

Designing Research to Find Contradictions & Personal Meaning

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Margaret R. Roller

*Research Design Review – www.researchdesignreview.com– is a blog first published in November 2009. RDR currently includes over 130 articles concerning quantitative and qualitative research design issues. This brief paper presents two articles that were published in 2015 concerning an important goal of all researchers: to unravel the mysteries of attitudes and behavior. Both of these articles emphasize the idea that an essential ingredient to achieving this goal is allowing sufficient **time** in the research process to discover and explore contradictions in participants' responses and find the personal meanings associated with the issues or constructs of interest. The suggestion of adding time to research designs – e.g., longer survey questionnaires, lengthier in-depth interviews – flies in the face of the ever-increasing focus on “faster and cheaper” research through technology. A research design, however, that acknowledges the inconsistent and contradictory nature of human beings, and is intent on discovering personal meaning, will give the researcher the appropriate freedom to reach this all-important objective.*

www.rollerresearch.com

rmr@rollerresearch.com

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Leaving Time in Research Design to Discover Dissonance

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Many conversations about research design revolve around the common goal of maximizing response. Whether it is a quantitative or qualitative study, researchers routinely make design decisions that they hope will mitigate refusals and better the odds of obtaining reliable and valid



responses to research questions. Survey and qualitative – focus group, in-depth interview, ethnographic – researchers carefully consider such things as sampling, mode, screening, survey request/recruiting, and overall questionnaire/outline design along with question wording, all with the desire to derive useful outcomes based on a sound approach to maximizing the actual number of people responding to the research request *as well as the integrity of the responses received to the research questions.*

An important dimension in research design is time; that is, the length of time it will take the survey respondent or qualitative participant to complete his/her involvement with the research. In this regard, questionnaire length (and complexity) is an obvious area of attention in survey research, with researchers such as Jepson, et al. (2005), Deutskens, et al. (2004), and others demonstrating an indirect relationship between length (e.g., in pages or word count) and response rate – the longer the questionnaire length, the lower rate of response. Likewise, qualitative researchers think about how much time to ask of focus group participants or the acceptable length for an in-depth interview with a given target population, knowing that a group discussion of more than two hours, or an interview longer than 30 minutes or an hour, may lead to a particularly high number of refusals depending on the topic and participant type.

With this in mind, researchers often look for ways to condense the research into manageable, sometimes “bite size” portions that make the research request less daunting to would-be participants and simplify research questions to relieve response burden to otherwise complex content. This is especially true these days as researchers are compelled to find more contrived, abbreviated design solutions for the mobile mode.

Massaging the research design to increase response from the people of interest is fundamental to delivering useful outcomes. But what do researchers give up when they reduce the length and complexity of their research to digestible portions?

Anyone who has conducted an in-depth research interview (IDI) will tell you that people are often not able to articulate their thinking when first asked to respond to questions on a subject matter. This may be because it is a topic they rarely think about (i.e., it is relatively unimportant in the scheme of their lives) or the researcher may have asked about some aspect of the topic that the participant had never thought about before being asked. In either case, it is not unusual for IDI participants to voice one attitude at the beginning of the interview only to contradict this thought at some point later in the interview after reflecting and refining their attitudes on the issue. It is these

contradictions and inconsistencies that fuel the interviewer's pursuit of a less tangled understanding of the participant's perspective.

But identifying contradictions – revealing cognitive and emotional dissonance – and untangling inconsistencies take time. It requires a commitment to survey and qualitative research designs that places a high priority on *building in* sufficient time to gain honest knowledge of the research participant. These are research designs that are less focused on reducing questionnaire or interview outlines to bite-size consumables and instead highly centered on design considerations that foster the discovery of dissonance and help the researcher unravel – gain a clearer picture of – participants' attitudes.

Is this a challenge in today's fast-paced, time-constrained culture? Yes, absolutely. But this is a discussion that researchers should be having nonetheless. A discussion that addresses the question: How can researchers maximize response while also maximizing meaning that comes from time spent to discover and understand inconsistencies in participants' thinking?

Jepson, C., Asch, D. A., Hershey, J. C., & Ubel, P. A. (2005). In a mailed physician survey, questionnaire length had a threshold effect on response rate. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, 58(1), 103-105.

