Quantitative / Qualitative research fundamental propositions

Applied to theories of human communication
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How this document should be used
This document has been designed to be suitable for web based and face-to-face teaching. The text has been made to be as interactive as possible with web based group exercises.

If you are using this document as part of a web-based course you are urged to use the online discussion board to discuss the issues raised in this document and share your solutions with other students.

Who is this document aimed at?
This document is aimed at those people who want a basic understanding of the different approaches to research.

I hope you enjoy working through this document.

Robin Beaumont
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1. Before you start

1.1 Prerequisites

This document is primarily concerned with the differences between qualitative and quantitative research. Many of the examples within it as well as the exercises assume that those reading this document have some knowledge of healthcare. These notes have been written as part of a course concerned both with communication and Information systems but I have tried to make this core document as generic as possible however I'm sure that it fails in many places. To help me please send your comments, additions and suggests.

Other documents provide much greater detailed descriptions of various quantitative and qualitative methods and tools used in research. You can find them, and others at:
http://www.robinb-beaumont.co.uk/virtualclassroom/contents.htm

1.2 Required Resources

You need the ability to be able to view this document while online so that you can check out the various web sites mentioned.

I also recommend that you have at hand a copy of, Theories of Human communication by Littlejohn
2. Learning Outcomes

This document aims to provide you with the following skills and information. After you have completed it you should come back to these points, ticking off those with which you feel happy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcome</th>
<th>Tick Box</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be able to apply the Who, Why, What, When, Where, How criteria to topic areas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be able to explain the Qualitative Quantitative continuum in terms of sets of opposing assumptions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be able to recognise the particular World View a pieces of research has adopted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have an awareness of the postmodernist perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be able to discuss the relationship between Theory, methods and Tools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be able to discuss the different approaches taken to analysing human communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be aware that academic disciplines exist for the study of 'body language' and 'personal space'</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be able to provide a critique of social constructionism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be able to suggest where each of the five genres of communications theory sit along a line from objective to subjective theories</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
3. Introduction

In this document we will be considering the basic differences between qualitative and quantitative research. We will begin by first introducing each type and then providing a number of examples of the various approaches. For the examples I have chosen to consider the area of human communications research as this encroaches on a wide range of disciplines.

I have drawn heavily upon the book by Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, and recommend that you see a copy at some stage.

While we are investigating the difficult topic of qualitative / quantitative research I suggest that you always keep at the back of your mind the following questions:

**Who, Why, What, When, Where and How**

4. The Qualitative Quantitative Continuum

Before we start it is important to realise that Qualitative and Quantitative research represent opposing views of the world, in fact Littlejohn calls them *worldview I* and *worldview II* (p27 7th ed)

4.1 *World view 1 (quantitative research)*

*Worlds view I* asserts the belief that there exists a real objective reality. This classic quantitative paradigm goes back to Plato (truth by reflective thought) and Aristotle (knowledge through observation and classification). This is the traditional, taken-for-granted view of the world embodied in the RCT (Randomised Control Trial) design that is the bedrock of all medical research.

The following table adapted from Littlejohn (p13 5th Ed.) lists the five premises that embodies *World View I*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Synchrony</td>
<td>Stability over time exists in contrast to change (diachrony). It is therefore valid to develop Causal laws etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective measures</td>
<td>It is possible to objectively measure an independent reality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent reality</td>
<td>There does exist a single reality. The reality is objective and not value-laden. Our experiences are just reflections/interpretations of it. Because our perceptions are merely reflections of this reality we should mistrust concepts such as “subjectivity”, “consciousness” and creative reflection in helping to understand this reality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dualism</td>
<td>Objects (i.e. the world) and symbols (i.e. language) are separate. Language is just a tool for description, and the world would exist without it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td>Language does correspond to reality (to a degree).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of you will think the above aspects are common sense, however most of them can be questioned to varying degrees. The important thing to realise is that they are basically a list of

