
12-1-1995

Representative Research: A Qualitatively Driven Approach

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Recommended APA Citation

Combs, M. P. (1995). Representative Research: A Qualitatively Driven Approach. *The Qualitative Report*, 2(3), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/1995.2058>

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Representative Research: A Qualitatively Driven Approach

Abstract

Research methodologies represent complex sociohistorical evolutions within the social sciences ranging from reductionist to reflexive sensibilities (Tuchman, 1994). These inquiries each emphasize dissimilar variations of data analysis as found in their subsequent conclusions obtained from and during the research process. Unlike quantitative methodology with its explicit formulaic constructions, qualitative research includes a veritable cornucopia of methodologies, paradigms and methods. This paper briefly reviews those experiences encountered and processes which unfolded during a pilot project for a research class. Although Miller and Crabtree (1992) proposed a research roadmap with associated typologies within qualitative research, this paper focuses on the process of learning to "drive" with this roadmap by synthesizing theory to the field and back to theory. Agar's (1986) observation of research, specifically ethnography, as requiring "intense personal involvement. . .and an ability to learn from a long series of mistakes" (p. 12) best characterizes the research process written about here.

Keywords

qualitative research

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**Representative Research:
A Qualitatively Driven Approach**

by Mark P. Combs

The Qualitative Report, Volume 2, Number 3, December, 1995

Research methodologies represent complex sociohistorical evolutions within the social sciences ranging from reductionist to reflexive sensibilities (Tuchman, 1994). These inquiries each emphasize dissimilar variations of data analysis as found in their subsequent conclusions obtained from and during the research process. Unlike quantitative methodology with its explicit formulaic constructions, qualitative research includes a veritable cornucopia of methodologies, paradigms and methods.

This paper briefly reviews those experiences encountered and processes which unfolded during a pilot project for a research class. Although Miller and Crabtree (1992) proposed a research roadmap with associated typologies within qualitative research, this paper focuses on the process of learning to "drive" with this roadmap by synthesizing theory to the field and back to theory. Agar's (1986) observation of research, specifically ethnography, as requiring "intense personal involvement. . .and an ability to learn from a long series of mistakes" (p. 12) best characterizes the research process written about here.

Looking for a Vehicle

Within qualitative research different methodologies posit and subscribe to different epistemological and ontological assumptions that comprise and provide distinctions about the research process (Guba, 1990). Understanding one's self-referencing or paradigmatic grounding requires that there is a fit between chosen research sensibilities with their explicit paradigmatic groundings. This resonance between researcher and research paradigm/methodology, is critical to the "steering" of the research process. This steering input may require significant research effort, such as in the case with field based research, or be more limited such as in quantitative correlation studies. Unique destinations and conclusions are reached, based upon the linkage between steering input and paradigmatic directions.

My perspective on research favors a social constructionist orientation (Gergen, 1985); therefore, it follows that my approach to research differs from the positivist-representative paradigm. Subsequently, there is a collaborative and reflexive orientation in my research which allows for a jointly constructed endeavor "with" others thus distinguishing my approach as interactional and meaning-making.

Another way of understanding this initial step in research, is to think of how we go about looking for cars. Do we want a truck, sports car, family sedan or all-terrain vehicle? Based on the answer to these initial questions, we then look at models which fit the parameters of our search and

needs. The fit between function and form lead us to a mental schema which informs our car search.

Test Drive(s)

These research distinctions alluded to, are reminiscent of car shopping with the requisite test drive, slamming of doors, lifting of hoods and listening to unique sales approaches. Qualitative research unlike car shopping--with sticker prices and listed options--has not been as user friendly. When it comes to qualitative research "shopping," finding a unifying definition reveals a lacuna in the research texts. One has only to pick up recent manuals on qualitative research (e.g., Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) to peruse the polymorphic methodologies/methods embraced by researchers.

Shopping and test driving for both cars and research methodology/methods assumes that there has been a focus or "research question(s)" resulting in a look under the "hood," and a basic understanding of the limitation and general function that allows the researcher+collaborators to maneuver around. Will the "buyer" be negotiating "winding" research terrain or going for long highway-like data gathering drives?

