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GREY MATTERS

A GUIDE TO COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH WITH SENIORS

Nancy Marlett and Claudia Emes

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Appendix 11
Navigating the “Seven C’s”:
Curiosity, Confirmation, Comparison,
Changing, Collaborating, Critiquing,
and Combinations

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Abstract

It is important for researchers to establish a research posture (i.e., the relationship a researcher wants to have with his or her subject or other) (Wolcott, 1992) and making subsequent methodological choices in which all cohere and are consistent with the ascribed posture. By keeping things plumb in this manner, researchers can greatly increase the chances that their projects will be internally coherent and imminently more do-able than those studies which grow out-of-alignment. A method for assessing research posture, the “Seven C’s,” is presented and a series of questions are introduced to help researchers match their postures with particular research methodologies.

Introduction

In an earlier essay (Chenail, 1997) I wrote about the challenges which can arise in qualitative research projects when the methodological choices made by researchers do not stay plumb. The discussion in that paper centered around the importance of establishing a research posture (i.e., the relationship a researcher wants to have with his or her subject or other) (Wolcott, 1992) and making subsequent methodological choices which all cohere and are consistent with the ascribed posture. By keeping things plumb in this manner, researchers can greatly increase the chances that their projects will be internally coherent and immanently more do-able than those studies which grow out-of-alignment.

In this essay, I want to focus on one part of this interactional process, posture, and how it relates to basic families of methods for systematic inquiries. The way in which I will do this is to concentrate on

seven different relationships researchers can have with the other and how researchers can assess which relationship is indeed the one which characterizes their posture in a particular study. I call these relationships the “Seven C’s” and being aware of them will certainly help researchers navigate a straight course in their studies. Conversely, researchers who ignore the Seven C’s are most likely facing a stormy future in their research projects.

Relationship with the Other and Oneself

Although researchers may not be overt about it, their relationships with the other in their studies is governed by a particular posture. Some researchers posture themselves as “curious investigators” who wish to address gaps in the literature and discover that which previously had been unknown (Mahrer, 1988). Some want to fulfill a reflective posture and desire to be reflective practitioners who shed new light on the nuances of their work or the implications of their actions (Schön, 1983). Still others assume a critical posture and conduct their inquiries to raise issues and to produce cultural critiques (Marcus and Fischer, 1986).

Each of these postures carries with it a particular relationship with the other and reveals a certain notion of the self of the researcher. To be curious about an other or the self is different than being critical of an other or oneself. It is very important for researchers to be aware of these postures and to carry out a research method which is fitting with such a stance. Of course, it is not always the case that posture and method live in simple harmony. Also, it is often the case that the posture of a researcher is left a bit covert in a study. Without such an awareness, problems of coherence and consistency arise.

To have a clue into this sometimes unarticulated posture, consider what researchers call the other in their studies. Some use the term “subjects.” Others are called “interviewees.” Some are termed

“research participants.” Still others are called “stakeholders.” Each of these terms is a metaphor. It tells the reader something about the relationship the researcher is having with the other. It gives away the posture of the researcher. It can also lead the reader to see certain inconsistencies in a particular study. For instance, a researcher who stresses a collaborative, non-hierarchical relationship in their work with others and who also refers to these others as “subjects” is not being very consistent. Are these others considered to be “subjective” or are they being “subjected” to a particular methodological protocol? Depending on the researchers desired relationship, the use of the term “subjects” may be very misleading or quite fitting. The confusion arises with the lack of an overtly articulated posture. In order to express their posture, researchers need to conduct some self-evaluation to assess their research postures. One way to shed light on their stance is to “navigate the Seven C’s.”

The Seven C’s

In surveying the current array of methodological families, I have broken them down into seven broad categories based upon the relationship with the other invoked by each method. These categories, dubbed the “Seven C’s,” are Curiosity, Confirmation, Comparison, Changing, Collaborating, Critiquing, and Combinations. Each of the “C’s” stands for the tenor of the relationship between researchers and the other in a project and each one is connected with a particular method:

The Seven C's and Their Associated Research Methods

- Curiosity and Qualitative Methods
- Confirmation and Quantitative Methods
- Comparison and Comparative Methods
- Changing and Action Methods
- Collaborating and Collaborative Methods
- Critiquing and Critical Methods
- Combinations and Mixed Methods

In the next section, I want to present these Seven C's in terms of the questions researchers can ask themselves in order to determine their research postures, and maybe, to clarify their relationships with their research subject or subjects.