Deutskens, E., De Ruyter, K., Wetzels, M., & Oosterveld, P. (2004). Response rate and response quality of internet-based surveys: An experimental study. *Marketing Letters*, 15(1), 21-36.

Image captured from: <http://polyliving.net/2013/04/polyamory-and-emotional-dissonance/>

Beyond the Behavior-plus-“why” Approach: Personal Meaning as Insight

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Researchers are desperate to understand behavior. Health researchers want to know what leads to a lifetime of smoking and how the daily smoking routine affects the quality of life. Education researchers examine the behavior of model teaching environments and contemplate best practices. Psychologists look for signs of social exclusion among victims of brain injuries. Marketing



researchers chase an elusive explanation for consumer behavior, wanting to know product and service preferences in every conceivable category. And, if that were not enough, researchers of all ilk, to a lesser or greater extent, grapple with an often ill-fated attempt to predict (and shape) behaviors to come.

But researchers have come to appreciate that behavior is not enough. It is not enough to simply ask about past behavior, observe current behavior, or capture in-the-moment experiences via mobile. Behavior only tells part of a person’s story and, so, researchers passionately beef-up their research designs to include “why” – focusing on not just *what* people do but *why* they do it. “Why,” of course, is often phrased as “what,” “how,” or “when”

questions – “What was going on at the time you picked up your first cigarette?” – but, whatever the format, the goal is the same, i.e., to get beyond behavior and understand the motivations, the thinking (conscious or not) that ultimately lead to certain actions.

All of this would be fine and good except that the behavior-plus-“why” approach often fails. Many researchers have been pursuing the explanation and prediction of behavior since the beginning of time, and continue to do so because the bubbles of the “ah ha!” moments burst upon subsequent new revelations in human behavior.

The behavior-plus-“why” approach fails because it is a transactional approach to understanding the human experience. It reduces what people do – smoke cigarettes, teach in a certain way, show signs of social exclusion, purchase Coke over Pepsi – and their motivations to a stimulus-response arrangement – My parents smoked, so I became a smoker; I experimented with teaching methods until I found something that worked; as a brain-injury victim, I feel socially isolated because people treat me differently; I buy Coke products because I grew up in Atlanta.

The behavior-plus-“why” transactional approach falls short of true insight because it doesn’t account for personal meaning. It doesn’t account for the fact that each individual associates his or her own personal meaning to any given behavior or thought. Yet personal meaning is what researchers strive for to honestly understand what lies beneath behavior or a construct of interest.

- What does the experience of smoking cigarettes mean to you? How does it make you feel? Who do you smoke with? How does it define your sense of being?

- How do you know that a teaching method is “working”? What does it make you think about? What does it mean to you when you feel “success”?
- What does “social exclusion” mean to you personally? How does it manifest itself? What are the ramifications you experience from “social exclusion”? What would you change, if you could, and how would that make things “better”?
- What part of you is satisfied by purchasing Coke products? What role does it play in your life, and how does this role relate to other aspects of your life?

Going beyond the behavior-plus-“why” approach is something I teach in focus group training. In a recent workshop for a corporate client, I tried to instill the idea that there is personal meaning behind every participant comment. At the conclusion of moderator role playing, a trainee expressed her frustration when she asked someone in her group to suggest improvements to the office environment. To the trainee’s horror, the participant suggested adding a water slide to the workplace to provide an element of “fun.” A water slide? Rather than exploring the personal meaning of a water slide for this particular person, the trainee just ended the group wondering to herself why anyone would want a water slide at the office. What she didn’t know – but then learned – is that it was not a water slide that this person necessarily wanted at the workplace as much as the positive associations a water slide conjures up. It was these positive associations and dimensions that the participant wanted in his work environment that he just happened to articulate as “water slide.”

Finding personal meaning takes time. It requires concentrated time with research participants to explore and understand their behavior and motivations through their words; exploring what those words mean to them and how those words capture the personal meaning of the thoughts conveyed. Finding personal meaning also takes time (and creativity) during analysis and interpretation of outcomes, particularly when many participants are involved.

Such an effort expends valuable time, energy, and resources. But it is certainly better than coming away from the research only to recommend that the client add water slides to the workplace.

Image captured at: <http://www.healthychild.net/health-articles/choosing-the-right-water-slide-rentals/>