These distinctions are crucial in research preparation. Just as some cars have their engine in the back, others have engines up front, thus the distinction between front and rear wheel drive cars and similarly, the process of research methodologies and methods. For example, do you try to pull and/or push your data collection process, or, is there a reflexive orientation? These questions determine how research methodology and method, or vehicle(s), influence what assumptions drive the process at hand.

As a doctoral student, I have taken several test drives with theory and research methodologies and methods. I have had to take a closer look at working definitions, data management, analysis and a host of "factory options" which come bundled with research "vehicles" or methods. I have had to spend time re-viewing how I see research while figuratively standing-under research vehicles examining their constructions and underlying assumptions. Theory, research design/process, analysis and conclusions were the metaphorical wheels which allowed me to roll around the research process.

Buying and Driving Vehicles

A basic distinction of methodology has to do with vehicle(s) that researchers use to integrate their research discoveries and interpretations. These include electronic programs (e.g., computer packages such as NUD*IST and Hypertext), traditional notes, journals, audiotapes, and videotapes. One of these field based research vehicles is ethnography (for discussion see Agar, 1986) and participant observation (see Bogdewic, 1992; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) which intertwines field work, observations, journals, audio and voice recording methods. Another of these vehicles is grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) evoking ongoing discourse between data and research efforts, thus "in-phorming" theory. This interplay between data and theory construction is also known as the "constant comparative method" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These approaches or vehicles, have well-documented histories within the

qualitative tradition and were "bought" (conceptually) by this writer for a "test drive" research project.

One of the strengths of grounded theory is that it "Forces us to ask, for example: What is power in this situation and under specified what conditions? How is it manifested, by whom, when, where, how, with what consequences..." (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 276). This observation provoked further thoughts about methodologies, paradigms and epistemologies, I realized that people don't see or understand the same things I do. For example, I thought I had seen a red light at an intersection so I stopped; however, to my surprise, the person next to me in their sports car accelerated on through. This exemplified how research, and in this case our vehicles, each allowed differing possibilities and understandings of what stop, go and driving meant and represented to each of us. Research vehicles are thus suited for tasks which may be in the field requiring a four wheeler approach to navigate the rough terrain or structured to speed on down highways.

Both Hughes and Becker (as cited in Punch, 1994) admonish researchers to just "go out and do it" (p. 95); however, there must be thought given to the "doing" it part and the process of learning to drive. Getting lost is one thing when driving and/or doing research; having an accident is quite another. Not addressing the distinction between methodology and method is a sure way to end up feeling that you have either lost your car, or have been riding around as a crash dummy.

Gradually shifting "gears" during my research enterprise--like driving a manual transmission--averts stalling, premature accelerating or getting stuck during the research process. This stalling out or stuckness occurred as I was trying to do research on sales people with pharmaceutical companies. I kicked the ideas around on how to do this--like kicking car tires--and thought that interviewing sales people as the terminus a quo, would simplify my research plan. I called several pharmaceutical companies to get a feel for the territories they had in my area but learned that this was not a "public" topic. Furthermore, trying to get names of sales persons was also a dead end, so there I sat with my best research intentions, and research vehicle, idling. At this point I felt like I had reached a toll gate, tried to throw my quarter in the toll basket but had missed and gotten stuck.

I needed to get my research going down the road, so I made a U-turn and revisited my core assumptions. What did I want to explore rather than "find out"; what was the research question? I realized that all I wanted for this project was to get a feel of a typical day for a typical sales person. In desperation I went to the library and established that the literature on medication was vast: a mountain of profiles on medications and pharmaceuticals. This array of information narrowed my research about a typical day. Specifically, if they (salespersons) were trying to sell different medications to different physicians, there would be many variances across these contexts. Since this had not been considered conceptually, I look into my methodological "rearview mirror", backed up, and broadened my scope of inquiry. I spoke with a physician friend who suggested I meet a "rep" (sales persons are called representatives in the parlance of medicine) at a hospital facility. I quickly learned the vernacular associated with sales reps. and situated my research back at the scene rather than in my constructions of what "my" research should consist of; this is the praxis of research Lather (1986) has commented upon.