**Assumptions**

### 4.2 World view II (qualitative research)

*Worlds view II* asserts the belief that objective reality is to some degree individually constructed. This alternative paradigm rejects the assumptions listed above and in place replaces them with the following set of basically opposing assumptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potts &amp; Newstetter 1997 Five Axioms</th>
<th>Penman 1982 Five tenets (quoted in Littlejohn 7ed p24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple Cause and effect is a simplistic illusion</td>
<td>Action is voluntary and you can not predict behaviour. There are no predictable universal laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is contextual and can only be described as a working framework</td>
<td>Theories are historical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The inquirer and the object of enquiry interact with each other so they are inseparable</td>
<td>Theories effect 'reality'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality consists of multiple constructed realities that can be understood to some extent but cannot be predicted or controlled.</td>
<td>Knowledge is socially created</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All enquiry is value laden</td>
<td>Theories are value laden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This view of the world may seem rather extreme but is presents a useful stance from both a theoretical and practical research perspective. Now work through the exercise below.

**Exercise 1.**

Decide which of the following represents a researcher with *World I* or *World II* views:

1. A researcher wants to find out about patient satisfaction at a local hospital outpatients department. She develops a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions each of which consists of a number of predefined responses. The questionnaire is given to 500 random subjects and the data analysed using a statistical programme (SPSS). The results are published along with a set of recommendations for Hospital Outpatients Departments in general.

2. A researcher wants to find out about patient satisfaction at a local hospital outpatients department. She spends a few days in the department asking treated patients to tell her what they think of the department and their experience. She records the interviews and then quotes (sometimes at length) the parts she feels are most relevant in a document describing individual patients experiences.

3. A researcher wants to find out about patient satisfaction at a local hospital outpatients department. She sits quietly observing what is happening in the department (unknown to both staff and patients) and records the number of times patients return to reception to enquire about their waiting time and the number of patients that leave before being seen by a medical member of staff.

4. A researcher wants to find out about patient satisfaction at a local hospital outpatients department. She develops a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions each of which consists of a number of predefined responses. The questionnaire is given to 500 random subjects and the data analysed using a statistical programme (SPSS).
5. A researcher wants to learn more about patient’s experiences at a local hospital outpatients department. She has a background in nursing and has arranged with a senior manager to shadow a nurse for the week on the assumption that she is interested in seeing the variety of procedures the nurse’s carry out. During her time observing she makes notes about how the patients and nurses interact and how a satisfactory outcome is negotiated between them. She writes up her experience after a great deal of reflection.

If you are working through this document as part of a web-based course discuss your answers on the electronic discussion board.

4.3 Intermediate world Views

In the above I have presented two opposing contradictory views. However there are intermediate stances, as you can reject only one, rather than all, of the assumptions made in the World I view. For example you might accept the 'Independent reality' assumption but believe that personal experience and reflection present a valid way of discovering this. This is the stance taken with some Social Science research where collections of individual diaries and interviews are used as a basis for research to gain knowledge about groups of people. In other words they accept that it is valid to pool the experiences together to gain insight into an objective reality.

4.4 Post-modernism - combining Qualitative and Quantitative Views

During the past 70 or so years 'post-modernism' has become a fashionable movement of which one characteristic is the juxtaposition of traditionally inappropriate entities. For example:

- A exhibition where the visitors take away part of the exhibit with them (i.e. something from a pile of objects) breaking the boundary between artist and viewer.
- An Iron with tacks (Man Ray Flat iron) or a Cup made of fur (Meret Oppenheim 1936, Luncheon in fur).

We have seen from the above sections that basically Qualitative and Quantitative views are based upon opposing assumptions. The problem is that by combining these views inappropriately I feel we sometimes end up with structures very similar to those presented above. Unfortunately it seems to be becoming ever more popular to try to combine the two in "imaginative" ways.

I feel there are appropriate ways of combining the two but this needs to be done in a very careful way, taking into account the underlying assumptions is a fundamental aspect to consider not something that can be ignored.

