

## Seeing Our Quantitative Counterparts: Construction of Qualitative Research in a Roundtable Discussion

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**Key words:**  
research  
relationship,  
qualitative method,  
complementary  
research,  
construction,  
meaning structure,  
collaborative  
approach

**Abstract:** The research relationship between qualitative and quantitative researchers is influenced by their constructions of one another's research approaches. While we, as qualitative researchers, have our own construction of quantitative research we seldom get quantitative people's construction of qualitative research. In this paper, we present our quantitative counterpart's construction of qualitative research in the form of themes we derived collaboratively from a small roundtable discussion on the use of the qualitative approach for research management studies. We define 'construction' as the meaning structure shared by the participants on the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research. This exercise has implications for our presentation of qualitative research as a complementary research approach to quantitative research and on our on-going construction of the quantitative-qualitative research relationship.

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### 1. Introduction

In the process of becoming qualitative researchers, we interact and work with graduate committee members, critics, co-researchers and colleagues who belong to the quantitative persuasion. These people have narrow if not ambiguous ideas about qualitative research which make our interaction with them difficult and trying, as we ourselves personally experienced and as is documented in retrospective accounts and reflections on such interaction (see MELOY 1994; KERLIN 2000). If we understand how quantitative researchers view qualitative research in relation to quantitative research, perhaps we can interact and work together with them in a more meaningful way. [1]

While we, as qualitative researchers, have our own construction of quantitative research we seldom get quantitative researchers' construction of qualitative research. Constructions influence people's action and interaction. Constructions or meaning structures help people interpret or make sense of the world and thus

act on the basis of such interpretation. According to CONLON (1999) meaning structures are

interpretive schemes or frames which are individual's schemas of making sense of the world ... They are shared meaning systems about ways to approach and proceed in situations, and incorporate evaluative sentiments and stocks of knowledge. These structures act as the basis for actor's conceptual systems, the way they think, act and perceive reality ... (p.19). [2]

In keeping with the teleological assumption that the purpose of qualitative research is understanding, we present in this paper our quantitative counterparts' construction of qualitative research (as well as their view of our construction of quantitative research) in the form of themes that emerged from a small roundtable discussion on the use of the qualitative approach for research management studies which was organized by a small research and extension unit of a science-oriented university and where the first author served as the speaker. In this paper, we define construction as the meaning structure shared (HEATH 1994) by the discussion participants on the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research. We assume that the participants expressed this shared meaning structure as they engaged themselves in the discussion. [3]

Our focus is on the shared meaning or what CARBAUGH (1986) calls the "intersubjective conventions more than the subjective intentions", because we are particularly interested in the relationship between groups (rather than individuals), that is the relationship between the quantitative group and the qualitative group. Shared meaning is reproduced through socialization, thus, we assume that shared meaning greatly influences the present and the future relationships of these two groups. As WEICK (1993 referencing THOMAS & THOMAS 1928) observed, "the symbolic environment from which definitions arise is always a shared environment and the outlook itself is always a shared outlook that cannot be ignored" (p.18). [4]

## **2. Our Construction of Their Construction**

As we noted earlier, we used as principal source of primary data the recorded proceedings of a small roundtable discussion on the use of the qualitative approach for research management studies. The discussion was organized by a small research and extension unit of a science-oriented university. Research management is an area of study that distinguishes itself from other management contexts by its emphasis on the pursuit of both creativity and productivity objectives in research organizations. The roundtable discussion is an occasional informal forum where participants share ideas and discuss the applicability of such ideas in research management as a way of generating innovations in the field. The purpose of the discussion in question was for the first author to explain the basic characteristics and assumptions of qualitative research and for the audience (other participants) to discuss the application of the qualitative approach in research management studies. [5]

