

Notes on Research Design: A Qualitative Approach (with Quantitative Considerations)

Knowing you're in a "tunnel" and knowing where to begin to find the light at the end of the tunnel, before you get blinded by that light!

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Consider a few vignettes: Tree's Water, Two Bullets, Blue Jay, and [Sqigwts](#)

A. Selecting a Research Topic (or Getting Selected!)

"An Idaho Farmer: A Proverb" - the paradox of retro-fitting your research design, yet sounding professional and seeing the "big picture" up-front

- contribution to others: impact for those who are the focus of the study
- personal interest: an issue of your own motivation to do the best possible job and continue you through to completion
- ethical considerations: working for the right reasons for the right folks
- contribution to the academy and scholarship, and to yourself: is the research amenable to and appropriate for inquiry, what is its impact for anthropology (methodologically and theoretically) and for you, professionally?
- situational: alertness and ability to jump through the doors once they open
- aligning research to one's own **paradigm**, as well as to the paradigm of those who are the focus of the research (the positivist-constructionist continuum). Ontology: what is real? and epistemology: how do we come to know it? What is the relationship between the methodological paradigms we're a part of, *the how*, and the subject of our research, *the what*? See [Two Paradigms Summary](#) (develop later)
- resources (funding and grant writing)

B. Proposal Writing

- explore the territory and networking; knowing and critiquing the literature
- collaboration

- writing a prospectus and a grant: the gentle art of “arm twisting,” the “rigor” checks (adequacy, appropriateness, authenticity and audit trail) and other considerations

- [Preparations Prior to Writing a Grant](#)

- [Prospectus](#)

- [Vita](#)

- [Critiquing the Literature](#)

- [Sgigwts NKN Climate Change Proposal](#)

C. Selecting and Fine-Tuning the Appropriate Research Methodology and Presentation Mode within the Paradigm Continuum that most accurately Accesses and Represents the Human Phenomena under consideration. *Aligning the Paradigms.* Proposition:

1. Following in the [Boasian Tradition](#), if the **goal** of a particular research project is to understand the **meaning of some particular human phenomena** (e.g., material culture, ecological pattern, social system, religious expression), be it in time (archaeological) or space (ethnographical). Be very clear in understanding that which you seek to know, the goals of your research.

2. And as **human phenomena** (the *what* we seek to study) is a **construction** of many and differing cultural conditions, reflecting many and **differing world view paradigms** (ranging from praxis to ideational; See [Anthropology Theories](#). See [Kroeber and Greeks](#) See [Social Constructivism](#)

3. And given the previous assertion, on the other hand as there is an inexorable relationship between the particular **research tools** and **modes of presentation** we utilize in anthropology (the *how* we study) and a particular ontological and epistemological **paradigm** (ranging from positivism to constructionism) within which those tools and modes are embedded. See [Kuhn's Paradigm Shift](#) and the [Antecedents of Anthropology](#) as a “social science.”

4. And as there is a **co-determinate relationship** between *what* we study and *how* we study it. That is, the **particular research tools and modes of presentation** we utilize (the *how*) directly influence our ability to accurately and authentically both **access** as well

as **represent** human phenomena (the *what*). We don't want to try to force square pegs into round holes.

5. Then does it not follow that we must be very deliberate in selecting the most appropriate set those **research tools** and **modes of presentation**, embedded in their particular **theoretical paradigm**, that most accurately and authentically accesses and represents the **particular human phenomena**, embedded within its **world view paradigm**, under question? Must we not be very cognizant of the alignment of the paradigms? Consider **Marshall Sahlins'** *Culture and Practical Reason*

Given an anchoring in some point along the **paradigm continuum** of positivism and constructionism, the research design and prospectus must include a consideration of the associated and appropriate research tools, evaluative criteria, analysis/interpretation, and presentation format/mode to be used. The focus here is on qualitative approaches, rather than quantitative approaches.

Thus seek the best research design (set of research tools and modes of presentation embedded in a particular theoretical paradigm) **that best accesses and can describe the particular human phenomena under study**. As anthropologists we have been entrusted with the highest of responsibilities to get that which is most cherished by others accurately and authentically represented.

