

Comments on Martine Quaglia's Paper

Paul Koegel

It is a pleasure to respond to Martine's thoughtful paper on a topic that manages to be both simple and straightforward on the one hand, but frighteningly complex on the other hand. I feel well-qualified to perform this role since my own research has relied so heavily on both quantitative and qualitative approaches, often as part of the same endeavor. My research on homelessness began more than twenty years ago with a cross-sectional survey of homeless adults that utilized survey sampling and interviewing techniques. I followed this work with an ethnographic study of homeless mentally ill individuals in the downtown area of Los Angeles that allowed me to fill in gaps left by a quantitative approach with the unique contributions that a qualitative approach offers. I've also conducted a longitudinal study of the course of homelessness, surveying a probability sample of homeless adults and tracking their movement in and out of homelessness using both quantitative and qualitative strategies. I've combined point-in-time survey approaches with retrospective service records reviews in order to understand the public sector costs associated with homelessness, and have also been involved in several evaluations of innovative programs for homeless adults. All of this positions me well to highlight and elaborate on many of the important points that Martine has made.

As I listen to Martine's paper against the experiential backdrop of my own work, what I hear rings very true. First and foremost, Martine emphasizes the *complementarity* of quantitative and qualitative methods—the way each can supplement, complement, and generally inform and enrich the other. And she provides beautiful examples of many of the usual ways in which complementarity takes place. She talks, for instance, about how preliminary qualitative work allows one to learn something about the daily experience and perceptions of homeless people,

which in turn provides the context in which better research can occur. Knowing who homeless people are, how they see the world, and how they lead their lives helps one **generate more appropriate and sensitive hypotheses**. In my own work, for example, an ethnographic approach allowed me to witness first hand the frightfully complex process that impels people in and out of homelessness over time, and provided the inspiration for subsequent work that looked more systematically at course of homelessness using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Knowing the qualitative context in which homeless people lead their lives also allows one to **construct more valid and meaningful questions and measures**. In the Course of Homelessness study, for instance, we looked carefully at self-perceived satisfaction and quality of life as both predictors and consequences of housing status change as a direct function of our ethnographic data that suggested its importance vis a vis why people didn't seek change, why housing moves failed, or why housing moves resulted in deleterious outcomes. Ethnographic data also suggested new dimensions that needed to be included on the satisfaction with living situation scale we devised. Knowing the qualitative context in which homeless people lead their lives also facilitates—as Martine's examples and my own work amply show--the design of **more feasible field strategies**, and provides **the detail that helps us better understand quantitative findings**. Finally, ethnographic data help us **open the “black box”** by providing a clear, descriptive sense of the intervention being studied. When we discover that “it” works, in other words, qualitative data can help us understand what “it” is.

These are familiar examples of the complementarity between qualitative and quantitative findings that follow a typical trajectory: qualitative data collection and analysis takes place in the service of quantitative data analyses. What struck me about Martine's comments, however, is that she made it abundantly clear how the relationship moves in the opposite direction as well.

Martine, for instance, nicely describes how *quantitative* work can suggest questions for further inquiry that require qualitative methods, a reversal of the usual relationship. This reminded me of my own work, which started with a survey but segued into ethnographic work because of a strong sense that I wasn't getting the full story from aggregated numbers. She also notes how quantitative work can provide a framework in which to understand what emerges from more microscopic qualitative studies—how quantitative work, in other words, can allow one to contextualize qualitative findings in a different kind of way. Again, this is a reversal of the usually-perceived relationship. And she challenges the conventional wisdom by rightfully pointing out that quantitative questions sometimes provide individual insights that may not emerge from qualitative inquiry, pointing out that the structured nature and format of survey questions—and even the structured nature of the surveyor-respondent relationship--sometimes frees one to pose queries that are more difficult to ask in more informal conversations. Martine makes it clear, then, that quantitative approaches can support and point qualitative efforts in new directions as well—that the relationship between the two, in other words, is really bidirectional, not unidirectional.

Martine's paper takes another interesting turn in talking not only about the complementarities between qualitative and quantitative work but about *commonalities* between the two. It is certainly the case that when you look at the far ends of the qualitative/quantitative continuum, you're looking at two very different approaches. Participant-observation, for instance, could never be confused with survey research. But as you move toward the middle of the continuum, it becomes clear that there are places where the two approaches confront similar issues and challenges—and that there are ways in which each can learn from the other. Martine points to how survey researchers with whom she has worked worried about how the social

position of the interviewer and respondents affected their exchanges and, by extension, the data that ultimately emerged from their interaction, and how difficult it was to grapple with the appropriate line between empathy and neutrality. These are the kinds of struggles that are usually thought of as lying squarely within the qualitative epistemological domain. Similarly, she notes how qualitatively-oriented colleagues were realizing that counting, correlation, and the mathematical/statistical treatment of qualitative data can enhance the understandings that qualitative data can support. This is exciting territory. Realizing that there is room for real interplay between these two frameworks, and that each perspective can help shape and enrich the other, is a far more productive approach to thinking about the qualitative/quantitative divide than has historically occurred.