Eight core and affiliate staff of the university unit comprised the participants. Their fields of specialization are presented in Table 1. They were involved in the advancement of knowledge in research management primarily through human resource development and research. Their research methods orientation varied along a quantitative-qualitative continuum. In a sense, Table 1 situates the participants in the quantitative-qualitative continuum, quantitative being on top and qualitative at the bottom. Many of them had been involved in the conduct of the university unit's research projects which mainly focused on structures of and systems in research organizations, technology utilization, and the relationship between these concerns; and which usually employed the systems framework, an orientation which most of the participants shared with other scientists in the university.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Field of specialization</b>
1	Research management, development management, animal science
2	Capital asset accounting, taxation, financial management
3	Public administration
4	Research management, public administration
5	Farming systems, community development
6	Development communication, educational research
7 (second author)	Agribusiness management, research management
8 (first author)	Organizational communication, qualitative research

Table 1: Fields of specialization of the discussion participants [6]

At the beginning of the talk, the speaker (the first author) distributed a hand-out that differentiates or characterizes qualitative and quantitative approaches. The speaker entertained the audience's questions, comments and arguments as the discussion, which was conducted in English and which lasted for a little more than two hours, proceeded. Among the eight participants, six participated in the discussion, one participant was recording the whole proceeding and one participant remained silent. [7]

In general terms, our analytic approach was iterative and emergent, consistent with the norms and standard procedures of qualitative research (TAYLOR & BOGDAN 1998, LOFLAND & LOFLAND 1994). It was iterative in the sense that we went into several rounds of theme identification, and emergent in that we did not have a fixed theoretical framework nor design to start with. The interpretive process can best be described as collaborative. [8]

## **2.1 Collaborative transcription**

Initially, only one of us was transcribing the tape-recorded discussion, but later on we decided to do the transcription collaboratively, aiming at intersubjective agreement (MAXWELL 1992) on everything we transcribed. We found the process useful since it helped us to develop a shared understanding of the content of the transcript. [9]

As much as possible, we transcribed the discussion verbatim. In the transcript, we bracketed those portions which we edited primarily due to poor quality of the audio. The bracketed portions, which only became a secondary basis of interpretation, helped us understand the overall sense of the discussion. [10]

## **2.2 Collaborative sense-making**

Similar to what we did in the transcription, we made sense of the data in the spirit of collaboration but allowing the interplay between joint discussion and individual reflection. [11]

Jointly and individually, we continually asked ourselves about the inclusion or exclusion of themes by looking at the fit between the themes and the data. It was during the individual reflection that we tried to question more the fit between the data and the emerging themes. Such feelings of uncertainty moved us to jointly question our understanding of the data, evaluate the themes in the light of these data, and change our themes until we intersubjectively agreed that a fit (temporary at that, as we soon came to realize) had been achieved. The interplay of joint and individual interpretation and the cycle of questioning and agreeing have given us more room for reflexivity, an aspect of qualitative research enhanced by the collaborative approach (RICHARDS 1999, p.1). [12]

Cognizant of the importance of social context in meaning-making (as NEWMAN 2000 says, "All meaning making is embedded in our cultural history and most of who we are is tacitly absorbed both from our immediate community as well as the wider community", par.13), we analyzed the research milieu of the participants (or what we take as the university's research culture) as it related to our emerging themes. We called to mind and assessed our own research experiences in the university as former students and as practitioners, undertook a document analysis of the university unit's research projects in the last twenty years and referred to a 17-year old report of a commission on the state of the social sciences in the university. We also employed member checking (CRABTREE & MILLER 1992; MERRIAM 1998) by soliciting the comments of the roundtable discussion participant who was silent throughout the discussion to validate our sense of the data, our reading of the participants' research milieu and the developing themes. Likewise, we requested an affiliate staff member of the university unit who was not able to join the roundtable discussion for comments as a form of peer evaluation (MERRIAM 1998). [13]

In the latter part of the process, we consulted theoretical literature to help us explain and validate our interpretation. In particular, we referred to BRANNEN (1992), HAMMERSLEY (1992) and LAURIE and SULLIVAN (1991) on the relationship between quantitative and qualitative research. Although this literature informed our analysis, it did not limit us in deciding whether to include or not to include a construction. We also allowed our individual qualitative research undertakings, which were framed within our disciplinary perspectives, to shed light on our interpretation. [14]