Case Study: Tree's Water, Two Bullets, Blue Jay in the context of indigenous learning style and orality, engage in Heart Knowledge (*ashammaléaxia, unshat-qn, baaxpée*); dasshússua/"stories make the world" in acts of singing, re-telling, ritual movement of feather, perpetuate world. See [Orality and Literacy](#) and [Tin Shed](#) the "Feel it . . . and Get off the Wooden bench . . . sections

Go to [Two Paradigms Summary](#) for outline of the Paradigms (what is real – ontology, and what is knowable – epistemology). The two paradigms follow then that they correspond with 1. The research tools, 2. Legitimizing criteria, and 3. Analyzing/interpretation and modes of presentation:

1. Research Tools:

Positivism: Archaeological field methods, Archival, Survey, Interviewing, Participant-Observation using a representative **sample** (systematic random sample, cluster sample or snowball sample) and framed within the **scientific method**:

- a. **systemic approach** agreed upon and shared by a scientific community - based upon a consensus;
- b. utilizing methods that are **logical-rationalism**, such as inductive or deductive reasoning, and **empiricism**;
- c. in order to investigate dependent and independent “variables” and their “relationships” with one another, i.e., cause and effect relationships;
 - the components: “**operational definitions**” - concepts (= constructs, abstractions) operationalized into “variables” (= logical grouping of measurable variance in an “attribute,” e.g., gender) in order to discern and measure them discretely. 1. **dependent and independent variables**; 2. levels of measurement: nominal variables, ordinal variables, interval variables, ratio variables
 - the process (lineal): deduce hypothesis, select operational definitions and variables, determine sample size, develop and administer survey tools, statistically analyze data to show **frequency relationships of variables**, then record findings in the appropriate way (the findings are an end-product of the research).
- d. in order to establish “**generalizations**” and “laws” that provide descriptions, explanations, and predictions of phenomenon;
- e. all done within a healthy community of **skeptics**, seek refutability, nothing taken on faith.

Premise: phenomena is praxis/material objects having autonomous existence (on one side of the glass pane), from which accurate representations of those objects can be ascertained (on this side of the glass pane).

Constructionism: Archaeological field methods, Archival, Interviewing, Participant-Observation focusing on a **particular** case study, life history, or specific site, and framed within the **construction of the “text,”** i.e., phenomena is the intersection of those participating - the “writing of culture” and the process of **interpretation** has begun. The glass pane is shattered; the focus shifts from objects “out there” to the ongoing interactions of the actors, all converging within a constructed text.

It is necessarily a collaborative reconstruction, a **dialectical** process: 1. seeking to empower the **primary voices of the host**, (an emic, host’s perspective sought, be they ethnographically living hosts or archaeologically dead hosts; hence ethical role of a review process), while 2. acknowledging the role of the **voices of the audience**, rendering the text accessible to the anticipated audiences, and 3. always deconstructing the theory and method one brings to the table, as well as one’s **own voice**, i.e., reflexivity. A subjective process, an event, not an objective thing, an object; no glass pane.

- the process (**matrix of feedback loops or circular approach**): Jump into the experiential mix of players (be it an ethnographic or archaeological field), using tools of participant-observation, key consultant interviewing, life-history, archival research, narrative interpretation, and any assortment of archaeological tools, etc. Begin by inducing (inductive process) an idea, pattern, and/or theme from this mix of players, events, and interactions (the interpretation has begun). As you write (from field notes to final report) you are constructing “**the text**”, representing the multi-voices intersecting at this convergence (acknowledging one’s own voice, i.e., “reflexivity,” as well as the primary emic voice of your consultants/hosts, but also the voices of your many audiences). Given the ethical considerations involved with multiple participants (their sovereign status and cultural property rights) and legitimizing considerations, build into this constructed text a review process involving your consultants/hosts (or their representatives). Throughout it all, seek an interpretation (Geertzian “thick description”) of the **meaning of a text**. As you construct the text and begin the interpretation, be cognizant of the inexorable relationship between how the text will eventually be presented and the meaning conveyed through it (the how and what relationship).

2. Legitimizing Criteria:

Positivism: **a. internal validity** - degree to which findings correctly map the phenomena in question (includes “face validity” and “construct validity”); **b. external validity** B the degree to which the findings can be generalized to other settings similar to the one in which the study occurred (includes “criterion validity”) – “generalizeability;” **c. reliability** - the extent to which findings can be replicated or reproduced by another inquirer; **d. objectivity** - the extent to which findings are free from bias. Focus on replicating objective reality, the sense-datum experiences of the subjects.

