

Research methodology: What do we 'know' about research and why do we know it?

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Energised and ready to write! This how I felt at the end of Dr. Rick Worch's session at the Playwork: Law and Lore conference. The session was entitled Research Methodology: What do we 'know' about research and why do we know it? If I am honest, the title did not inspire me with excitement. However as soon as the presentation started, Rick had my attention. He began the session by exploring his diverse research background and introduced us to his research muse, a primate called Rosa from Uganda. He mentioned the process of conducting his early research and explained his current research projects. This introduction prepared the audience for a session that would debunk the myths associated with playwork research.

He explored 7 myths:

Myth 1: Quantitative research is more objective than qualitative research

Myth 2: Quantitative research is superior to qualitative research

Myth 3: Statistics are too difficult to understand

Myth 4: Behaviour cannot be quantified

Myth 5: A single case study is not generalizable

Myth 6: Studies with larger sample sizes yield more meaningful results

Myth 7: It's too difficult for playworkers to conduct research

Rick presented the facts alongside each myth by using comic strips and visuals that helped to illustrate his points. By using comic strips Rick set the tone of discussing research and the process of research as relaxed. As any researcher or lecturer knows, discussions about methods can be complex, divisive and daunting. Rick approached the topic with humour and this allowed the audience to feel comfortable and engage with the learning he had to share from his research and experience. As a lecturer and researcher in the area of play for children with autism, I will continue by highlighting a few points that I felt most pertinent.

First, Myth 2, Quantitative research is superior to qualitative research. Rick traced the history of qualitative research and even described conflicts that occurred within his own department regarding the debates between qualitative and quantitative researchers. Within this discussion, Rick encouraged the audience to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches and clearly articulated that one is not better than the other. As a PhD

student I use a mixed methods approach to play research for children with autism. I highly recommend reading Onwuegbuzie (2012) for a concise overview of the case for using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Onwuegbuzie (2012) argues the importance of using the 'radical middle' to create a research space that refrains from deficit thinking and considers how a mixed methods researcher can bring together opposing views onto a continuum. Bringing together qualitative and quantitative methods can support the diversity of much needed research in playwork and move away from the stereotypical view that quantitative methods are superior to qualitative methods.

Next, Myth 3, statistics are too difficult to understand. I have seen many undergraduate researchers completely disregard statistics and early career researchers quiver at the mere thought of needing to access them. Rick mentioned the mysterious nature surrounding statistics and the limitations in our maths and science training but he also made one point that gave me greater confidence in using the equations. Rick suggested that we 'trust the statisticians'. He used the example of a chi squared test and encouraged us to trust the equations and trust that the statisticians had correctly identified a method to calculate the results. This simple reminder from Rick, made equations and calculations seem more usable. Trust is an easy concept to forget about in the world of research. Researchers are often reminded of the need to be critical and though this is a vital skill there is also a case, as Rick reminded me, for trusting the work of those who are experts in their fields. In future I will give more trust to those that develop the equations.

The other myths that I will mention are myth 5, a single case study is not generalisable and myth 6, studies with larger sample sizes yield more meaningful results. These two myths really portray what I, as an early career researcher often dwell upon. The question that frequently passes through my mind is, Is this small single study worth anything? Is my knowledge and experience really needed in the research field? What Rick clarified during this portion is that 'knowledge that cannot be generalised can still contribute to knowledge accumulation'. He reminds us that of course not all single case studies can be generalised but we should not dismiss the importance of single descriptive studies that can contribute to wider understandings. The experiences that we each encounter can be written up to share and can help us to expand our knowledge of different perspectives and contexts. This gave a gentle reminder that even the small stuff matters. I believe it also gives confidence to those who have never completed research to consider that their experiences and data that they can collect contribute to a greater understanding of play. It also has the potential to remind

established researchers that sometimes the descriptive pilot data that is collected can contribute to knowledge and is worthy of sharing. If you still need further convincing of the value and myths associated with case study work, Rick also makes reference to an article by Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) that further debunks myths associated with case study work.

At the end of the session Rick encouraged us to discuss in small groups the research that we might conduct in future. This led to a lively discussion within my group about potential ideas. I was able to meet a colleague who was currently working with children from Roma families and she shared fascinating insight into her experiences of play with this group of children. Although she claimed she was 'not a researcher' she seemed inspired and was contemplating ideas she might use for future research. Within these few minutes of sharing ideas I quickly realised the priceless knowledge that playwork practitioners hold. Rick suggests we must share this knowledge so that we all might learn from each other and our experiences. The session ended with a large group share about the ideas we had discussed in our smaller groups. It was clear that there was a diversity of potential for play research and I can only hope that many of the mentioned projects come to light.

Overall, the session with Dr. Rick Worch used comedy to create a relaxed environment that addressed the honest concerns that many people have about conducting research. I am inspired to write and will keep these myths in the forefront of my mind whilst preparing future research intentions. I will finish by stating the final comment from my notes from the session that simply states "get researching, just do it, it all counts!".

Flyvbjerg, B, 2006, Five misunderstandings about case-study research, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12, 2, 219-245

Onwuegbuzie, A, 2012, Introduction: Putting the mixed back into quantitative and qualitative research in educational research and beyond: Moving toward the radical middle. *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*, 6, 3, 192-219