7-8-2013

A Guidebook and a Research Model: A Review of Doing Excellent Small - Scale Research

Michael L. Clancy
Eastern Michigan University, thehawksnest2@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr

Part of the Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons, and the Social Statistics Commons

A Guidebook and a Research Model: A Review of Doing Excellent Small - Scale Research

Abstract

A guide book and a research model – Doing Excellent Small - Scale Research (Layder, 2013) provides both. First, Professor Layder has written a book that is just what he intended: "an introductory guide" for research students. It provides a process for clearly defining problem and topic questions, advice regarding research designs, methods for data collection and analysis, real - life examples, and a logical sequence tying everything together. Second, the author offers an Adaptive Research Model as a practical approach for conducting social research. This model and this book are recommended (by the reviewer) for research students and teachers, both undergraduate - and graduate - level.

A Guidebook and a Research Model:
A Review of *Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research*

Michael L. Clancy
Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan USA

A guidebook and a research model – Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research (Layder, 2013) provides both. First, Professor Layder has written a book that is just what he intended: "an introductory guide" for research students. It provides a process for clearly defining problem and topic questions, advice regarding research designs, methods for data collection and analysis, real-life examples, and a logical sequence tying everything together. Second, the author offers an Adaptive Research Model as a practical approach for conducting social research. This model and this book are recommended (by the reviewer) for research students and teachers, both undergraduate- and graduate-level. Keywords: Adaptive Research, Orienting Concepts, Problem Questions, Research Logs, Social, Research

This review covers two aspects of the book, *Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research* (Layder, 2013): (a) as an educational text, and (b) the Adaptive Research Model. First, Professor Layder has written a book that is just what he intended: "an introductory guide" for research students. It demonstrates how to define problem and topic questions to begin the research process, and provides advice regarding research designs, methods for data collection and analysis, real-life examples, and a logical sequence tying everything together. Second, the author offers an Adaptive Research Model as a practical approach for conducting social research. This model and this book are designed (and recommended by the reviewer) for undergraduate- and graduate-level research students and teachers.

An Introductory Guide for Student Research

Overview

Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research provides a cookbook approach to conducting a research project. Starting with identifying a research interest, then moving through the development of problem questions, topic questions, a research design, data collection methods, data analysis, and writing a research report, the text provides a how-to process for new researchers.

Strengths and Good Practices

First of all, the organization of the book could be a model for all textbooks. Each chapter begins with a preview list of topics, and includes examples of actual research projects and useful checklists for the researcher.

Layder (2013) recommends two good practices for all new researchers: (a) the importance of writing early and continuously, and toward that end (b) keeping a Research Log.

More than anything else, I want to stress that actually starting to write, and getting into a regular habit of writing, as early as possible, is probably the most

important factor in helping you to carry through a research project to its completion. (p. 60)

To organize the writing process for a research project, the Research Log should contain any ideas, questions, diagrams, design plans, orienting concepts, and ideas for future research; as well as, an on-going history of the research project itself, including any changes that occur along the way. To reinforce this idea, each chapter of the text ends with a Checklist for Research Log Notes

The author emphasizes the fundamental idea that social research should be problem-driven; that it is essential to develop clear problem and topic questions right at the start of the project.

The important point is to develop some core research questions which will serve to define the nature, scope and objectives of the research, and thus give it clarity and momentum right from the start. […] research questions themselves result from the combined influence of a problem-focus and a topic-focus. (Layder, 2013, p. 42)

Examples of topic and problem questions are discussed in the text, but their basic aspects are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1: The Fundamental Aspects of Topic and Problem Questions

Topic Questions	Problem Questions
Specific, Concrete, and Empirical	General, Abstract, and Conceptual
Vary in terms of Time, Place, and People	Independent of Time, Place, and People
Descriptive	Explanatory

Note. Adapted from *Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research,* by D. Layder, 2013, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (pp. 41-43). Copyright 2013 by Derek Layder.

In this model, topic questions deal with the "who, what, when, and how" of observable events or behaviors. Problem questions are, for example, "why did this occur," or "what were the underlying causes?" Table 2 shows six key problem questions to help the researcher focus their project.