Constructionism: **a. “authenticity,”** involving the quality of including and acknowledging a multiplicity of voices via **“collaboration,”** an ongoing partnership/collaborative relationship between host (living or dead) and anthropologist. In doing so, it can lead to **empowering** the voices of those you seek to represent - i.e., **“tactical authenticity;”** and **b. “trustworthiness,”** involving qualities of credibility, dependability and confirmability. These are all issues of “trust” via shared and/or linked cultural paradigms and the granting of authority to the “text” by all participants (hosts, various audiences, and anthropologists) who have bought into and are participating in this **granting of “authority.”** **Key:** as phenomena is the intersection of those participating, authenticity seeks to include in construction of the “text” the many voices of the host, while trustworthiness seeks to link the ”text” with the larger paradigms shared by various possible audiences, as well as by the host and anthropological communities.

These two criteria help avoid the authoritarian and “privileged position” of an anthropological voice dominating the text (argued implicit in a positivist’s approach), as well as avoid the “tyranny of rampant relativism” by the host, by anchoring the text in a larger, reflexive, deconstructed paradigm shared by all participants (host, anthropologist and audience). Can not apply the scientific criteria of validity and reliability to such a text.

3. Analysis/Interpretation and Modes of Presentation:

Positivism: once data gathered begin **analysis:** applying empirical and rational analysis. The analysis often entails the application of deductive theorizing and the **comparative method**, seeking to place the particular data acquired in the research at hand into the **nomothetic** context of “grand theory.” Nomothetic refers to the use of generalization rather than specific properties in the context of a group as an entity.

Premise: data is **generalizable**.

Once analysis complete, **present** your findings: which are mechanical descriptive replications of the subject material (data) studied, all written in a formal, objective, omniscient, third-person narrator style. Hence the analysis of the data is distinguished from the presentation of the data and analysis.

Lineal process: begin with research tools, gather data, then analysis data, and then present data, the product of your research, a representation of the phenomena in question, is a end result of the research. The end-product is a natural consequence of this methodology.

The **act of publication**, i.e., your research is accepted by the peers of your community, is itself another legitimizing measure of the value of the research - hence “publish or perish” mentality.

Value: the analysis and presentation seeks to understand causation, explanation and prediction of human behavior.

Constructionism: Illustrated in such modes as “**thick description**,” hermeneutical, symbolic interactionism, and the “writing of culture” - engaging research phenomena (the data gathering), and the interpretation and presentation of that phenomena, are **one in the same** process, i.e., phenomena, the “text,” is the **ongoing intersection of those participating**.

Premise: as cultures are **idiosyncratic** expressions of those participating, all theorizing is particularizing and relative to the time and place of the actors, and there can be no nomothetic theorizing.

As previously noted, constructionism, 1. seeks as its primary goal the empowerment and representation of the “voices” of the **host**, while also 2. writing to your **audiences** (be they your host, your profession, the general public, or even future generations), and always 3. re-evaluating **one’s own** contribution to the creation of the text via deconstructing it, your theory, and your method, - one’s self, i.e., reflexivity. The “text” is thus necessary a “**bridge**” that links all participants. As a result, it can **never be said to represent** any one of them accurately, as it is to a certain extent a **new creation** onto itself, i.e., what has been called the “crisis of representation” in anthropology.

As a “bridge” facilitating so many participants, the style, form and nature of the constructed “text” is very critical (given the relationship of the “**how**” and “**what**”), ranging from experimental narratives, vignette and impressionistic narratives, confessional narratives, to non-narratives, such as poetry or video texts, but likely not formal writing.

Circular process: with research tools, engage the host (living or dead), constructing the “text” (the intersection of those participating) as an interpretation unfolds.

Value: a heuristic appreciation and understanding, as well as an on-going refinement of the ways of coming to appreciate and know the human condition.

Modes of presentation to be developed and discussed more fully later in the semester.

Final Note:

Having insisted and gone into some detail discussing that we “**aligning the paradigm**” (you, with theoretical orientation and corresponding research tools/methods with the reality of your subjects), so critical to be able to travel, as an anthropologist, the territory of your subject’s unique and distinct spoke, but in the end however, don’t forget our **shared humanity**, the rim and hub.

Your ability to relate and communicate, develop rapport and trust, just as much influenced by your ability to be honest and sincere with your fellow human beings. Be yourself. Be a human.

When I first entered the field, I certainly didn’t think about all this aligning stuff, but then too I was fortunate to have had a Alan Old Horn and Tom Yellowtail help get me started and guide me along my early way. It’s only in hindsight, with some degree of reflection and experience that I’ve come to realize the critical correspondence of paradigms, with methods, with ourselves, and with the other we wish to understand.

Be as competent in your ability to travel the spokes of the wagon wheel as the hub and rim.