The interweaving and knitting of our understanding of the participants' research context, our insights from our respective researches, our theoretical readings, and our interpretation—all done in an iterative process—have been complicated and, at times, arduous but have nevertheless been quite well-suited to our interpretive purpose. The whole iterative process ended with the identification of the themes reported in this paper. [15]

### **3. Their Construction: Qualitative Approach is Subordinate to the Quantitative Approach**

As we mentioned previously, we define construction as the meaning structure shared by the participants on the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research. From the analysis of the transcript of the roundtable discussion, one central theme that related to the participants' view of qualitative research vis-à-vis quantitative research emerged: qualitative approach is subordinate to the quantitative approach. This central theme is made up of three sub-themes which are presented below together with representative quotes from the transcription. [16]

Sub-theme 1: Qualitative method cannot approximate the precision and objectivity of the quantitative method. As Participant 1 expressed:

One problem with qualitative is that you can only describe without going quantitative--sweet, sweeter, sweetest. You use words to describe. But in quantitative, what is sweet you can probably explain it in terms of let's say, number of calories, parts per million, or pH. You cannot change that, there's an absolute value for that. It's also very objective. [17]

Sub-theme 2: Qualitative method is used only when quantitative method cannot do the job. As Participant 2 said:

My experience, we do qualitative research because we can't get quantitative data...If we want to have a deep understanding of our organizations, if this could also be done in quantitative, we would. [18]

Sub-theme 3: Qualitative method must aim for prediction, not just understanding, to be legitimately called a science. The following response of Participant 1 to the speaker's point that the purpose of qualitative research is understanding rather than prediction expresses the sub-theme empathetically:

In making that stand, that makes you the qualitative (researcher) vulnerable to concede that you are not a science. [19]

Taken collectively, all these sub-themes make qualitative research inferior to quantitative research by putting a lower premium on what qualitative research considers important, namely, description, meaning and understanding. Sub-theme 1 gives the impression that qualitative description is of a lower standing than quantitative measurement, sub-theme 2 that qualitative data (words) are of lower value than quantified data (numbers) and sub-theme 3 that understanding as an aim of science is of lower value than prediction. When the traditional yardsticks of science such as measurement, quantification and prediction are used qualitative research is devalued and in effect deemed inferior to quantitative research. [20]

Different writers would have different interpretations of this construction or meaning structure. From our view, we see this construction as an issue that exerts influence on the relationship between quantitative and qualitative approaches and even shapes interactions between qualitative and quantitative researchers. As THOMAS and THOMAS (1928 as cited by CHARON 1995) said: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p.131). [21]

We would argue that this interpretation is valid on two grounds. First, the meaning structure is seen as operating in the immediate and wider milieu of the participants. When one looks at the participants' immediate research milieu (that is, in terms of the research undertakings of the university unit), there seems to be a positivistic stance in the use of the qualitative method, its role being defined according to the terms of the quantitative approach, in particular in the form of describing variables of a predetermined conceptual framework. Probably such stance makes qualitative research appear more objective. Meanwhile, in the wider research milieu (that is, in terms of the research in the university at large), qualitative research appeared marginalized. For instance, staff research projects that are qualitative and inductive in nature only made up approximately 10 percent of the reported total staff research projects of the university between 1991-2000. There is also a feeling that qualitative types of research, where quantification and measurement are absent, are not attractive to funding sources. [22]

The same meaning structure also seems to operate in the way future researchers are trained or socialized. Looking first at how research methodologies are taught, there is a dominance of quantitative courses offered in the university. There is also a paucity of qualitative research materials available in the library. Meanwhile, student researches considered qualitative (those that do not employ statistical analysis and those that are more descriptive in nature) were labeled field studies and special problems but not as theses. Likewise, in graduate research in particular, proposals opting for a qualitative method had to pass a statistician's evaluation, a guarantee that the proposal would be revised to include quantifiable data and analysis to make the study "scientific". [23]

