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Triangulation and Multi-method Approaches

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Abstract

Family communication is a developing field with a consciousness regarding the importance of researching phenomena from a multitude of perspectives. This position paper argues for the importance of conducting programmatic triangulated or multi-method research. Issues discussed include the nature of the phenomena of interest in the field of family communication, underlying assumptions of the historical dualism between qualitative and quantitative approaches, and practical considerations of multi-method approaches.

Triangulation and Multi-Method Approaches

Introduction

As a communication scholar, I have been exposed to many different approaches to the investigation of communication phenomena. Different approaches seem to answer different kinds of questions about communication. Therefore, I have attempted to learn about the different approaches and use them in my studies depending, of course, on the nature of the question asked.

Subsequently, I have developed ideas about broader-based approaches to studying communication. In 1994, I presented my first paper utilizing multiple approaches to the Family Communication Commission at the National Communication Association convention in New Orleans (see LeBlanc, 1994). In 1995, I chaired a methods panel and presented a theoretical paper on methodological triangulation at the Family Communication Division's preconvention conference in San Antonio. The following year in San Diego, I presented a paper demonstrating several examples of multi-method research. Finally, last year in Atlanta I presented a paper based on my dissertation research (see LeBlanc, 2001). That research utilized a quantitatively designed survey, based on previous qualitative research (see LeBlanc, 1996b; 1996c). For the past year and a half I have been teaching an undergraduate research methods class and have had more time to reflect on the nature and ramifications of inquiry. I have become convinced that methodological triangulation and multi-method approaches are necessary to fully understand the subtleties and nuances of communication in a family context.

First, I would like to tell a short story that I believe illustrates some of the difficulties facing communication scholars. A couple of years back I participated in an orientation program for students. The dean of another college introduced herself and asked what was my area of specialty. My response of communication was greeted with, "Well, that's useful."

As I later explained to my students, in physics the more variables in a system, the more unpredictable the system becomes. The example I give my students involves a comparison between a two variable and three variable system: or in communication terms, the difference between a dyad and a triad. In a two variable system, movement of information from source to destination can travel in one of two possible directions. If one knows the source, and movement is guaranteed, predicting the destination is a fairly straightforward matter. In simplest terms, barring other intervening variables (which we will get to in a moment), dyads are fairly predictable.

Triads are another matter. Even if one knew the originating source and knew that movement was guaranteed, predicting to which of two possible destinations the information would flow becomes more problematical. If you add intervening variables such as free will, multiple possible fields of experience for members of the triad, differing levels or forms of intent and/or impact, differing situational contexts, then causal prediction becomes nearly-if not completely-impossible. Particles in physics experiments do not have free will.

Communication scholars are interested in investigating message production, transmission and interpretation between and among human actors, who as luck would have it, have free will. Family communication scholars may have a more difficult time as the family context often involves multiple interdependent actors, with free will. How communication scholars have dealt with these inherent complexities of the phenomena of interest is to utilize different approaches in the investigation process. The problem has been, however, these various approaches have not been integrated.

The most obvious reason for not integrating the various approaches to researching communication phenomena is the historical dualism between various approaches. Popularly, scholars have debated the distinction between social scientific and humanistic traditions. I have

come to believe more and more that the distinction is a false one. However, distasteful it may be to some, inquiry, whether qualitative or quantitative in methodology, must be scientific. To unpack that claim, one must understand what is meant by science. Science is simply systematic observation.

A holistic approach to scientific inquiry would and should understand the purposes and goals of various approaches. If the global purpose of scientific inquiry is to theorize, that is to explain phenomena, ultimately what we are talking about is the ability to tell another about our experience in a way they can understand. The dualism between quantitative and qualitative approaches is about how one goes about explaining. Put another way, each approach makes assumptions about the relationship between the knower and the known.

As alluded to in earlier essays (see LeBlanc, 1995; LeBlanc, 1996a), scientific inquiry requires honesty and humility about our place in the epistemological project. The debate centers around the question: Where is the locus of truth? For the subjectivist, truth is reality. For the objectivist, reality is truth. Both approaches have historically assumed direct access to either of these two: truth and/or reality. Neither assumption practices honesty or humility.