A separate document at http://www.robin-beaumont.co.uk/virtualclassroom/contents.htm describes in detail how qualitative and quantitative approaches can be satisfactorily combined.
I have not tried to explain postmodernism other than present a few examples for a short definition of postmodernism see: [http://www.counterbalance.org/gengloss/postm-body.html](http://www.counterbalance.org/gengloss/postm-body.html)

For a longer essay also discussing modernism and modernity see: [http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html](http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html)


Before we move onto investigating various world views in more depth I feel it would be appropriate to discuss the relationship between world view (“theory”), research method and the particular tools one may use.

### 5. Theory, Methods and Tools

The research method (the process), the Tools and the philosophical foundations (the theory / World View) are different but related aspects. For example *World View I* is probably unsuitable for a day’s shadowing (i.e. a particular research method). However, if you were a fervent *World View I* advocate (quantitativist like myself!), you would attempt to force the process and Tools associated with your world view upon it – after all what is the ‘time and motion’ approach other than this. You would also conceive of the shadowing exercise as a pilot for a follow-on study consisting of a proper randomised sample. However if you were a *World View II* advocate you would see the exercise as a valid process in itself.

Let’s remind ourselves of the typical method for quantitative research. If you adhered to the *World View I* perspective you would attempt to gain objectivity, by attempting to develop methods that would minimise the dangerous possibility of subject /researcher interaction by Blinding but also to gain control by Sampling, Randomisation, Grouping and Placebo development. You would aim for a method that would allow replication. You would develop hypotheses describing possible variables (relating to objective the real world). You would define objective valid reliable measures by a process of operationalisation the result of which would be data consisting of numbers. The data would be interpreted using formal statistical theory possibly involving sampling and probability theory. Individual interpretation of the results would be minimised.

The tools you would use in the above approach would need to provide numeric data, for example:

- Questionnaires with pre-defined responses that could be coded numerically
- Text or ’soft’ data would be translated (i.e. coded) to numeric values. For example a sentence might be coded as 1 to 10 on an aggression scale. Similarly diary entries might be coded in particular ways.
- Instruments such as questionnaires and other measuring devices would be reliable with the same input value producing the same result (code) each time.

Conversely if you are a *world view II* adherent (qualitativist) Your method might superficially appear similar but that is all. You might aim to become as minimally invasive as possible to your area of study. You might have few or no specific ideas as to what you will get out of the study. Your initial aim would be to understand the situation and then see how things develop, themes and areas of interest might develop as you learn more, this might be by using open ended unstructured interviews or by observing a specific group. You might aim to become as transparent as possible - disappearing into the background or you might decide to take on a specific role that you have come to understand within the group. When you felt that you had gained enough insight you would then leave and write up the experience possibly adding your own interpretation of the events. You would not attempt to generalise your findings or indicate that the same findings could be replicated, other than in a very tentative manner.
The tools you would use in the above approach would need to provide context rich descriptions, for example:

- You might write up daily notes
- You might provide the opportunity for people to write down what they think in the form of diaries, critical incident reports or "any comments" sections to questionnaires
- You might use transcripts of interviews
- You might use videotapes
- But the most important thing is yourself!

We will now look more closely at a number of theories that represent various views along the Quantitative / Qualitative continuum.

6. Genres of Communications Theory

There is a large amount of research concerned with human communication, and numerous conflicting theories attempting to explain how we should examine and interpret (etc.) communication. Littlejohn (5th ed. P13 - 18 not in the present 7th ed.) suggests five broad categories (he calls them “genres”) of communications theories:

1. Structural and Functional
2. Cognitive and Behavioural
3. Interactionist
4. Interpretive
5. Critical

Each genre/theory can be thought of as the equivalent to a particular world view.

We will now take a look at each of the above groups of theories ("genres").
6.1 Structural and Functional Theories

Examples of these types of theories are Systems Theory, Shannon and Weaver's communications model and cybernetics. All these theories possess some common characteristics:

One of the consequences of accepting Synchrony is that there is a reliance, to a certain degree, on rationality in both the subjects under scrutiny and those carrying out the investigation. For those being investigated one assumes they are basically rationale and for those carrying out the investigation the aim is to achieve the highest level of rationality.

