

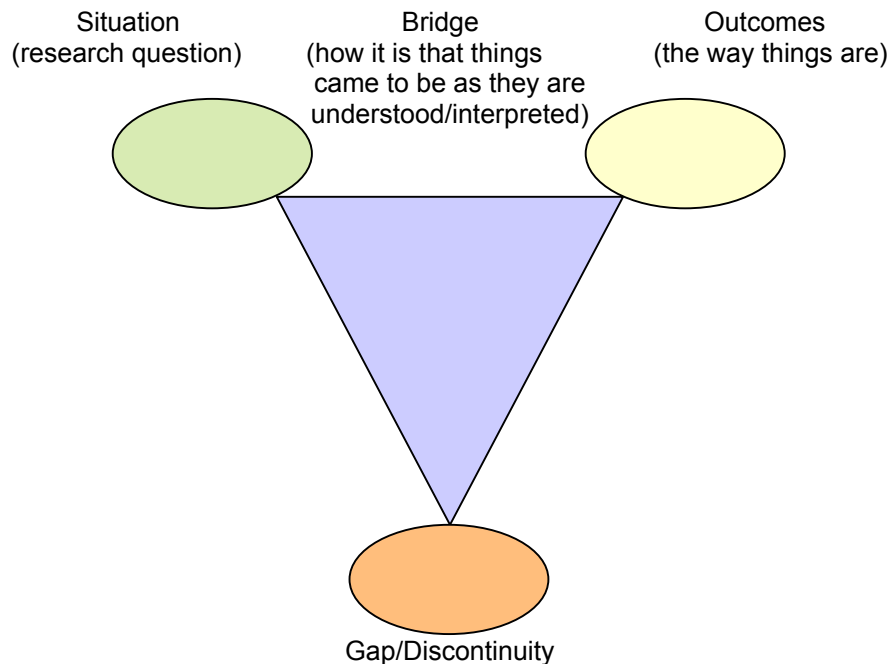
CONNECTING THE DOTS: METHODOLOGY AS GUIDE

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For me, to be methodological is to be holistic, in some sense, in thinking about the research process. It is to consciously connect each research question with a set of philosophical assumptions about human nature and reality. In particular, it is to start with the notion of discontinuity and with an understanding of individuals moving continually through time and space bridging each moment with the next. Such a conceptualization of human communication and the link between individuals and society makes it possible to more fruitfully contemplate how things came to be the way they are (interpretively speaking) and to consider what research methods might be appropriately employed to address my initial research question. In short, methodology allows me to connect my research question to a basic understanding of how the world works, which connects to a theoretical view of human communication, which connects to the research tools or methods that will most usefully connect back to my research question. This paper is presented as a series of musings on these connections between meta-theory and method.



I realized I could visualize this connecting-the-dots concept with the Sense-Making Metaphor (above).

Meta-theoretical Assumptions

- Ontological (nature of reality and of human behavior)
- Epistemological (nature of knowing and of observation)
- Axiological (nature of human values)
- Ideological (nature of power)

These might be mapped out as follows according to various research approaches:

	Ontological Assumptions	Epistemological Assumptions	Axiological Assumptions	Ideological Assumptions
Positivistic	orderly, fixed	isomorphic with reality	objectivity assumed	expert authority
Constructionist/ Interpretivist	orderly, fixed	individual perspectives	individual perspectives	individual authority
Sense-Making	both orderly and chaotic	constructed and mediated	intersubjectivity mediates bias	acknowledged, exposed
Postmodernist	chaotic	knowledge a pretense	objectivity impossible	power inherent throughout

Adapted from Dervin, B. (2003). Information↔Democracy. In B. Dervin & L. Foreman-Wernet with E. Lauterbach (Eds.), *Sense-Making Methodology Reader: Selected Writings of Brenda Dervin*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Borrowing from Richard Carter’s discontinuity assumption, and in keeping with the Sense-Making Methodology, my research proceeds from an understanding that reality is partly ordered and partly chaotic, subject to multiple interpretations, changing over time.

