the nature of the research and therefore they did not have to be debriefed at the end of the research so that they were aware of the true nature of the study. Political issues must also be considered when research is carried out.

Funding the research is an important issue and Wright et al. mentioned that their research was funded by the government. Gatekeepers are those who control access to organisations (Bryman 2004). In order to gain access to offenders in prisons, Wright et al. had to negotiate with gatekeepers, they were refused from a number of prisons which may have been due to bad negotiation with the gatekeepers. The gatekeepers would have influenced how the investigation took place and whether the questions being asked were ethical or not and how the prison organisation would be represented.

Wright et al. did not mention some political issues in their article, which may have arisen in their research such as taking sides, where the researchers may have sided with the participants thus producing biased results. There is also pressure to restrict the publication of findings unless the participants have given consent. This is also an ethical issue. The use made by the findings is a large political issue because they can be used as a critique. The major problem of the semi-structured method is the extent to which the interviewer undergoes to make the technique plausible (Flick, 1998).

In order to judge the plausibility and persuasiveness of the article's central claims and conclusions, the criteria of reliability and validity of the article's findings must be judged. The reliability can be defined as 'the degree to which a measure of a concept is stable' (Bryman, 2004). Bryman, 2004, also defined validity as 'a concern with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research'. External reliability is the extent to which the study can be replicated.

Wright et al. study can be replicated, however, the description of the method is brief. The reader does not know certain aspects of the study such as whether or not the participants were paid to participate in the study.

Bryman, (2004) stated validity is 'the degree to which a measure of a concept truly reflects that concept' (Bryman, 2004). The findings of Wright et al. cannot be generalised because the age range of the sample is small. The average age was twenty-five and modal age was nineteen.

It may be the case that individuals above the age of forty are less likely to commit street robbery regardless of their ethnicity. The participants were

also from the same area, this may also affect findings as different regions in England and Wales may have different cultures as there may be different dominant ethnicities in each area, which may effect individual's behaviour. Another main issue is that the senior author, Richard Wright was an American and had not previously conducted research in the United Kingdom.

Therefore, it is questionable to how much he knew about English culture and living on estates. In conclusion it was found that Richard Wright is a well experienced senior researcher who has conducted similar research on robbery in the United States. The method he used to conduct the study is typically one used for qualitative research. The British Criminology Code of Ethics was followed by the researchers in order to ensure the research was carried out according to the highest ethical standards.