The Seven C's

1. Do you want to be curious about the subject?

If curiosity is the tenor of your relationship, if you want to know more about the particulars of the subject (i.e., what you already know about the subject is limited), then you should most likely approach your project from a qualitative research perspective (e.g., Crabtree and Miller, 1992; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). A hallmark of the qualitative approaches is their emphasis on open-mindedness and curiosity.

2. Do you want to confirm what you already know about the subject?

If confirmation is the tenor of your relationship, if you want to control the conditions around the subject so you can confirm certain relationships or patterns (i.e., what you already think you know about the subject), then you should most likely approach your project from a quantitative research approach (e.g., Babbie, 1998; Robson, 1993). A hallmark of the quantitative approaches is their emphasis on experimentation and prediction.

3. Do you want to compare your subject with another?

If comparison is the tenor of your relationship, if you want to examine the configuration of conditions of cases so you can compare the logic of one configuration with another (i.e., similarities and differences across a limited number of cases), then you should approach your project from a comparative research approach (e.g., Ragin, 1987, 1994). A hallmark of the comparative approaches is their emphasis on contrasts and diversities.

4. Do you want to change the other?

If change is the tenor of your relationship, if you want to examine the actions an organization takes to change (i.e., the cycle of assessing the situation, developing a plan, implementing the plan, and evaluating the success of the plan), then you should approach your project from an action research approach (e.g., McNiff, 1992; Stringer, 1996). A hallmark of the action research approaches is their emphasis on participation and community.

5. Do you want to collaborate with the other?

If collaboration is the tenor of your relationship, if you want to examine the community's needs by involving the perspective of non-researchers in all aspects of the inquiry (i.e., building collaborative systems with the purpose of joint problem-solving and positive social change), then you should approach your project from a collaborative action research or collaborative inquiry approach (e.g., Catelli, 1995; Oja, 1989; Schensul and Schensul, 1992; Stull and Schensul, 1987). A hallmark of the collaborative action research or collaborative inquiry approaches is their emphasis on building networks and utilization.

6. Do you want to critique the other?

If critique is the tenor of your relationship, if you want to examine the world from a critical perspective (i.e., the systematic deconstruction of a privileged description, explanation, or interpretation from a feminist, cross-cultural, Marxist, post-modern, or post-structuralist point-of-view), then you should approach your project from a critical research approach (e.g., Carspecken, 1996; Reinharz, 1992; Lather, 1991). A hallmark of the critical research approaches is their emphasis on values and power.

7. Do you want to have a combination of these relationships?

If combination is the tenor of your relationship, if you want to examine the subject from multiple perspectives and/or paradigms (i.e., the triangulation of theory, participants, observations, data, and/or analyses to produce developmental, expansive, and/or convergent descriptions, explanations, and/or interpretations), then you should approach your project from a combined or mixed method research approach (e.g., Creswell, 1994; Sells et al., 1995; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

A hallmark of the combined or mixed method research approaches is their emphasis on integration and contradictions.

Conclusion

These distinctions are meant only as basic guidelines or suggested starting points and not as hard and fast rules. For instance, researchers have used qualitative methods for confirmation purposes and quantitative approaches to discover new relationships in social phenomenon.

The Seven C's can also be used throughout the research endeavor. They can serve as "posture reminders" or "relationship checks" to help researchers "to stay the course" in a project. For example, if the tenor of the relationship is collaboration, researchers can keep check of every methodological choice being made to evaluate just how collaborative they are being with the other, or as they progress in their study, researchers can constantly be rechecking in order to build more collaboration into their research processes.

The purpose of the Seven C's is to help you to make your relationship with the other or others in the study clear and to select a method which has a coherent fit with your posture. Of course, you can select different postures in a particular study, but I would recommend trying one at a time. You have to try to build simplicity somewhere into the research process because the phenomenon being studied is quite complex. It is very difficult to study a complex phenomenon with a complex method. You are better off keeping the method simple and let the complexity lie in the other.

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