

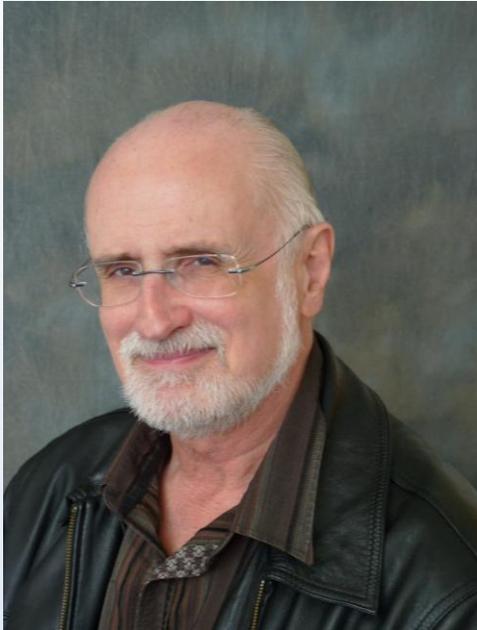


OT 24 Hour Virtual Exchange

October 29/30/31

[Depending on where you are]

Exploring Balance



John Paley is a senior lecturer in the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health at the University of Stirling, UK. After obtaining a degree in philosophy, he pursued a career as a jobbing researcher, but he has also worked in publishing and the design of open and distance learning material. In his current post, he teaches mainly on postgraduate programs, especially Stirling's clinical doctorate. His research interests include spirituality in health care, nursing ethics, complex systems, the application of social psychology to clinical environments, and narrative. He has published extensively in these areas, and is currently completing a book on the philosophy of qualitative methods. In real life, however, he plays bass in an old codger's rock band.

The difference between qualitative and quantitative research

What is the difference between qualitative and quantitative research? At first sight, this looks like an odd question. Isn't the answer rather obvious? Well, yes, it is. The difference is basically one between two types of tool, each of them useful for certain kinds of job. Just as you wouldn't try to knock a nail in with a saw, or cut a piece of wood with a hammer, so you wouldn't try to test the effectiveness of an intervention with a qualitative study, or elicit people's stories about a particular series of events with a quantitative one.

However, several alternative answers to the question have been proposed, some of which imply that the qualitative/quantitative divide is more significant, and more profound, than finding the right tool for the job in hand. Many authors argue that qualitative methods are to be preferred on philosophical grounds, because quantitative research 'reduces everything to numbers and causes', whereas qualitative research is 'holistic' and deals in 'meanings'. Others suggest that qualitative methods are more 'in tune' with the values of health professions such as occupational therapy. In this session, I will be assessing arguments like these, and suggesting that they don't hold water. Qualitative and quantitative methods do not have philosophical beliefs built into them. They are not a lifestyle choice. They really are just tools, and the choice between them depends entirely on the research question you are trying to answer.