Hey, my internet search engines were down ten years ago when I first created this page, and I needed to get this posted. So I opted for a spiffy picture of me interviewing the natives in Australia. [For the record: the li'l guy's favourite beer: XXXX].

As you should all be aware, I tend to do more qualitative than quantitative research, not out of mathophobia but rather because I'm interested in things that are hard to count (nonprofit accountability and policy involvement, for instance; or cross-national differences in administrative reform) in countries that have little data (Brazil!, though this is improving). So I learn languages, read what people have to say about themselves, and voila, I publish.

I've also been a bit jaundiced against quantitative methods because (and this has been asserted by many others) there is a tendency both among academics and among practitioners, especially with the recent move towards performance measurement, to implicitly discount those things that can't be readily counted. So I've been a big advocate of rigorous qualitative research. Unfortunately, my qualitative balloon got a recent puncturing by an article in the Journal of Public Affairs Education, (and this message was reinforced during my recent attendance at the Southeast Conference of Public Administration) in which the author asserts:

"The environments in which public administrators will practice in the future are likely to place greater value on technical skills. Indeed, these environments are already taking shape. At the federal level, the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 has pushed agencies toward greater performance measurement, and increasingly new laws have provisions requiring evaluations. Similar requirement placing demands on public administrators' quantitative skills are appearing at the state level as well. More generally, the declining costs of computing on the desktop and information gathering via the internet place public agencies in environments in which the organizations with which they interact

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1 And while on the topic of XXX beer, other things found while searching for this ad include a Rugby League State of Origin brawl that ended with Queensland fans throwing cans of XXXX onto the field (link). Then there is Slim Dusty's classic “A public with no beer” (link). Just part of the richness that is Australian culture.
increasingly employ quantitative analyses. In thinking about what public administrators will likely do in the future, it seems prudent to assume that these trends will continue." (Weimer 2003:40)

Weimer also goes on to point out that the 'barriers to self-learning' are higher for the development of quantitative than for qualitative skills. I can't disagree with any of this, so it's just as well we're only spending part of this course on qualitative research. Related to this, though, for me a key in doing effective qualitative research is to think in terms of rigour and structure. Qualitative research can be set up as rigorously, and can be presented as systematically and in as structured a fashion, as quantitative research.

What with my wife having recently finished the PhD program at Northern Illinois University, I had the interesting opportunity of doing a second PhD vicariously. As a result, I could learn all the stuff I missed the first time. Georgette took a qualitative research class, and from what I can make out, this class pretty much characterized qualitative research as survey research. There is more to it than this.

* I. Qualitative research *

By way of initial definition, qualitative research is more or less concerned about the qualities of variables, as opposed to the emphasis on quantities in quantitative research. The distinction can be taken too far, in that:
- it can be useful to count these qualities in some way, and/or to express them in some sort of rigorous fashion to clarify one's findings.
- Quantitative research is also not nearly as rigorous as it seems, especially because often qualitative judgments are necessary to operationalize parameters in quantitative research. After all, how do you measure education? Still, the distinction is useful in that there is a segment of the social sciences (and among the body of policy researchers) for whom if you can't count it, it doesn't count.

This creates a number of serious problems:
- Important phenomena that can't be neatly represented through numbers get ignored;
- important phenomena that can't be neatly represented through numbers get stuffed into an inappropriate, numerical straight jacket; and
- unimportant phenomena that are easy to count get emphasized.

Given this tendency to look at qualitative research in contrast to the quantitative alternative, it might be worth looking at the strengths and weaknesses of each:

**Quantitative**
- Precise -- '10' is unambiguous: more than 9.99, less than 10.01.
- Transparent -- honest, good quantitative research can indicate with great precision how conclusions were reached. The variables used can be itemized completely, as well as how these were operationalized. The analytical method used (multiple regression, probit, etc.) can also be specified.
- Breadth v. depth -- the ability to simplify, often using databases that already provide numbers that make a good faith effort to operationalize any number of variables, allows one to look at hundreds, even thousands of cases at once. This great breadth sacrifices depth, though, in that the variables of interest are reflected through these simple, linear, unidimensional operationalizations.

**Qualitative**
Imprecise -- 'good' is a normative concept, 'success' dependent on criteria established for this. Degrees of success are equally imprecise: how much more successful was a program that was 'very' successful, as opposed to one that was just 'somewhat' successful? Even simple categories like race, social class and occupation can be hard to nail down.

- Note, though, that quantitative research often faces these same problems. That mean education for the middle class is 15.87 years sounds tantalizingly precise, yet what exactly do the quant jocks mean by 'middle class', and how exactly did they count 'education'? This is one of the often overlooked similarities between these two research traditions, in that quantitative researchers often have to make fuzzy qualitative decisions about what to count and how to count it.