One particular area of communications research that takes on this approach is that of ‘non-verbal’ communication, such as body language (‘Kinesics’) and the use of personal space (‘Proxemics’).

An example of using the structural approach
A particular project (Prodigy - UK) was interested in investigating the possible effect the introduction of a simple computer based prescribing support system might have upon communication in patient consultations in UK GP practices.

The structural approach would probably do something like the following:

- Select a random group of GP practices and divide randomly into a control & treatment group
- Video consultations
- Measure the “effect upon the consultation” a number of ways such as the length of the consultation, Percentage of time spend with Doctor patient eye / eye contact, percentage of time doctor spend looking at the computer screen and also the results of a consultation satisfaction questionnaire which might be administered to both doctor and patient.
- Statistical analysis would then be carried out to see if in reality there was any significant difference in the various measures as a result of the introduction of the system. Importantly the (inferential) statistics would remove any individual differences that might occur due to the random variation that would occur between individual consultations. The aim would be to gain some overall measure for each group, stripping out the individuality so that it is possible to compare the two groups easily. (think this is what happens when you obtain an average, or standard deviation etc.)
- Blinding (hiding details of the experiment from various participants, such as Patients GPs or researchers). Due to ethical reasons this would be almost impossible for the situation described above. A technique that achieves a similar result (i.e. reduces the effect of subject researcher interaction) is to use a Placebo. For example, a paper version of the electronic prescribing guidelines. Ideally you should use both blinding and a placebo.

6.2 Cognitive and Behavioural Theories

This group of theories accepts the premises of the Structural and Functional theories, but the level of analysis is at the individual rather than the group. It is the standard approach in Psychology (Behaviourism and Cognitivism) and Psychiatry (ignoring the watershed of psychoanalysis!).

By adopting the premises of the Structural and Functional approach, these theories attempt to identify variables ("variable analytic") that explain human behaviour in the form of "schema". A schema in this context is a set of measurable beliefs. A persons actions are also considered to be worthy of measuring.

An excellent example of the variable analytical approach is that demonstrated in Cognitive Therapy. Cognitive therapy accepts the Schema concept and believes that a specific psychological illness (e.g. Anxiety, Phobia etc) is due to a dysfunctionsing Schema (i.e. set of beliefs).
An example of the Variable analytical approach - Cognitive Therapy

Cognitive therapy has the following clearly defined phases (much of the information below has been taken from Wells 1997: Cognitive therapy of Anxiety Disorders):

- **Full assessment** – Here the patient is measured on a number of important variables where standardised scales are used wherever possible. Amongst the regular scales used are: Beck’s Depression / Anxiety inventories, Hopelessness and State-Trait Anxiety scales, additionally for specific disorders a number of other scales have been developed such as the Agoraphobic Cognitions Questionnaire, Fear questionnaire, Symptom interpretation questionnaire, Illness Attitude Scale, and the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale. The important thing here is that the problem is defined by a set of measurements that provide information about various traits and beliefs (i.e. the schema).

- **Conceptualisation / Goal setting / Socialisation** – This involves educating the patient (bibliotherapy) concerning cognitive therapy, their specific disorder and getting them to understand the role they will play in the therapy.

- **Symptom and schema-focused intervention** - This phase consists of two stages firstly modifying the cognitive and behavioural variables (i.e. the symptoms), secondly the inappropriate Schema is modified (i.e. beliefs are changed).

- **Relapse prevention** – This provides techniques for preventing and managing any relapses.

Throughout the whole process variables are constantly measured to gain objective measures for assessing the results of the intervention. This example shows the use of the variable analytical approach at the individual level (but it is important to realise that data can be aggregated to obtain normative values) The following example shows the use of the Variable Analytic approach to a number of people.

**Examples at the group level**

The development of various computer based statistical methods (structural equation modelling and multilevel modelling etc.) along with the software to support them (EQS: www.mvsoft.com LISREL: http://www.ssicentral.com/home.htm ) has made it possible to construct models in which a network of variables are analysed. A typical example is that of Bagozzi (1980) who reported a study on performance and satisfaction in an industrial sales force. He was interested in looking at the relationship between Job satisfaction, motivation, measures of performance and verbal IQ. The resultant diagram (various statistics omitted) is given below.