Further, our introspection about our research milieu has shown that qualitative research is subjected to double marginalization. The relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods has an interrelated and parallel relationship with the relationship between the social and the physical sciences in the university. The social sciences were treated as second class citizens as revealed in the commission report which was made seventeen years ago but apparently has not changed much since then. Thus, the double marginalization happens because the qualitative approach is subordinated to the quantitative approach at the same time that it is identified with a marginalized branch of science in the university. [24]

Secondly, the construction compares with the constructions elsewhere as documented in the studies conducted by MELOY (1994) and KERLIN (2000). MELOY (1994) observed that "the language, assumptions, practice and products of qualitative research are neither common nor necessarily accepted at our colleges and universities, or between faculty members and graduate students" (p.22). In KERLIN's (2000) study, she noted that the dominant focus of undergraduate programs and general research methods book for the social sciences is on quantitative methodology (p.3). These conditions point to the relegated status of qualitative approach vis-à-vis the quantitative approach. [25]

#### **4. Their View of Our Construction of Quantitative Research: Quantitative Research Is Not All It Is Made Out to Be**

In this study, we aim to understand our quantitative counterpart's construction of qualitative research. Knowing how they view our construction of the quantitative research may provide us with an additional dimension or context by which to view and understand their construction of qualitative research. We present in this section our quantitative counterparts' view of the construction we qualitative researchers have about quantitative research. [26]

Our quantitative counterparts think that qualitative researchers have a different idea of how quantitative research is done. For instance, contrary to qualitative researchers' construction, quantitative research is also a subjective process. This view is exemplified in the following expression of Participant 2:

I think that's bothering me, putting quantitative on the side of objective and putting qualitative on the side of subjective...can't we have quantitative research results driven by subjective biases? We've been doing that all the time, right? [27]

Another example is again contrary to qualitative researchers' construction, in that the quantitative researchers suggested that elements of quantitative research, like any research procedure, are marked by an inductive process. As Participant 2 amplified it:

I'll make a comment which might make all of you to jump on. I don't think [quantitative] researchers do research first by setting out a hypothesis. But I think that's the way they publish that because that's the traditional and acceptable way of

communicating research [results]. But that's not the real way. It's like you do look at all the variables, if there's something missing or wrong or slightly different then you come up with something that is usable if you're in the social sciences. And then you decide, is this real, the hypothesis that you are looking at? We do have our prejudices as well. We do keep an open mind ... [28]

As we stated earlier, our quantitative counterparts' view of our construction of quantitative research may provide us with an additional context by which to view their construction of qualitative research. It seems that the way in which the qualitative approach is usually presented, that is, in a dichotomous relationship with quantitative research, influences the quantitative people's construction of qualitative research. It is possible that quantitative researchers resist or downplay the qualitative approach not because of a lack of understanding of the method but because dichotomization makes quantitative method into something it is not. HAMMERSLEY (1992) has argued that "the distinction between qualitative and quantitative is of limited use and indeed, carries some danger" (p.39). For one thing, dichotomization may narrow the arena for complementarity. As LAURIE and SULLIVAN (1991) aptly commented:

The view that quantitative research is always "objective" and on the other side of the coin, that qualitative methods always lead to more meaningful analyses, is open to question when one examines the reality of social research practice in the field. The steady growth in recent years of methodological texts on the production of statistics which reveal "what really happened" in particular research projects should be sufficient to convince anyone that subjectivism of many kinds intervenes at all stages from the formulation of a problem to final publication of results. With respect to qualitative research it must also be remembered that actor's meaning-systems alone are not necessarily more likely to provide an understanding of how "things really happen" than are responses to questionnaires. Again the interpretation the researcher puts on such systems is crucial and ultimately subjective. However, we believe that if an attempt is to be made at understanding which is not entirely relativist then some way must be found to accommodate the findings of both quantitative and qualitative research (p.126). [29]

