

Effect of paradigms on research methods



Each paradigm brings a unique view to research and to how reality and all of which it consists should be viewed. No paradigm is more effective than another as each looks at reality differently. Interpretivism is a paradigm which was created as an alternative to Positivism and took an alternative approach to research by encouraging the use of qualitative, in-depth data to create knowledge. The article, *The Insider's Experience of Long-Term Peer Victimization*, by Mackay, Carey and Stevens (2011), is informed by the Interpretive paradigm as it aims to understand the concept of bullying from a subjective perspective through the use of personal experience. The use of the Interpretivist paradigm influences every aspect of this research from how the topic is viewed, the purpose, how the research problem is presented, the collection of materials, how the data is analysed and displayed as well as the ethical considerations of the research.

Interpretivism, similarly to other paradigms, has a unique and distinct view of the world and of how the world should be understood. Interpretivism does not accept reality as it appears at face-value. Instead this paradigm claims that reality consists of people's subjective experiences of the external world (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, *Histories of the present: Social science research in context*, 2006). This means that a world which is shared by everyone is experienced differently by everyone as each individual applies their own unique perspective and meaning to their experiences and actions. In order to understand this type of reality, the patterns and problems which occur in reality and even solutions to these problems; Interpretivism proposes that research explores people's subjective experiences and actions and the meanings or reasons they attach to these actions and experiences.

In order to conduct research through the Interpretivist paradigm, the researcher must also take a unique stance to reality and to the subjects in the research. The researcher is required to be open and empathetic. Empathy involves attempting to view the beliefs and experiences of other as they themselves would view or experience them. Therefore, the use of empathy will allow for the researcher to fully understand the individual's subjective experience and the meaning they attached to the experience. Empathy and understanding of the subjective experience can be achieved through the Qualitative methodologies which Interpretivism uses. These methodologies create a subjective relationship between the researcher and the participant which allows the researcher to interpret the data at a deeper, involved level and to form ideas from the interpretations in a mutually - constructed manner (Mottier, 2005). Ultimately, it is important to emphasise that the way the Interpretivist paradigm sees reality, the way the researcher engages in the research and the various research methods used by this paradigm all work simultaneously and influence the research in order to answer the research question in a particular, desired way.

The topic of the study is usually the first part of the research which is decided upon. How the researchers wish to study and understand the topic, however, is influenced by the research paradigm, " Paradigms are all-encompassing systems of interrelated practise and thinking that define for the researcher the nature of their enquiry" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, *Histories of the present: Social science research in context*, 2006, p. 6). The topic of the article by Mackay, Carey and Stevens (2011) revolves around bullying and the experience of bullying. The researchers have chosen to look

at the experiences of bullying which requires them to look into the data deeply as the experience of bullying is not simple but an extremely personal experience which has many complex layers and effects to understand. Through this topic, the influence of the chosen paradigm, Interpretivism, begins to immerse. Kelliher (2005) states that Interpretivism is based on the assumption that if people are studied according to their social context, there is a greater chance of understanding the meanings associated with and perceptions they have of their experiences and actions. Therefore, the interpretivist paradigm is perfectly suited to study and understand the concept of bullying as a social action and a social problem experienced by individuals. This is because this paradigm focuses on the meanings underpinning human actions and associated with human experience (Kelliher, 2005). Ultimately, it is clear that how the topic is being viewed and researched is influenced by the Interpretivist paradigm as the researchers have chosen to study bullying in an in-depth manner and to view it from a subjective or personal perspective in order to understand bullying in its entirety.

The paradigm informing the research also has an effect on the purpose of the research as the paradigm indicates what type of questions are asked about the topic and the purpose of the research is to ensure that these questions are answered. This idea is supported by Durheim (2006) who states that although the paradigm does not directly define the purpose of the research, it provides a guiding framework for the purpose of the research. The article states that the overall purpose of this research is to improve the understanding of bullying through the personal experiences of bullying

victims who have experienced long- term victimization (Mackay, Carey, & Stevens, 2011). The research is however divided into three sub-questions or purposes in order to gain a full representation of bullying.

The first purpose of the research is to understand the victims' perspectives of what factors contributed to bullying while the second purpose aims to understand the why the victims allow themselves to be continuously subjected to the bullying. The third purpose of the research is to provide information on and discuss various treatments and interventions of bullying. All of these research aims rely heavily on the personal opinions and experiences of the victims. Thus it is evident that Interpretivism plays an indirect role in the formation and fulfilment of these research purposes. This is because these purposes have a qualitative, interpretivist nature as they require the researcher to delve into the experiences of the individuals. Therefore only Interpretative, qualitative methods focusing on individual's personal experiences can thoroughly and correctly fulfil these purposes.

The collection of material in research typically involves the type of sample and participants used, the sampling methods and the methodology used to collect data from this sample group. The methodology used within Interpretivist contains various Qualitative methods which are clearly employed in the research conducted by Mackay, Carey and Stevens (2011). These interpretivist methodologies had a great impact on the type and number of participants used, how the participants were selected and how the data was retrieved.