For a history of Structural equation modelling see: http://www.ssicentral.com/lisrel/word.htm
To give you an idea of how the technique has been used I include a few references below:


A similar technique has been used in the business work to help with complex decision making, in this instance a statistical technique called the “analytic Network Process” (see Saaty 1996 for details) is used and once again special software has been developed to facilitate the process (http://www.expertchoice.com/).

Within the field of sociology the above techniques have been used to measure the level and type of interrelations of individuals within and between groups (In this instance it is called “Social Network Analysis”).

To sum up, the Variable analytic approach accepts the premises of the Structural and Functional theories but focuses attention at a lower level, although it is often difficult to distinguish the two genres.

### 6.3 Interactionist Theories

We have now moved from the nice cosy world of the structuralists / Functionalists to a more personally defined, negotiated reality of the interactionist theorists. No longer are the premises of Synchrony, Objectivity, One reality, Dualism and Correspondence accepted without question.

The theories of this genre view social life as a process of interaction. Interaction is considered to be the process that individuals use to make sense of the world. Social structures are a result of these interactions, rather than the other way round (as suggested by the structuralists). Social conventions are similarly the result of interactions which are continually being re-negotiated. An important aspect is the lack of emphasis given to measurement and making inferences about what people understand, and believe from their overt behaviour.
Because interactions are defined partly by the situation, these theories tend to stress the importance of considering each situation as unique. Examples of Interactionist theories include the following:

1. Symbolic Interactionism (ie Erving Goffman)
2. Rule using theories (only some of them)
3. Social constructionism
4. Cultural theories (only some of them)

The history of the Interactionists follows that of the “Chicago school” of sociology which was founded in 1892. The first person who developed Interactionist theories was G H Mead who developed the concept of ‘role’ theory.

“In this context ‘role’ connotes the bundle of formal and predictable attributes associated with a particular social position, as distinct from the personal characteristics of the individual who occupies that position. The waiter or the doctor, for example, is called upon to perform a professional role expected of him by his public audience which may be quite at variance with his own inclinations of the moment. Roles which are official and publicly recognised as these which are frequently supported by uniforms and strict linguistic codes. But most social ‘roles’ are so inexacty defined that they are barely more than intuitively felt guidelines to the correct behaviour for a particular social situation.” (Bullock 1988 pp750).

An example
Becker found that new Marijuana users learn at least three sets of meanings and actions through interaction with other users. The first is to smoke the drug properly. Virtually everyone Becker talked to said that they had trouble getting high at first until others showed them how to do it. Second, smokers must learn to define the sensation produced by the drug as ‘high’. In other words the individual learns to discriminate the effects of Marijuana and to associate these with smoking. Becker claims that this association does not happen automatically and must be learnt through social interaction with other users. In fact, some experienced users report that novices were absolutely stoned and didn’t know it until they were taught to identify the effects as pleasant and desirable. Again this is not automatic; many beginners do not find the effects pleasant al all until they are told they should consider them so.

Here we see marijuana as a social object. Its meanings are created in the process of interaction. How people think about the drug (mind) is determined by those meanings, and the assumptions of the group (society) are also a product of interaction. . . .it is easy to see that part of the self may also be defined in terms of interactions in the marijuana smoking community.”

[Becker H 1953 Becoming a Marihuana user, AJS 59 (1953) 235-242 quoted in Littlejohn 1996 pp163]

[The concept of ‘role’ was used] first in Mead’s Social psychology (Symbolic interaction) which emphasised the importance of ‘taking the role of the other’ and role playing therapy invented by J L Moreno.” (Bullock 1988 pp750). Various other writers have suggested that ‘role’ in everyday life has an element of the theatre about it (‘Dramaturgical’) and Narrative (‘we live by stories’) approaches.