While Martine makes it clear that there are strong complementarities and intriguing commonalities between qualitative and quantitative approaches, her comments also acknowledge that these approaches do represent two very separate epistemologies—two very distinct ways of approaching reality—that may lead to a focus on very different issues and even on different segments of the population. This doesn't mean that the two approaches are incompatible or at odds with one another; it means only that they are different and capable of revealing different kinds of insights. Even the most inventive of survey sampling strategists will not be able to access hidden populations; even the most skilled survey interviewers will encounter people who are unwilling or unable to answer a formal set of questions. Ethnographic approaches are much better able to engage these individuals and access their reality, in the same way that survey approaches will always have the upper hand regarding claims to generalizability. What survey researchers can say about such issues as work, sociability, and money management skills will differ from what ethnographers can say, the former having more to do with an almost clinical

approach to these issues, the latter benefiting from the insights that come from examining these phenomena in naturalistic contexts. (Survey research may reveal, for instance, that homeless people score low on social support scales that focus on stable, longterm relationships. Ethnographic research, on the other hand, may reveal an intense level of sociability and a complex network of relationships among this population. Each of these data points is worth knowing.) The analytic questions that each approach addresses will differ as well, as Martine carefully notes. Quantitatively-oriented researchers will invariably ask questions related to “how much” or “how many”, to the association between variables, while qualitatively-oriented researchers will more likely want to know what is going on and why that seems to be the case. And ultimately, the two perspectives will differ in the contributions they can make. One would be foolish to try to arrive at a quantifiable estimate of the public sector costs related to homelessness with a qualitative approach, or to use a quantitative approach to understand what it feels like to spend a night in a shelter or a group home and how that—as well as other factors--affect decisions to sleep rough.

Finally, Martine reminds us of the dangers of not being sensitive to the strengths and limitations of each approach in her cautionary tale of how generalizing from an ethnographic effort can lead to misrepresentations of important issues. We all need to be thinking of what we can safely and reliably say given the methods we have used—and to be as honest with regard to their limitations as we are with their strengths.

I want to mention two additional points that occurred to me as I read and listened to Martine’s paper. First, I was struck by Martine’s comments related to how the theoretical orientation of researchers affect their perspectives and the questions they ask, an especially cogent point given how theoretical perspective differs across the European teams. I don’t

question that how one views a problem shapes the approach one takes in addressing that problem. I see this in how my own theoretical orientation shapes the work I do. But the power of one's theoretical perspective notwithstanding, it has been my experience that the practical necessity of addressing a variety of policy issues makes it important to address many questions, and that each of these questions may be better served by different methods. In the end, I would argue that the questions themselves should determine the methods that are ultimately used—that there is a role for practicality in how these decisions are made. I believe, in other words—and Martine seems to suggest this as well—that theory shouldn't necessarily drive one's choice of methods; rather, the questions one is asking should drive the choice of methods.

I see my own theoretical perspective on homelessness as being a structural perspective that gives individual limitations their due. At the same time, I am heavily influenced by my training as an anthropologist, which has focused my attention on understanding behavior naturalistically, in context, over time and from an insider's point of view. Even so, my approach has been a practical one, driven by the policy question I was trying to address in a given study. When the questions were epidemiological in nature, pertaining to sizing different problems, needs, diagnoses or characteristics, or were related to costs, I chose a structured quantitative approach. When the questions addressed issues such as how people live their lives, what gets in the way of services, how they survive from one day to the next, I turned to qualitative methods that contextualized behavior not only in the microscopic contexts of daily life but in the more macroscopic contexts suggested by structural trends. When the questions had to do with the extent to which people exit from and re-enter homelessness and why these status changes occurred, I drew upon both approaches, as I have done in the case of program evaluation. How I've worked, in other words, shifts as the question I'm trying to answer shifts, all in the context

of a single orientation to homelessness. A critic looking only at my epidemiological work might type me as adhering to a theoretical framework that is largely individually-oriented, just as a critic looking only at my ethnographic work would peg me as more of a phenomenologist. My point, then, is three-fold: (1) the question being asked needs to drive the methods used; (2) we need to avoid sweeping assumptions regarding theory from single studies; and (3) no theoretical approach can or should lay exclusive claim to either the quantitative or qualitative approach. Each of these will almost always have some contribution to make to any effort to understand a given phenomenon.

This leads me to my last point, which is very much related to Antonio's comment yesterday about the difficulty of linking the micro-macro divide. I agree that integrating micro- and macro-perspectives is extraordinarily challenging. I would argue, in addition, that we are not going to make this task any easier if we associate the qualitative approach with microscopic perspectives and the quantitative approach with macroscopic perspectives. It is true that quantitative approaches aggregate data and thus allow us a perspective that transcends the individual, but the results often stay very close to the ground and are not necessarily framed in a way that informs a broader structural landscape. It is also true that qualitative approaches tend to focus on recipes for living and the minutiae of everyday lives—and work at capturing the experiences of individuals in order to better understand different ways of life. But for me, good qualitative work is always sensitive not only to the microscopic contexts in which lives are lived but the macroscopic contexts as well—what Kim Hopper refers to as “framework”. I believe wholeheartedly that the real promise in addressing issues related to homelessness is going to come from a judicious use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, but only if, in addition to looking at homelessness per se, we look at the conditions that produce, sustain and prevent

homelessness. If we are to really answer the question of why homelessness exists and what we need to do about it, in other words, we need to be examining such phenomena as the pressures that impinge upon precariously poised households, the changing geography of cities, the factors that affect the successful movement of proven intervention strategies to broadly implemented policies, the nature of neighborhood opposition to programs for homeless people, and the way in which broad changes in housing and labor markets affect the life trajectories of individuals. Both quantitative and qualitative methods clearly have a role in addressing these thorny issues, and each has a role in helping to understand the microscopic and macroscopic forces that drive homelessness.

I'll close by reiterating Martine's most essential point, which is that quantitative and qualitative methods each have important contributions to make in the study of homelessness, and that combining them judiciously is our best shot at understanding and ameliorating this distressing social problem.