Knowing little else, the beginning social researcher could use the descriptions from Table 1 and the questions in Table 2 as a self-tutorial to get started, then as guideposts (or touchstones) to keep their research project on its intended path as they complete their literature search and research design.

Table 2: Six Key Problem Questions for Research Focus

No.	Factors	Problem Questions
1	Environment	How are a person's self-identity, feelings, ideas and attitudes related to his or her social environment?
2	Interactions	How do people influence each other's behavior in social interaction – either 'face-to-face' or –mediated' through texts, e-mail, mobiles, and so on?
3	Setting (Context)	How do social settings (such as schools, universities, families, factories, companies, hospitals, and so on) influence the behavior of those operating within them?
4	Membership	How is social behavior influenced by: (a) social class, ethnicity, gender, age, neighbourhood, region, or politics; (b) cultural values, expectations and institutions (including the media)?
5	Power	How does power influence human behavior and social activity?
6	Time	How does the passage of time influence social behaviour?

Note. Adapted from *Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research,* by D. Layder, 2013, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (pp. 8-10). Copyright 2013 by Derek Layder.

Weaknesses

Only one element of the book, itself, is of concern to the reviewer: consistency in describing problem and topic questions. First, the basic elements of problem and topic questions are very clear in Table 1, and the author's problem questions (Table 2) and supplemental examples (pp. 8-10) are also straightforward. In subsequent mentions in the book, however, inconsistent descriptions/wording of problem and topic questions (vis-à-vis "what, why, how come, etc.") were encountered. These basic building blocks are too important for any misunderstanding by a reader.

<div align="center">

The Adaptive Research Model

</div>

Overview

"No plan will survive contact with the enemy" (von Moltke). Field Marshal von Moltke's comment has become a standard piece of the education in the U.S. military academies. However, von Moltke, as chief strategist for the Prussian General Staff in the 19th century, was the one who developed their war plans. How is this seeming dichotomy resolved?

The Field Marshal realized the importance of having clear military plans – without them, an army is essentially an armed mob. However, he also knew that, while those plans provided overall goals and directives, along with command roles and responsibilities, actual

combat would require adaptive, real-time responses on the part of battlefield soldiers and commanders. Professor Layder uses this same logic in presenting the Adaptive Research Model.

First, the Adaptive Research approach is strictly problem-focused, but recognizes that research projects often change while in-progress. "Once underway, your plans and focus may shift, change or readjust, but having a preliminary focus and design in place will ensure that any changes will be ordered and controlled" (p. 11). Figure 1 shows the author's overview of the Adaptive Research process.

Problem → Topic → Research → Sampling
Questions   Questions   Design   → Data Collection
                                    → Data Analysis
                                    → Findings and Conclusions

Figure 1 - Adaptive Research Model Overview. Adapted from *Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research,* by D. Layder, 2013, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (p. 11). Copyright 2013 by Derek Layder.

Second, "with the adaptive approach, instead of discrete stages, social research is understood as a continuously unfolding process" (Layder, 2013, p. 12). With this in mind, it may have been helpful to provide a more complete diagram of the overall Adaptive Research process as part of Chapter 1 – "Overview of the Adaptive Approach," instead of the simple model provided by Figure 1, which implies a linear progression. Figure 2 is an alternative diagram, developed by the reviewer.

Figure 2 attempts to show the iterative nature of the process, described very thoroughly by the author in the text, in which the problem and topic questions are interlocking elements; the research design is guided by the research questions; and the results of sampling, data collection, and analysis are checked against (and fed back into) those touchstone questions and orienting concepts. "Shifts and transformations in core research questions can happen at any point during the project, after data collection has begun, and are a natural part of the research process" (Layder, 2013, p. 55).