6.3.1 Erving Goffman
Erving Goffman a Symbolic Interactionist interested in primarily dramaturgical interpretations analyses human behaviour with a theatrical metaphor (Littlejohn 1996 pp169). Goffman expanded the ‘role’ term in his book The presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1956), “were he elaborated two key concepts:

- role distance - the extent to which the individual may free himself fro the demands of mere adequacy in a given role, and exploit the possibilities of play and improvisation above and beyond the necessities of ‘correct’ behaviour); and
- role conflict - what happens when the individual finds himself in the position of playing two or more roles at once – when, for example, the doctor has to minister to a member of his own family, thereby confusing his professional and fatherly roles.
Armed with these more subtle and modified terms, Goffman presented a most influential analysis of social behaviour as an elaborately mounted drama, in which virtually no area of human activity, public or private, was excluded from the essentially histrionic demands and conditions of the ‘presented’ self.” (Bullock 1988 pp750).

Williams 1998 provides a very lucid account of Goffman's work focusing on his use of Metaphor (p158) stating that Goffman used the metaphor of the "theatre", "ritual" and "game" amongst others.

If you want to understand Goffman's work I recommend that you read either Asylums or The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.

In the 1960s Harold Garfinkel took Goffman's work further in analysing the interactions in more detail using a method he called Ethnomethodology. You can find out more about this particular technique either by looking at the document called "Obtaining requirements - Qualitative methods" or by reading Heritage 1998 Harold Garfinkel for an unusually lucid account of the subject.

### Techniques used by Interactionist Theorists

The ‘Case study’ is the standard approach. This is very much a face to face process trying to understand peoples beliefs from their own perspective, followed by a period of reflection which involves reflection and seeing how the information obtained fits into the symbolic Interactionist framework.

The face to face approach might include:
- Interviews long, in-depth and unstructured
- Covert or Overt - you may tell the group what you are doing or just join it
- Non-participation or participation – you may stand and observe or actually take part in the activities of the group.

Therefore a study may be of one of four types; non-participate covert, Participant covert etc.

Because one of the assumptions is that interactions partly define the self it is logical to follow that realities are partially socially constructed.

There are a large number of approaches that subscribe to the belief that reality is partially socially constructed including various Rule based approaches and cultural theories. We will consider each of these very briefly.

#### 6.3.2 Rule based approaches

Rule based approaches believe that the way people construct and use various [social] rules influences their reality. Some theories accepting some of the premises of the structuralist approach (e.g. 'Conditioned management of meaning') evaluate the internal consistency of various actions to highlight the conflict within some patterns of behaviour. The diagram below shows the types of rules for one particular rule based theory (adapted from Littlejohn 1996 pp189).

![Rule based approaches diagram](http://www.robin-beaumont.co.uk/virtualclassroom/chap5/s5/comm_theories/qual_quan1.pdf)
6.3.3 Language and Culture – Linguistic Relativity

The Theory of linguistic relativity is based upon the work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. In the words of Sapir,

*Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society . . . The fact of the matter is that the “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose choices of interpretation”* (from Whorf 1956 Language thought and reality. Quoted in Littlejohn 1996 pp196).

Whorf provides the following example of the difference between the Hopi’s perception of time and that of the Standard average European (SAE) due to the different way they have of describing ‘time’ within their language.

“As a result of . . linguistic differences, Hopi and SAE cultures will think about, perceive, and behave toward time differently. For example, the Hopi tend to engage in lengthy preparing activities. Experiences (getting prepared) tend to accumulate as time “gets latter”. The emphasis is on the accumulated experience during the course of time, not on time as a point or location. In SAE cultures, with their spatial treatment of time, experiences are not accumulated in the same sense. Elaborate and lengthy preparations are not often found. The custom in SAE cultures is to record events such that what happened in the past is objectified. ”(Littlejohn 1996 pp.197)

It should be noted that while both the theory of Linguistic Relativity and Symbolic Interactionism believe in a socially constructed world the former believes that the ‘reality’ is already embedded in the language whereas the Symbolic Interactionists believe that ‘reality’ is created by the process of interaction.