The mapping above also helps me to better see how different **communication theories** are grounded. For example:

1) the traditional transmission model of communication appears to be based on positivistic assumptions such that reality is “out there” to be observed, packaged into messages, and sent to one or more receivers;

source → message → receiver

2) a ritualistic model of communication, in contrast, acknowledges the subjectivity of experience and a socially constructed reality;

3) similarly, a dialogic model of communication focuses on interpretation, mutual understanding, and intersubjectivity.

Research Methods

Selected methods and their connections to meta-theoretical assumptions:

Experimental – For me this method is unworkable, because it is based in a positivistic

view of human communication as able to be manipulated and observed in a manner analogous to the physical world.

Textual analysis – The implication here is that there can be different readings or

interpretations of texts, although alone this method still relies heavily on an authoritative understanding of the researcher’s role and leaves no room for audience understanding or interpretation. It seems to me that it can be a useful tool in tandem with one or both of the methods below.

Carter’s understanding of human behavior and the meta-theoretical implications of discontinuity, described by Grunig:

In their quest to emulate the physical sciences, behavioral and social scientists traditionally adopted the assumptions of logical positivism, especially the idea that there is order in the universe that can be observed and modeled theoretically. An ordered universe would mean that human behavior, like the behavior of physical objects, is *determined* by forces (or variables) that people themselves cannot control. Examples of deterministic variables are concepts such as needs, motives, or attitudes.

Social science theories also have emphasized positive (descriptive) theories more than normative (prescriptive) theories. The reason seems obvious if you accept the presupposition of logical positivism that human behavior is inherently ordered. If human behavior is ordered and one can observe and model that order, then one should be able to explain, predict, and control the behavior of people other than ourselves – just as one can split an atom or send a space ship to the moon once he or she understands the laws of physics.

Grunig, J. (2003). Constructing public relations theory and practice. In B. Dervin & S. Chaffee with L. Foreman-Wernet (Eds.), *Communication, A Different Kind of Horse Race: Essays Honoring Richard F. Carter*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Survey/Interview – These methods allow for an understanding of many different perspectives or understandings of the world; as above, however, there is a danger of imposing the researcher’s position through the questions and how they’re asked. Trust between the researcher and respondent is important.

Ethnography – Observation alone strikes me as having a similar problem to textual analysis alone. Both seem to relate back to positivistic assumptions not only that the researcher has expert authority, but also that knowledge is isomorphic with reality such that all (trained) observations would yield the same information. In conjunction with interviews and other methods, however, as a means of “circling the phenomenon,” observation may prove to be very useful.

Example

Research Question: How do visitors understand their museum experiences? → **Meta-theoretical**

Assumptions: People’s worlds are both orderly and chaotic; they move through time and space sometimes creatively and imaginatively and sometimes rigidly and habitually; they make sense of their experiences based on their own past histories, their immediate material context, and their own thoughts and feelings (i.e., phenomenologically). → **Research Methods:** I would want to gather data from as many sources as possible to attempt to find patterns in the ways that people experience museums. This certainly would need to include interviews with visitors to gather their interpretations or understandings. It might include observation as well; if one recorded the visits on videotape one might use these to facilitate a series of critical-incident interviews with participants.

In pursuing this question of how visitors understand their museum experiences, I might further analyze the bridge section of the triangle graphic at the beginning of this paper. My initial question is seeking outcomes, hopefully patterns of outcomes. Looking at critical incidents or using other interviewing questions would help me to begin to understand the thoughts, ideas, feelings, and so forth (the bridge) that led to the outcomes. I may find it useful to then expand my research to the institution itself – to the exhibition publications it produces, to written and unwritten policies, to the physical environment of the museum, and to interviews with administrators, curators, and others – in an effort to tease out how it is that visitors’ experiences came to be as they are (and, perhaps, to suggest interventions or enhancements). This might include textual analyses and observations as well as more interviews.

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