- Which is why for me, when one is assessing quantitative research, the last thing you should look at is the numbers. Look first at how the researchers operationalized the parameters (how they measured education), and how they modeled the phenomenon of interest. If you find either of these to be lacking (or inadequately explained), don't bother trying to make sense of the numbers.

  - At the same time, be fair. Don't expect precise measurements of fuzzy, imprecise phenomenon. As Emilio Moran put it: better an imprecise measure of an important variable than no measure at all.

Opaque -- the analytical process is rarely as clearly stated as for quantitative research. the qualitative people unambiguously lose here. Again, though, qualitative research can be carried out as systematically and as rigorously as quantitative research.

Depth v. breadth -- qualitative researchers can dig deep into variables and bring in any number of factors, weaving rich stories of complex interactions. This depth sacrifices breadth, though, in that it can be difficult if not impossible to consistently study more than a few cases using this method.

Qualitative research methods

Stay informed.

This can't be emphasized enough. There is no more powerful piece of analytical hardware than the human brain. Computers have their strengths, but their weaknesses include that they find it hard to deal with imprecise, non-quantitative phenomena. What are the implications for contemporary administrative reform of Brazil's history of authoritarian social structures? What about Dilma Rouseff's low popularity for the continuation of her reform agenda? What of Cardoso's reform agenda -- was it really a reform agenda, or just a manifestation of IMF-inspired structural adjustment which sought (by one interpretation) to impoverish the many at the expense of the few? Computers can't deal with this sort of data and these sorts of questions.

The human brain can. Key to this process, though, is the software: the programming of this phenomenal piece of analytical hardware. Through experiencing life, through exposing oneself to a wide range of opinions and views, and through following current events, one can develop a feel for what does and does not happen, what is and is not possible, and so forth. 'Conspiracy theories' are a nice example of this. Granted, 'conspiracy theory' may just be a pejorative term that I apply to those views that my biases lead me to disagree with. But as I am fond of putting it: we live in a country where the President of the US, nominally the most powerful person in the
world, couldn't get away with a bit of consensual, extra-marital oral sex. Given that, I dismiss out of hand suggestions that cancer cures have been hidden from the public, and stuff like that.

Am I naive? Could be. And this, echoing one of the weaknesses of qualitative analysis above, is one of the weaknesses of 'gut feeling' as an analytical method. The analytical process used in this method is wholly opaque. We may say what factors we think we are taking into consideration, but we may not know what factors we are considering. How rational are my views on civil unions in Vermont? Maybe quite, but they are undoubtedly influenced, especially sub-consciously, by personal biases, prejudices and preferences. Which biases? My trendy-left, ivory tower intellectualism, in which gay rights are de rigueur? Or my working class midwestern-American upbringing, with its culture of gay-bashing? Maybe even something more personal, such as the Boy-Named-Sue like experience of being named GAY-lord? Point is we (and I certainly don't) know for sure what motivates my views on this issue.

**Archival research.**

Look at what others have written about your issue, especially others who have deep backgrounds in the issue area. Hence my emphasis on 'systematic, comprehensive research'. Why reinvent the wheel, if someone else has already done it? Deep archival research can be unsexy: lots of stuff still isn't (and never will be) on computerized databases. Having spent hours in Brazilian libraries leafing through a year of back issues of five newspapers, as well as various dusty sources related to my organizations and issues, I can attest to this.

A serious limitation of this approach can be that there is little information in archives on or from marginalized groups and/or about previously ignored issues. Afro-Brazilians, for instance, remain woefully under-represented in Brazilian business, academic, political and similar circles, and this is after considerable improvement over the past century. So there is little on Afro-Brazilian perceptions on Brazilian history in archives in the country. There is some, though, as well as much insightful material by other Brazilians.

A second limitation is that there are few, if any, unequivocally expert sources on any issue. So beware false prophets, and research widely, drawing on numerous perspectives.

**Participant observation.**

The idea here is that one takes part, becomes part of the object of study. Doing research on steelworkers? Walk high steel and turn a torque wrench! There can be limitations to this, in terms of tokenism. Shortly after arriving at Indiana to start a PhD, I heard presentations of two bodies of research that included participant observation. The first was on fishers on Lake Chapala, south of Guadalajara, Mexico. The researcher proudly noted having gone out in a canoe and pulled some nets. Actually pulled some nets, with researcher's own lily white, uncalloused hands! And: they got rained on while returning to shore. Yowza! The second was by a researcher who was looking at communities near a national park in Costa Rica. Said researcher spent six weeks in the area, and spent a lot of time hanging out in the village square, where the women tended to congregate, and chatted with these in order to get to know them. At the time I was not long returned from a two year gig as a roads engineer with the Ministry of Works in Tonga. This
was my primary reason for being in the country, and I had a strong professional background in the field: with ten years work experience and having managed nationally accredited materials testing laboratories in Australia. While in Tonga I also did an Honours degree in International Development through distance learning (in the pre-internet age, all by post) through Deakin University in Geelong, Victoria. My dissertation was on the Tongan construction industry. Now note that this represented a form of participant observation far, far richer than all but a rare handful of social scientists could hope to approximate, and certainly richer than that of my two colleagues mentioned above. Yet unlike my colleague who pulled a fishing net, or the other who chatted with women in the village square, I came out of my experience absolutely dumbfounded by what I didn't know about Tongan construction workers, and am deeply skeptical that my colleagues got much out of their participant observation. Of course I pointed this out to both of my colleagues, and made friends that day!