6.3.4 Is social constructionism a load of rubbish?

In direct opposition to those who believe in Linguistic Relativity is Chomsky who taught that language structures are universal and that cultural differences in language are merely superficial. The argument that if one is put in front of a locomotive one can be sure that it is not socially constructed is simply taking the argument too far. Social constructionists do not deny the fact that objects exist in the world, what they are concerned about is the vast and rich context of which the locomotive is a part.

Cherwitz and Hikins (Communication and knowledge 1986 Littlejohn pp201) give five basic reasons for dismissing the constructionist approach:

A Reality exists - They simply state that no one believes that a socially constructed reality exists so it is very unlikely to be the case.

Evolution – If man has evolved and objective sense of reality is required as a baseline with which to measure this.

Logical consistency – Without an outside reality there is no way to test validity or quality of socially constructed knowledge. We are stuck at the individual / group?

Anthropological – There are commonalities across cultures where cross-cultural understanding does occur

Nature of communication – Some studies have shown that communication itself results in an undeniably objective world. In other words, the communication that supposedly “constructs” reality cannot be understood without reference to its own reality.

For an excellent criticism of the qualitative world view in general see Intellectual Impostures by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (1998 profile books).
As Littlejohn so succinctly put it (pp202): “The basic question is: Is communication a tool for communicating accurately about the world, or is it the means by which the world itself is determined?” I would add to this sentence “and to what extent”?

An aside – the Edwardian House

In May 2002 on Channel 4 (a UK television channel) a series of programmes followed a group of people who agreed to live like Edwardians in a country manner for three months with the series becoming far more popular than the makers had originally imagined. The various groups, a family to play the Lord and Lady and a set of individuals none of whom knew each other to act as the servants. While this type of series (“reality TV”) has become very popular in the UK the actual result is usually pretty uninteresting, however in this instance the result was very different. Why was this so? To understand why I think we need to consider how previous similar series were set up. Such previous experiments consisted of a single family and therefore during the experiment the social unit itself was not disrupted.

However in this case, each of the servants were given a book of detailed rules, and expected to initiate interaction with fellow servants, and obviously the masters, in the required manner. Similarly those above stairs did not know those beneath and also had a set of strict rule books determining every aspect of living.

The result was that various players developed in their perspective roles and furthermore developed interactions within their role. It was fascinating to watch during the series attitudes changing to those suggested by the various roles. One felt that the individuals had lost a sense of self and just became the roles, all very disturbing. When it was time to go the Lord and Lady were obviously very upset but could not perceive how the servants might view it as a welcome release (which they clearly did). This was in distinct contrast to the views they had expressed at the beginning of the experiment, where they had stated that they were worried about the type and amount of work the servants were required to do and also the dismissive way in which they were required to interact with the servants.

Similarly the servants who initially felt that they would be able to ‘suffer’ the masters at the beginning seemed to have developed a real animosity to them by the end.

Unfortunately there was no follow up to see the groups reunited in their present day situations.

6.4 Interpretive Theories

These theories approach the world as a subjective experience and, as Littlejohn (p17 5th ed.) says, ‘celebrate’ it. For them, how the individual (that is the subject primarily, not the researcher) interpretations the world is the most important aspect of discovery. Taking the theories discussed in the last section these theories take things further by unashamedly placing the individual's interpretations, upon the findings. They
are not immediately concerned with finding shared meanings, although there is a crossover between interpretive theories and Interactionist theories.

Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and some cultural/media theories are examples of interpretive theories. Hermeneutics is the study of understanding through interpretation, a good example is the study of interpretation of the bible (exegesis).

Ethnography sits between the Interactionist and interpretive theories depending upon the approach taken, for example Goffman applies much more reflective interpretation to his work, particularly with his use of metaphor, than would most traditional ethnographers.