Problem & Topic → Research → Research → Sampling,
Questions   Questions   Design   → Data Collection   → Findings
                                            → & Analysis   and
                                                                       Conclusions

                                                Orienting
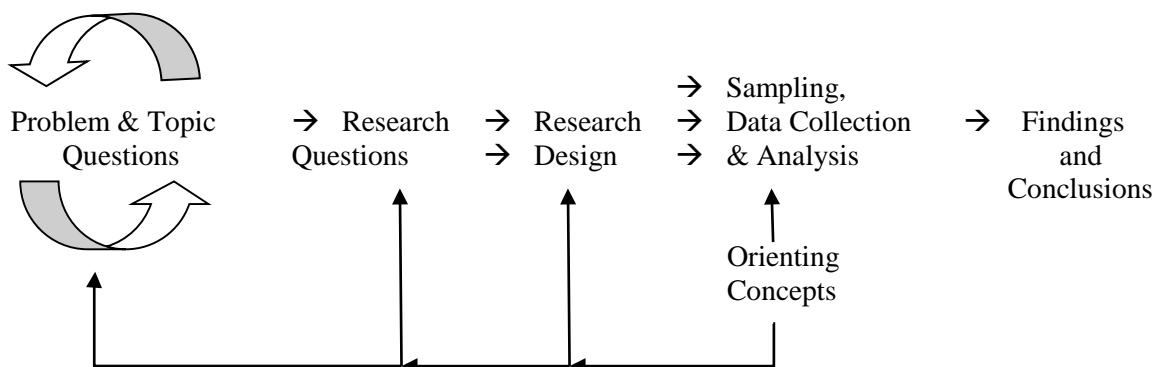   Concepts

Figure 2 - Adaptive Research Model Continuous Process Overview. Adapted from *Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research,* by D. Layder, 2013, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Copyright 2013 by Derek Layder.

Strengths and Good Practices

Five elements of the Adaptive Research Model merit highlighting: (a) Problem-Driven Research, (b) Adaptive Design, (c) Imaginative Sampling, (d) Orienting Concepts, and (e) Adaptive Research as an Iterative Process.

Problem-Driven Research

The first element has already been described, with the problem- and topic-questions serving availing for initial focus and as touchstones throughout the research project. Layder (2013) stresses its importance:

> Remember, adaptive research is problem-driven. Thus the initial plan or design of the project is structured by its problem-focus and core research questions. [….] In effect, decisions about the exact problem-focus and the core research questions are the most pivotal the adaptive researcher has to make. (p. 167)

Adaptive Design

Adaptive Design is important because of the nature of modern society and social research. More and more, people and organizations operate in dynamic environments (Anderson, 1999; Galinsky, Bond, Kim, Brownfield, & Sakai, 2005; Hallowell, 2005, Jensen, 1991). In addition, significant disruptions often cause step-functions changes that obviate fixed research designs (Meyer, Gaba, & Colwell, 2005). If indeed, no plan will survive contact with the enemy, flexible design would appear to be a logical approach for researchers. But, to avoid knee-jerk responses, keeping focus on the touchstone questions can keep a project on track, despite turbulence and setbacks.

Imaginative Sampling

"What sort of evidence do I need to provide answers to, and explanations of, my research problem" (Layder, 2013, p. 14)? If an entire population could be directly studied, sampling would be unnecessary. Since this is not usually feasible, a sample must be selected. The author describes this as "the criteria used in selecting the 'sample' of people, observations, and documents from which" data will be collected (p. 113). Such selections are also influenced by the challenges of access (to an organization, specific people, and source documents), researcher safety, ethical research concerns, time constraints, and funding. So, a well-designed sampling plan is important, but should also be flexible. In this respect, it should resemble the guidance system of a cruise missile, comparing its programmed flight path with the actual terrain, and making adjustments as needed to complete the mission.

A second aspect of research design (and the sampling plan therein) is whether the research is intended to provide explanation or exploration. Toward that end, the author has developed a particular variant of purposive sampling that he terms "problem sampling," which serves to facilitate both exploration and explanation (Layder, 2013, p. 102). Starting with an initial conventional sample, flexible sampling kicks in once the research is underway (p. 13). This approach is appropriate for field research, because of its non-controlled nature, and "relies on purposive samples and the selection of 'information rich' cases for in-depth study" (p. 114). This approach also embraces the idea that new data, personal observations,

environmental changes, etc. may very well reinforce, modify, or require changes to a research design.