So there are limitations to participant observation. Another has to do with the same sampling issues that we have discussed throughout this course. Where does one carry out this participant observation? How representative is the milieu chosen? Is it possible that the participation of the researcher could influence the way others act? Even my fellow Tongan construction workers were always aware that there was a pa'alangi (foreigner) in their midst, and modified their behaviour as a result.

**Interview/survey research.**

Talk to people: what a radical concept! It is worth noting in passing that the internationalist who doesn't speak the language of the international country of study is, as I put it in a recently published paper (online link), "naively comparative". English is certainly the international 'lingua franca', yet I was frankly amazed at the richness of the Portuguese language literature in Brazil, when I got to the country. There are literally worlds of insights that one misses by not tapping into these domestic discussions. In the interest of full disclosure, my two participant observation colleagues in Mexico and Costa Rica both spoke very good Spanish. I did not speak anything beyond rudimentary Tongan. But then virtually all Tongans speak English, and one can legitimately question how open Costa Ricans and Mexicans were in my colleagues' presence...

So assume you're staying within the US and language issues aren't quite as important. There are a range of techniques for talking to people:

- **Open ended interview** -- in these, people are allowed to express themselves in their terms, unlike many surveys which force one to choose between various, perhaps inappropriate boxes. These responses, though, are often 'coded' or categorized for ease in analysis.
  - In interviews, it can be important to develop a consistent, systematic set of questions for subjects, while perhaps allowing flexibility for ad hoc follow-ups. This is especially so if differences between sub groups is important. Without a systematic approach, some respondents may not be asked to address some issues.

- **Focus groups** -- small groups intentionally selected and interviewed in depth.

- **Surveys** -- in these (and I'm creating some crude, artificial distinctions between interviews and surveys here) respondents are typically given a set (often rigid) of questions, as well as a list of possible responses. I had a nice example of this while in Vermont, in that the (Bolshie) UVM faculty union movement sent out a wide-ranging survey. One question went something like this:
o How do you feel about faculty involvement in university administration?
  - Is adequate
  - Is somewhat inadequate.
  - Is very inadequate.

Now my reaction to this is something like "I don't want university administration teaching my classes, and I don't want myself administering the university." This wasn't one of the choices, I did actually draw a thick black line through the question, and wrote this in the margin. But somehow I doubt that it was recorded as anything other than 'no response'. In other words, the structure of the question precluded some responses.

Writing survey questions is obviously very important. In the case above my impression was that the question was disingenuous, taking for granted something that should not have been. More honest researchers can make similar mistakes, though, inadvertently writing questions that many respondents misinterpret. As a result, when possible it is a good idea to do a trial run.

For example, in my Tongan construction research (Candler 1997) I carried out an industry survey. The process of setting up this research went something like this:

- **Preliminary research**: after about 18 months of archival research and participant observation, I developed what was meant to be a comprehensive survey of issues facing the industry. The issues (both positive and negative) were developed from the research: those raised in the broader (non-Tongan) research on construction in developing countries, those raised in the few Tongan sources about the country's industry, as well as disgruntled comments from concreters. Everything was included.

- **Instrument design**: the intent was to identify those factors that were most beneficial to, and most harmful to, the industry. I wanted the survey questions to be consistent enough that I could compare the responses. As a result each question was asked in terms of its effect on the industry. There was an important distinction here. I might ask how effective the numerous expatriate personnel in the industry were, and get a highly negative response. It is possible, though, that this issue is largely irrelevant, as the Tongans were able to cover for these inept 'pa'alangis', and so the effect on the industry of these inept expatriate workers was minimal. In theory, then, I should have been able to get some sort of comparability in my responses by focusing on the effect of these various factors.

- **Survey group**: the initial hope was to get a sample of 100+ or so, by drawing widely among engineers, foremen and administrators, as well as job site tradesmen and labourers. It is worth keeping in mind that this is a very small country (100,000 or so) with a very small construction industry (2000 or so workers). The sample could be sub-divided among these various groups. In the event, job site personnel proved impractical, as few of them were broadly enough experienced with the range of issues being discussed to comment on them with any authority. So the sample was limited largely to industry leaders: management, engineers, architects, and such. This yielded a sample of about 40, which was over half of such personnel in the industry.