This avenue had been overlooked during my initial inquiry that later provided me with an intersection and direction for my research endeavor. I met several different reps. and learned that one of them knew a friend of a friend who was a rep. I used this serendipitous lead and contacted a co-researcher or "source" for my initial grand tour (Spradley, 1979) understanding of pharmacology sales. This translated into my becoming an assistant representative for a special event, a book club for doctors. I found that listening to the talk and observing how my co-researcher "prescribed" information out to doctors was not at all typical. Conversely, these were not typical encounters but tailored interactions maximizing the information "dose" for physicians with literature and information on products.

By slowing down my research process and getting to know the scene I limited my project to just one representative in two different settings with many physicians. This was followed by a working dinner and later, an opportunity to sit and interview my research collaborator with whom I had observed and gotten to know well. The coding of the data was limited to reflect what he thought was typical for him and the expected interactions for any given day. Disengaging from my world of typical research assumptions and engaging the world of multiple physician engagements vis-à-vis a more opportunistic and asynchronous way of doing research, required a significant steering shift for me.

A social construction grounding and field based approach were collaboratively engaged in with a representative who became my co-researcher. By going from my field notes to co-researcher in a reflexive manner, there was a grounded-participant observation methodology which allowed for a richer description and understanding to jointly co-evolve.

Retrospectively, I lost my status as "the researcher" thus mitigating my habit of trying to capture data instead of focusing on those orthogonal relationships unfolding around me. Shifting gears from researcher to apprentice was a quick ethnographic immersion grounding my research. By riding with my co-researcher, I learned how he stocked his vehicle (car) with all the necessary tools of the trade. His vehicle was a mobile office that carried meanings and status and how he had worked his way up from a generic representative to a more specialized representative.

My pre-research notions evolved significantly as I realized that my sampling needed to focus on one informant, one company and one area in that company: hospital pharmacology. Wolcott's (1994) statement "that a lone qualitative researcher, working with inevitable limitations of time and resources, ordinarily should pursue one case study in depth" (p. 183) was good counsel for a single case approach. This steering adjustment allowed me to remain on the conceptual road map or framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994) by delimiting what I did not have time for.

I discovered that food and marketing are inexorably linked which gave me much "food for thought." The careful "horn honking" marketing approach without being too obvious was pointed out to me as an art. The placements of material, and strategic medication profiles were all road signs that guided and made presentations work without the fanfare typical of sales people in other vocations.

Arriving at Destinations

This side-road into the culture of hospital pharmacology proved far more meaningful than singly interviewing several representatives and coming up with a typical day. Borrowing from Carney's (1990) ladder of analytical abstraction, figure 1 shows the process as understood from a driving metaphor with the shifting and steps taken during this research. By weaving and jointly constructing meaning (Mishler, 1986), there was a sense of fit and comfort between research vehicle, data and my co-researcher. Initially, this project had been likened to driving in a conceptual fog. My inquiry was a transformative process within a broader social context generating a relational and discursive self-understanding about my role(s) within this research undertaking.

As with driving, there must be careful attention cast upon the road, speed limits, lane markers, cautions, signs etc. and data provided during the research process. Failure to stop and/or yield at some intersections and avenues during research could result crashing into some conceptual obstacle because of limited vehicle maneuverability. Additionally, checking the pressure in the tires before a drive is similar to checking one's grounding and the research vehicle(s) used. My apriori assumptions going into this research pilot project were naive and "flat". Not having knowledge of pharmacology, both the business and politics, was like driving at night with no lights.