6.5 Critical Theories

You will notice that I am not sure where to put this group of theories along the qualitative/quantitative continuum in the above diagram. Littlejohn also seems to have a problem with them (p17 5th ed.) considering them to be ‘a loose confederation of ideas held together by a common interest in the quality of communication and human life’. They are especially concerned with inequality and oppression. Critical theories do not merely observe; they also criticize. Most critical theories are concerned with the conflict of interests in society and the ways communication perpetuates domination of one group over another. Many critical theories are based on Marxism. Feminism is also a variety of critical theory.

Marxism focuses attention upon the struggle of interests within society. Marxism encourages an analysis of power structures within the organisation and the beliefs that various groups hold. It then interprets these within the framework of Marxism, identifying the oppressor and the oppressed etc. One important aspect of Marxism is the concept of Hegemony. Hegemony is the process of domination, in which one set of ideas subverts or co-opts another. It is the process by which one group of society exerts leadership over all others. For example advertisers often play into the “women’s liberation” theme, making it look as though the corporation supports women’s rights. Other popular tactics include the organic/green or healthy spins seen in advertising.

Feminist interpretations are similar to Marxist except the oppressed are females rather than the workers. Feminist interpretations often highlight issues of transparency. Women often carry out tasks which are either not attributed to them or / and re-attributed to others (Littlejohn calls this inclusion pp.239 5th ed.). This approach has been taken further by anthropologists Edwin Ardener and Shirley Ardener (Littlejohn pp.139 5th ed.) who found that in most cultures language is largely defined by men and as a result certain female aspects are muted. The so called ‘muted-group’ theory which they have developed analyses communication from the viewpoint of the women, it looks at female language differences and gaps within the culture, exposes underlying structures causing oppression and suggests directions for positive change.

Possibly another critical theory could be considered to be that of “a religious ideology”. The believer has a set of beliefs similar to that of a Marxist.

For example you might observe something that is rather strange but if you consider it from a religious perspective it might be entirely appropriate. Take an extreme example, a famous saint in the fourteenth century said Jesus told her to suck the puss out of soldier’s wounds? To one person she is a saint and to another a mad women. This may be an extreme example but consider the dietary habits, role of women etc. in most religions

7. Summary

Returning to the introduction to this document it is important to return to the

Who, Why, What, When, Where and How

The two opposing world views have allowed us to create a number of very fruitful methods of viewing and investigating the world. Within each of these world views discussed above different answers to each of these questions can be found for the same situation.

For example, considering the area of human communications studies within the Marxist context we would identify the Who in terms of the oppressed and the oppressor we then might describe What and How communication is managed in terms of how the power structure (hegemony) is maintained / reinforced. In contrast to some of the other genres the why would be largely irrelevant, as we would be working within the Marxist approach.
8. MCQs

1. Which of the following is a characteristic of the Structural and Functional genre of theories? (one correct answer)
   a. The innate goodness of man
   b. The homeostatic characteristic of systems
   c. The existence of an objective reality
   d. The importance of a subjective reality
   e. The separation of objects and classes

2. What is the correct name for the study of ‘body language’? (one correct answer)
   a. Kinesia
   b. Takinesia
   c. Kinesics
   d. Kinemia
   e. Kernia

3. What is the correct name for the study of ‘personal space’? (one correct answer)
   a. Protogyny
   b. Prothalamia
   c. Proxaxia
   d. Proxadynamics
   e. Proxemics

4. What does the ‘variable analytic’ approach attempt to do? (one correct answer)
   a. Discover hidden variables ('latent') to demonstrate new relationships
   b. Discover a commonality between a number of variables
   c. Discover sets of variables that explain human behaviour
   d. Discover key variables that predict basic instincts
   e. Discover a general variable ('g') that explains the core intelligence of a person

5. Which of the following is the most subjective (qualitative)? (one correct answer)
   a. Cultural theories
   b. Cognitive theories
   c. Structuralism
   d. Marxism
   e. Symbolic Interactionism
9. References

Considering the prevalence of 'communication skills', I am amazed at the lack of good academic material. By far the best book is Littlejohn, unfortunately the present edition has removed some very useful material although in several places it still refers to it!


Saaty T L 1996 The Analytic Network Process. RWS publications Pittsburgh USA


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