Orienting Concepts

Data coding is an integral part of data analysis, with coding schemes usually designed around either descriptive, tangible data elements (e.g., words and phrases, events, or locations) or conceptual elements, which Layder (2013) describes as more abstract, general, and analytic (pp. 121-122).

The adaptive approach requires that you begin data analysis by choosing *Orienting Concepts* [capitalization added] from established knowledge and previous research, as opposed to the "open-coding" technique, as suggested in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) (pp. 131-134).[1] Such Orienting Concepts provide the initial framework for coding and analysis, based upon a particular "take" on qualitative data, and suggest possible explanations for observed patterns of behavior (p. 140). Thus, as the iterative process (of coding and analysis) continues, the research data is scrutinized vis-à-vis the Orienting Concepts, and those concepts are tested as to how they explain the research data. The author says this approach provides a guiding structure – but is flexibly adaptive (p. 155).

Iterative Process

As shown in Figure 2, the Adaptive Research process is not linear. While the initial problem questions are intended as relatively fixed, the research design, sampling plan, data collection, and analysis are all viewed as works-in-progress, until a coherent whole has emerged. This "feedback loop" approach enables the researcher to adapt as necessary, while staying true to the project's problem questions and orienting concepts. It also enables the researcher to be open to "emergent possibilities," which makes it likely that at least some discovery, or addition of challenging data, or innovations in conceptual analysis will occur (Layder, 2013, p. 155).

Summary

Doing Excellent Small-Scale Research (Layder, 2013) is just what the author intended – an introductory guide for research students. The author's advice regarding using Problem and Topic questions to focus a research project, to begin writing as soon as possible, and to keep a Research Log are all Good Practices, applicable to any research work. This book would serve well for first-time researchers as a tutorial and for experienced researchers as a reference.

In addition, the author's Adaptive Research Model offers design flexibility, without necessarily sacrificing academic rigor, for social research. Problem and Topic Questions create initial focus and on-going guideposts, Flexible Sampling methods enable the researcher to adapt as needed (especially when encountering organizational turbulence and disruptions), and Orienting Concepts inform the data collection and analysis work (through feedback loops). This model is worth considering.

---

[1] For the original work on Grounded Theory, see Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

References

Anderson, P. (1999). Complexity theory and organization science. *Organization Science,*
        10(3), 216-232.
Galinsky, E., Bond, J., Kim, S., Brownfield, E., & Sakai, K. (2005). *When the way we work
        becomes too much.* Families and Work Institute. Retrieved from
        http://www.familiesandwork.org
Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago, IL: Aldine.
Hallowell, E. (2005). Overloaded circuits: Why smart people under-perform. *Harvard
        Business Review,* 83(January), 54-62. Retrieved from http://www.familiesandwork.org
Jensen, B. (1999). *Simplicity.* Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
Layder, D. (2013). *Doing excellent small-scale research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
        Publications.
Meyer, A., Gaba, V., & Colwell, K. (2005). Organizing far from equilibrium: Nonlinear
        change in organizational fields. *Organization Science, 16*(5), 456-473.
Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *The basics of qualitative research: Techniques and
        procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.

Author Note

Following a thirty-year engineering and manufacturing management career, Michael Clancy returned to school in 2009 (first, in the D.B.A. program at Lawrence Technological University, Southfield, MI; now, in the Ph.D. – Technology program at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI) to fulfill a life-time goal of university-level teaching. Mr. Clancy's research interests are (a) organizations as complex adaptive systems, (b) leadership studies, and (c) "a place to stand" in complex times. His education includes a M.S. – Mechanical Engineering, University of Michigan; a M.B.A., Saginaw Valley State University; and a B.S. – Engineering, Oakland University. He may be contacted at thehawksnest2@gmail.com

Article Citation

Clancy, M. (2013). A guidebook and a research model: A review of *Doing Excellent Small-
        Scale Research*. *The Qualitative Report, 18*(Review 15), 1-7. Retrieved from
        http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/clancy15.pdf