The participants used in this research had to be victims of bullying and had to have experienced bullying for the majority of the school year. These specifications of the participants are undoubtedly influenced by the Interpretivist nature of the research which aims to understand the subjective experiences of individuals and therefore, the research specifically requires the participants to have subjective experiences of bullying which can be analysed and interpreted. The sample population size used in this research was also influenced by the Interpretivist nature of the research. Only three participants, one female aged eleven and two males aged twelve and fifteen were selected to take part in the research (Mackay, Carey, & Stevens, 2011). This is due to the fact that Interpretivism only needs a small amount of participants in order to achieve a meaningful, ethnographic inquiry. This small sample is also influenced by the type of interpretive data analysis which is used, namely Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA requires an even smaller sample sizes than typical interpretivist research as it analyses the cases of the participants in intense detail rather than using many participants to form generalizations, “ The detailed case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts takes a long time, and the aim of the study is to say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of this particular group” (Smith & Osborn, 2007 , p. 55). Thus, it is clear through the extremely small sample population, that Interpretivism and IPA have had an impact on the number of participants decided to be used.

The interpretivist nature of the research requires the research to rely heavily on the participants and their experiences and therefore these participants should be selected extremely carefully (Scotland, 2012). The size of the

sample population and the specifications of this population greatly affect the type of sampling used in the research. In the case of this research, only a small sample population, who had personal experiences of being bullied, was needed. Therefore, purposive sampling was used to meticulously select these types of participants. Purposive sampling is the typical sampling method used for interpretive research as it allows for a particular group of participants, for which the research question will be significant, to be chosen (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Ultimately, the use of purposive sampling was influenced by the Interpretivist nature of the research as it allowed for the perfect sample population to be selected.

The method of data collection is also an aspect of research which is undoubtedly influenced by the paradigm informing the research.

Interpretivist research primarily focuses on using the power of ordinary language and expression in order to understand the social world (Terre Blanche, Kelly, & Durrheim, 2006). This is achieved through Interpretivist data collection methodologies which are flexible and yield in-depth, qualitative data; for example interviews, focus groups, observations and role-playing (Scotland, 2012). The semi-structured interview, which is used in Mackay, Carey and Steven's (2011) research, is a common type of data collection method informed by the Interpretivist paradigm. This is because a semi-structured interview allows insight on behaviours to surface and also aids in explaining actions and experiences from the individual's perspectives which is the primary goal of this research. Scotland (2012) further states that semi-structured interviews are unique as they allow the participant to freely express themselves and for the participant to delve deeper into their story.

In Mackay, Carey and Steven's (2011) article semi-structured interviews are used precisely for this purpose as the research requires the method of data collection to be able to get the participant to reveal intimate details of their victimization and also to allow for important areas of the topic to be probed. The quote, "if it gets bad, the teacher will... actually say the names of the bullies, and they get really embarrassed ... So that usually keeps them down for a few days. Which is a relief for me", in the article taken from a participant's interview is just one example that shows how the participant was able to explain and express their feelings around their experience through the interview.

The paradigm informing the research instructs the research to use certain participants, collect certain data in a certain way and therefore it also instructs the research on how this data must be analysed. In Mackay, Carey and Steven's (2011) research, the Interpretivist paradigm has influenced the use of the Interpretive technique, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in order to analyse the data in a manner which will yield the results needed. Generally, IPA is used to examine how individuals interpret their world and their experiences and attempts to understand the meaning of these interpretations and experiences. When researching a specific topic such as bullying, IPA focuses on attempting to understand what the individual believes and feels about the topic and how they have personally experienced the topic and ultimately transforms this information into themes (Chapman & Smith, 2002). The use of IPA is clearly seen through the results of the research which used how the individuals described their experiences to generate themes of why the victims felt they were bullied. An example of

this is seen through the theme, ' being different' which emerged from the interpretive analysis of the victims' statements such as, " they tease me about being [name]'s friend, because she's different" and " They tease me about being different, because I care for my brother"(Mackay, Carey, & Stevens, 2011).

IPA is also distinct from other Interpretivist research as it understands that the researcher plays an active role in data analysis as they interpret the participants' interpretation of their experiences in order to reveal patterns and themes in the data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The use of this interpretive technique is evident in the research by Mackay, Carey and Steven (2011) as the researchers regularly discussed the emerging themes throughout the data analysis process in order to assure that they each found were related to the experience of the individual. Thus, the influence if the interpretive paradigm is seen in the data analysis of the research as it allowed for the use of IPA to generate themes. IPA was specifically needed in order to completely understand and interpret the individuals' experiences but also allowed for themes to be formed based on these three experiences.

In Mackay, Carey and Steven's (2011) research, the way in which the themes and findings were presented was based on the interpretive nature of the research. Through the use of IPA, the superordinate themes, ' experience of victimization' and ' Strategies' and their subthemes were generated and were presented in a very simple thematic table (Mackay, Carey, & Stevens, 2011). Typical to interpretive research, the thematic table containing the superordinate and subordinate themes is then explained and the themes are described in depth and are supported with statements made by the

participant (Chapman & Smith, 2002). An example of this is seen when discussing the bullying policy at school which was discovered through the research to be inefficient and was supported by statements such as, “ Yeah they had a bullying policy, but nobody abided by it.” (Mackay, Carey, & Stevens, 2011). Terre Blanche, Kelly, and Durrheim, (2006) further state that Interpretive techniques in communicating research findings make use of “ evocative language” which is strong language used to bring about images or feelings (p. 274). In the results of this research the use of descriptions stating that the victims had, “ only one or two friends” and that there was an “ unwillingness of teachers to suspend bullies” creates an image of the problem and consequences of the bullying being experienced by the participants. Ultimately, the influence of the Interpretivist paradigm is evident through the thematic table and various linguistic techniques used to discuss the results of the research.