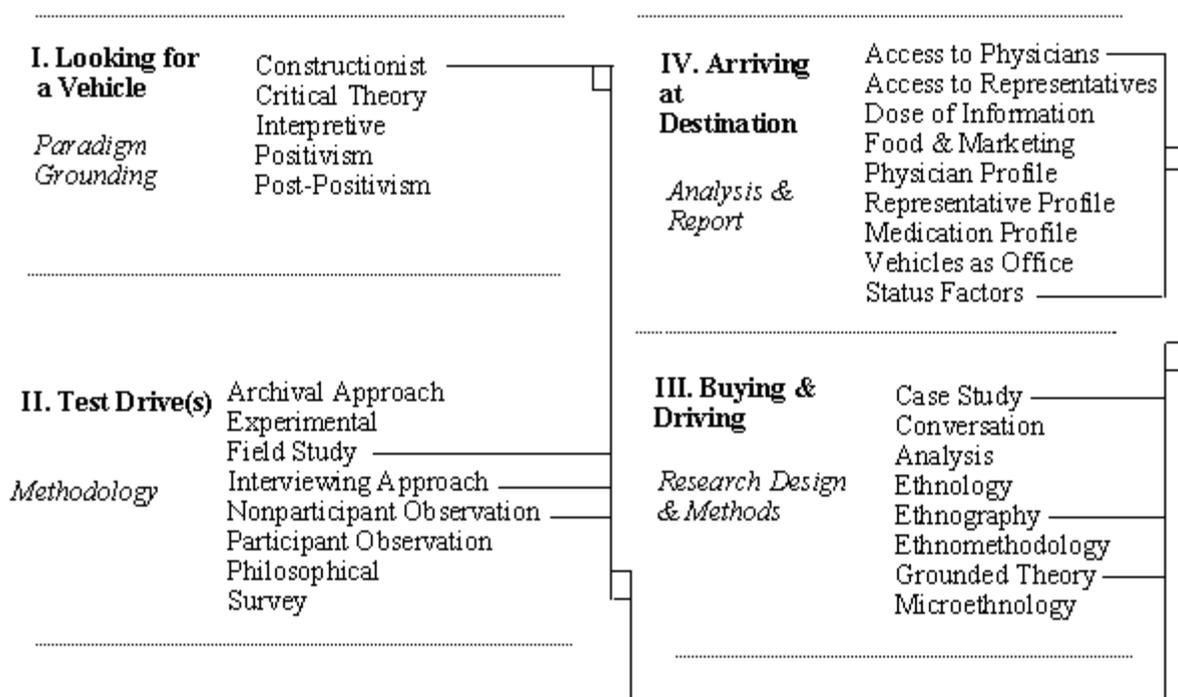
As my co-researcher pointed out, paying close attention to the way physicians listen and request information is fundamental, "like you asking me about this stuff." As he put it, "They [physicians] come in all shapes and sizes, and you have to be able to know them all, just like the meds [medications]". This poignant statement helped me listen carefully as he explicated what he considered "typical" in his day. Furthermore, this reminded me that "research" comes in many sizes and is shaped and informed by discourse and interactions with respondents and collaborators.

One last indulgence regarding driving, if one commuted around in an eighteen-wheeler truck, many problems (e.g., parking, shifting, costs) would limit the efficacy of getting around this way. Likewise, having a poor research vehicle+researcher fit is probably the *raison d'être* for finding a better research vehicle.

The developments drawn from the analysis reflected the road(s) taken (and not taken and backed out of), the vehicle(s) utilized to look at the data and the mechanics involved in gathering and using the road signs to help me navigate (see Figure 1). For example, I found audio taping was not an acceptable way to record information during encounters with physicians. The use of paper and pencil, however, was quite acceptable as everyone had a pad of paper in their pockets and were readily jotting things down. The instrumentation, as with other aspects of this research, reflected doing things that were contextually informed.

Figure 1

RESEARCH PROCESS SHIFTS & CONSTRUCTION STEPS



Conclusions

Paradigmatic groundings simultaneously shape and conceptually bound the research enterprise (Guba, 1990). My initial research question and subsequent ideas about interviewing representatives and "finding" themes were obstacles for me. Shifting from a nomothetic to an ideographic presupposition (e.g., Hammersley, 1989; von Wright, 1971), shifted my relationship with my research question of "typical" for a representative in pharmacology. This allowed for a shared ethic with my research partner: A jointly constructed and dialogical project. I found that the confluence of an interactive and reflexive methodological understanding with participant observation and grounded research, reconceptualized my pilot study and moved me away from the "methodolatry" type of research (Janesick, 1994). As Atkinson (1992) aptly observes "Each author brings...his or her reading of the 'literature,' as well as a personal style, and the particular experience of 'the field.'" (p. 37). Instead of doing and writing up "a" research piece, I become part of the research landscape assuming local knowledge (Geertz, 1983) and organizationally embedded (Gubrium & Holstien, 1993) perspectives including both emic and etic perspectives.

Much is said when one travels hopefully; research is no exception to this dictum as we explore roads less traveled and learn how to negotiate one turn at a time. Implicit to this enterprise is understanding what drives our research vehicles.

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