What we have access to in that project is the phenomena (the-appearance-of-the-thing), and not the noumena (the-thing-in-itself) (see Husserl, Heidegger). While it may be apparent to casual observation that "reality" is socially constructed, in fact what is actually occurring is the social construction of the "perception of reality." We make meaning about our experience through our interaction. What is "apparent" is the phenomena of meaning-making. However, neither is meaning reality. Meaning is phenomenal. As knower, we do not have direct access to the noumena, only to the phenomena, and only to part of that phenomena.

If what we have access to is the phenomena, then what sense (pardon the pun) does it make to proceed with the debate of procedure. We are about understanding (describing and predicting) the methods of "doing" human relationships, which is interaction. That is our charge. The question is no longer why or when, but rather how. In the final analysis, all research begins in observation -- formal or informal. That is science at its root: systematic observation. Therefore, we should be about the business of systematic observation. The question is: how do we do observation? Therefore, the purpose of the remainder of this essay is to describe how to effectively design a program of study that effectively examines the phenomena of interest.

How to proceed with research design first starts with an examination of what is known. The known may be evidence-based theory, or pre-theoretical evidence. Given what we have theorized about communication to date, the next step requires the development of sophisticated multi-perspective, for example, multi-method-ological research designs. (As I was formulating that last statement, it occurred to me that the root of sophisticated is sophist. Given that the history of our discipline dates back to the Age of Pericles, it is interesting to note that the arguments regarding the relationship between the knower and the known, within the academy, first began there with the rhetoricians and philosophers. Those who took the position that truth was at best probable, as opposed to absolute, were known as sophists.) One caveat regarding the development of these triangulated designs is that such designs may be too complex or cumbersome to complete in a single study. The answer to that problem is to design a program of study.

As I stated earlier, my dissertation research involved a programmatic approach. The dissertation itself was a quantitative study. However, the test instrument that was utilized for data collection was based on characteristics of family interaction that was first described in a

conversation analytic study. The qualitative approach afforded the opportunity to ground items on the survey instrument with directly observed phenomena.

Secondarily, my dissertation was interested in looking at subjects' perceptions of the characteristics of their family interactions across families. To do this, multiple subjects from participating families were surveyed. With some families under investigation being comprised of dyads, while others were comprised of triads, a complex matrix design known as a randomized block design ANOVA was utilized to analyze the data.

While the study did not utilize a multi-method approach per se, it did require a design that included multiple perspectives from earlier studies. This is not meant to suggest that qualitative approaches serve as the servant to the goal of quantitative prediction. In general, it does point to a direction for scientific inquiry: observation, interpretation, categorization, prediction.

Prediction methods require observation, interpretation, and categorization. Indeed, as subjectivists like to point out, researchers cannot separate themselves from their biases. No matter how hard the researcher tries, the overall goal of understanding motivates the researcher to ask questions, make assumptions, and come to conclusions (even small ones) during every step of the process.

The issue of subjective bias has even influenced qualitative researchers to debate who to privilege in the interviewing process. Do we privilege the researcher's perspective in his or her interpretation of the co-participant's responses? Or, do we simply report the co-participant's responses. If we do the latter, do we know if the co-participant is reflexively or reflectively responding. If we do the former, how do we judge if we are reflexively or reflectively processing? We don't, really.

Yet, engaging in the process allows for serendipitous discovery. For example, in an earlier study (see LeBlanc, 1994) I intended to interview couples about their marriages. The interviews were conducted. Initially, the intent was to collect participants' descriptions of their experience. But by interviewing couples together, it provided an opportunity for couples to co-create meaning in the interview process. After transcribing the interviews, minute details of the interaction process itself became available. Unintentionally, the interview served multiple duties as ethnographic, ethnomethodological, phenomenological and conversation analytic data collection.

It seems to me after observing the process of doing research, doing meta-research, that thinking carefully and clearly about what the overall goal of a research project might be allows the scholar to plan the building of the program of study. By doing so, we can begin to understand better the character and quality of complex phenomena, such as family interaction, and also answer more effectively when someone outside the discipline tells us our discipline is "useful."

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