- **Survey glitches**: it seemed clear that some confusion was generated by the way questions were worded. Early on, respondents interpreted the questions as conceptual, rather than as reflecting on conditions in Tonga. So in response to a question regarding the effect of the quality of construction personnel on the industry, many respondents indicated that the effect was very positive, as quality workers will lead to better construction. What I wanted to get
at, though, was what impact the quality of construction workers in Tonga had on the industry. After half a dozen or so responses, most respondents figured out this distinction, but the first few questions were seriously compromised.

**Content analysis**

In content analysis, one takes amorphous, qualitative data and tries to create some analytical rigour out of it. Often the idea is to quantify this data. Not unlike in survey research, one sets up a series of categories, then analyses and classifies the content of the data accordingly. It is almost like doing a survey of newspaper articles or other sources. I have done this in my Brazilian research (Candler 1999). The idea was to look at newspaper references to the organizations that interested me, then both count and classify these references. In the two states in which I did the research, it was first useful to know that these organizations had a higher profile in one than the other. Further, the classification broke down into references to activity at various stages of the policy process. Note that despite these often heroic efforts to introduce analytical rigour to what is otherwise an amorphous mass of references, this sort of thing can be very subjective. Still, you end up with something that looks like this:

Note that, for all its failings, this is a damn sight stronger than a less structured approach: just remarking "a perusal of newspapers in Santa Catarina and Sergipe shows that professional associations in the former are far more active in public policy issues than in the former." Who says? On what basis can one make that claim? At least by introducing some sort of structure to the analysis, and providing a spiffy graphic (look at all them check marks in Santa Catarina!) these claims can be made more strongly and believably.

**Others?**

Note that I am a fairly simple, truck-driver's-kid-from-Indiana turned construction worker, who somehow ended up in academia. Concrete mix design is my idea of the perfect science. So, some qualitative approaches which to me seem like they MAY BE A BIT DUBIOUS:

- **Phenomenology** -- "Phenomenology, 20th-century philosophical movement dedicated to describing the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without
recourse to theory, deduction, or assumptions from other disciplines such as the natural sciences."

- **Phenomenography** -- "The word "phenomenography" has its etymological roots in Greek "phainomenon" and "graphein", i. e. "appearance" and "description". The combination of these two words makes "phenomenography" a description of appearances. Although the word "phenomenography" was not used in classical Greek philosophy, the interest in describing that which appears can be traced back to pyrrhonism. In modern times, the interest for phenomena has taken different paths. The so called "phenomenalism" has in the classical formulations of British empirism identified reality with phenomena and phenomena with that which is actually present in experience. Berkeley’s dictum "esse est percipi" is an expression of this kind of phenomenalism."

- **Reflective practice** -- "I have come to think of reflective practice by teachers as the counterpart of metacognition for students as advocated in the PEEL project based in Melbourne. Reflective practice involves, among other things, teachers attending to their practices in ways that consider what they are learning from their teaching experiences."

- **Action research** -- "The Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) is committed to supporting and improving the quality of professional practice, achieved through systematic, critical and creative inquiry into the goals, processes and contexts of professional work. The quality of our work in the professions depends upon our willingness to ask questions of ourselves and others, and to explore challenging ideas and practices, including the values that underpin them."

- **Grounded theory** -- "Grounded Theory (GTM) is a "general method of comparative analysis" to discover theory with four central criteria, i.e. work (generality), relevance (understanding), fit (valid), and modifiability (control). GTM is "one of the interpretive methods that share the common philosophy of phenomenology". It is a "do-it-yourself methodology" where no research assistant, no research grant, no dues, and no secret handshakes is needed :-)."
  o Note: smiley face is theirs.

- And there are many, many more.

**Other issues:**

- **Sampling**: Surveys must be carried out on representative samples. We have discussed the irrelevance of much internet polling as a result of this.

- **Beware survey effect**: I was involved (working the crowd) in economic impact surveying in the Indianapolis area, for the IU School of Business, for whom I worked as a research assistant while a graduate student. In these surveys we sampled a roughly random group of people attending various sporting and cultural events (Indianapolis 500, NCAA basketball Final Four, and more local events) and asked them a set of questions. These included where they are from, then questions about expenses. The former question (residence) let us know whether new money was coming into the area or was just recirculating among locals. On the latter question, especially once respondents realized that we were doing economic impact surveys in part to justify bringing these events to the area, and given that these attendees were obviously fans of the events, there was an incentive for respondents to over estimate expenses to make their favourite sport appear that much more desirable and worthy of public support. People also may have had an incentive to exaggerate to avoid looking like tight arses, etc.