## **5. Reconstructing a Research Relationship**

While the construction of qualitative research and the view on construction of quantitative research were seen in the light of the relationship between qualitative and quantitative approaches, we acknowledge that the status relations in research organizations are not simply a matter of the method one practices. Plain novelty, or foreignness, of an idea (such as a new method) may sometimes bring with it resistance. It is also probable that the zeal exuded especially by novice qualitative proponents may sometimes create a negative in-group/out-group impression. People tend to belittle anything that seemingly excludes them. Track record or even seniority and intergenerational stratification may also influence status relations, particularly in an Asian context. [30]



Nevertheless, within the confines of this construction and within its context, the relationship of qualitative research with quantitative research is that of subordination, or what BRANNEN (1992) calls "pre-eminence of the quantitative over the qualitative" (p.24). With this narrow view, people fail to see what qualitative research can actually do, that is, that it can dig into processual and deep aspects of observed phenomena such as people's meaning and perspectives and thus provide a richer understanding of these phenomena. However, despite the muting of what the qualitative research approach can actually do, some qualitative voices can be heard in the wilderness. For instance, seminars that feature varieties of the qualitative approach (an example of which is the roundtable discussion studied) are being held in some university departments and special research programs while a postgraduate course in qualitative social research is being offered beginning this academic year at one of the social science departments in the university. And lately, there has been some relaxation of the graduate school rule that all graduate proposals must undergo a statistician's evaluation. On the faculty/staff side, there is now a growing number of newly returning staff who were trained in the qualitative school. Hopefully, their qualitative perspective would balance the views expressed in social researches. [31]

As previously discussed, this meaning structure is being reproduced through the socialization and interaction among researchers. Thus, the challenge remains to bring the qualitative-quantitative research relationship to the level where the two are equal. Realities are socially constructed and could therefore be reconstructed through interaction. In the roundtable discussion that was cited in this paper, for instance, Participant 1 realized in the course of the discussion that there exist qualitative elements in quantitative research. This may lead to an opening up to or a consideration of the merits of the qualitative approach. In the succeeding discussion, we identify some means by which the reconstruction can be done. [32]

*Communicating:* It is through dialogue and discussion that understanding of each other's approaches can be created between researchers of qualitative and quantitative orientations. To encourage mutual understanding, such discussions need to consider the following:

- *Continuum rather than dichotomy.* Situating qualitative approach in a continuum of research approaches, rather than in a dichotomous relationship with the quantitative approach (see HAMMERSLEY 1992), and focusing on what qualitative and quantitative researches can do best, may encourage both parties to see each other's approach in a favorable light.
- *Contextualize.* Stressing that quantitative and qualitative approaches use research concepts differently may aid in understanding the nature of both approaches (see MAYKUT & MOREHOUSE 1994) and may reduce the possibility of misinterpretation and misapplication of these concepts. [33]

To widen their perspective and deepen their understanding, qualitative researchers also need to interact with each other to examine their constructions of quantitative research in the light of the quantitative researchers' perspectives. At the

same time, networking may help fortify qualitative researchers' position in advocating the qualitative approach as a legitimate means of scientific inquiry. [34]

*Collaborating:* Qualitative and quantitative researchers can explore research problems where they can collaborate and work in a complementary manner to provide a more holistic solution to the inquiry. By complementary, we mean that "each approach is used in relation to a different research problem or different aspects of a research problem" (BRANNEN 1992, p.12), and not in the sense of subordinating qualitative to quantitative methods or vice versa. In application to the research management field, a structural study on interorganizational relations/linkages such as research and development consortia and university-industry research linkages could be complemented with a processual study on how these relations/linkages come about. Another example would be a quantitative study on the determinants of technology adoption which could be complemented with a qualitative study on the users' construction of the technology. [35]

We are all co-creators of our social realities. We hope that through our on-going construction and negotiation with our co-creators we can reverse the effect of socialization and of the form of structuration that reproduces the subordinated meaning structure we found in this study, and thus move to a playing field where actors can see eye to eye. [36]

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## Citation

Saludadez, Jean A. & Garcia, Primo G. (2001). Seeing Our Quantitative Counterparts: Construction of Qualitative Research in a Roundtable Discussion [36 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2(1), Art. 12, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0101127>.