



CHAPTER

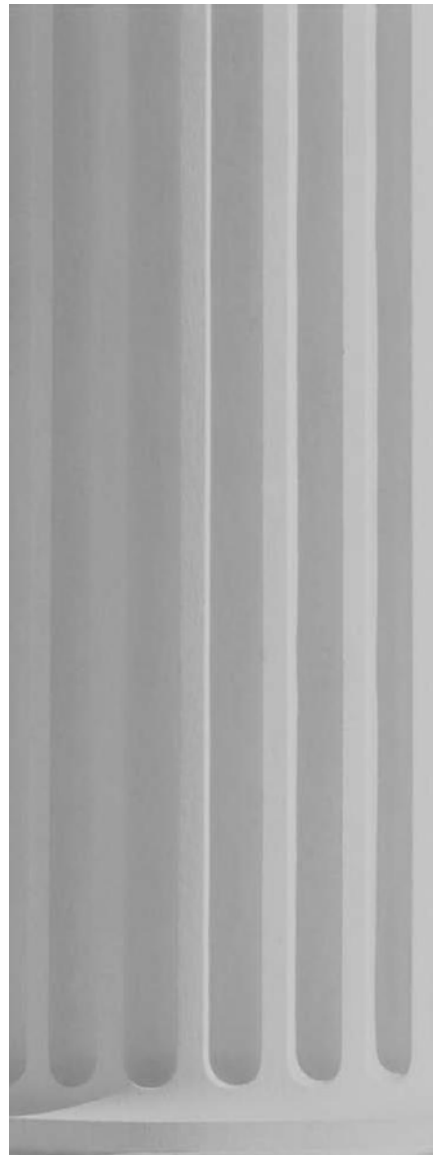
8

Qualitative and Mixed Methods Designs

KEY TERMS

ethnography
feasibility
field research
grounded theory

mixed methods
phenomenology
rigor
relevance



OUTLINE

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mixed methods

Any research that uses multiple research methods to take advantage of the unique advantages that each method offers. For instance, a study that combines case study interviews with an experimental design can be considered mixed methods.

relevance

In qualitative research, the degree to which a study may make a practical contribution to a substantive area as well as the goodness of fit of methods to the study goals in all aspects of the design.

rigor

In qualitative research, the soundness of the methods chosen and degree to which the design has accounted for potential problems in any stage of the research.

feasibility

In qualitative research, the “doability” of the design—the degree to which each part of the study is realistic and appears to have a high probability of success in implementation.

Qualitative methods have been growing in scope and sophistication, but designing a qualitative study presents special challenges. Many of the philosophical and practical issues are still actively discussed, providing an ongoing stimulus to critical thinking about the nature of research and the criteria that make it “good.” As a student, you can look at this situation from an idealistic perspective and be grateful that you are not merely being forced to memorize a set of procedures but being trained to be thoughtful, creative, and responsible in designing your study. I’ve noticed that students who think of themselves as practical but not particularly mathematical may tend toward qualitative research to avoid statistics. This attitude should be checked at the door, along with any notion that a qualitative design is easier or necessarily more meaningful. Here I’ll introduce qualitative and **mixed methods** design with some comments on justification (why you would consider this kind of design), and then provide a brief overview of some of the traditions and alternatives.

The main reasons that a researcher might consider doing a qualitative study is when the state of knowledge in an area is quite limited; when constructs are not well understood, defined, or measured; or when prior research has apparently hit a dead end. Thus, it is impossible to plan a study with the same level of detail and probability (both literally and figuratively) as a typical quantitative study. The major justification for doing the qualitative study *might* in fact be the prospect of an eventual quantitative study of the problem. In addition, qualitative research is emergent; that is, it is well suited to situations in which preconceived notions are purposely limited and where the intent of the researcher is a more gradual process of discovery as the study unfolds. It allows for flexibility in procedures as circumstances during data collection change. All of these characteristics make the research design process challenging, especially when it comes to obtaining study approval or funding from quantitatively oriented faculty or review panels.

This does not mean that there is little to define the qualitative research design process except the absence of statistics. Morse (2003), who has served on or consulted with grant agency panels in several countries, provided some guidance by elaborating on Guba’s (1981) criteria for evaluating qualitative research: **relevance**, **rigor**, and **feasibility**. Relevance refers to the potential impact of a study in the topic area. Will it potentially make a difference? The rigor of the proposed study can be assessed by asking whether the methods proposed are both appropriate and strong relative to the problem that is to be studied. Last, but not least, a judgment of feasibility can be made to indicate whether all practical aspects of the proposal are in order. Morse recommended a broad assessment of feasibility, including the qualifications of the investigator, access to the study population (including any potential ethical complications), and the overall likelihood that the study can be completed as proposed. All three dimensions can be translated into critical questions that can be considered with regard to all aspects of any qualitative study proposal, from topic to analysis to dissemination. It would be wise for a study designer to try to think like a study reviewer, and Morse has provided a helpful guide.

Elliot Eisner is a well known educational researcher who has contributed much to better understanding and use of qualitative research methods (1991). One of his contributions is elaboration of six features that “make a study qualitative”. These features are presented in Table 8–1.

TABLE 8-1 Eisner's Six Features of a Qualitative Study

- 1) The study is *field focused*.
- 2) The study employs the *self as an instrument*.
- 3) The study has an *interpretive character*.
- 4) The study *makes use of expressive language and the presence of voice in text*.
- 5) The study *pays attention to particulars*.
- 6) The study is believable because of its *coherence, insight and instrumental utility*.

The field focus of qualitative research refers to the emphasis on naturalistic settings, documents, conversations and other phenomena represented life as it is experienced. This of course contrasts with the experimental lab situation in which control is highly valued.

When we think of using ourselves as a measurement instrument, we are utilizing our senses and our sensibility. That is, the researcher is open to subjective experience as seen, heard and felt, but also as processed through all that makes us individual humans through our personal history.

Interpretation occurs at two levels, according to Eisner. First, there is the level of explanation, or accounting for how something seems to happen in a particular context. The second aspect of interpretation is related to understanding the apparent meaning of the experience for those being observed. How does a person seem to feel, think, behave in a given set of circumstances? The goal is to go beyond surface characterization to something called "thick description". Thick description means that the story is told in detail, communicating the essence of what it is like for the participants.

The use of expressive language and the presence of voice is a particularly distinctive feature of qualitative research reports in contrast to quantitative studies. As Eisner said, in a qualitative study it is clear that the story is being told by a person and not a machine; an empathic person with emotions that the reader can understand and relate to just as the writer has felt them when in the research setting.

Paying attention to particulars refers to the level of analysis, and the extent that the study attempts to relate particulars to other levels. For example, a case study might be a complete report on very individual characteristics of the case, with no interest in generalizing to other cases. In contrast, when we derive a sample from a population in a quantitative study, the usual intent is to generalize to the population.

Judgments about the value of a qualitative study are a summary, integrative kind of judgment based on characteristics such as coherence, insight, and instrumental utility. It is the weight of combined evidence rationally assessed, rather than a summary statistical indicator such as an effect size or probability value.

One of the reasons that qualitative research is sometimes not regarded as seriously as quantitative is the misconception that analysis of qualitative data is unsystematic and superficial. This notion is as mistaken as the idea that because procedures may be adapted to changing circumstances in the course of a study, that the analysis can be invented on the fly after the data is collected. A well-planned qualitative study includes an integrated approach to design and analysis. Constatas (1992) provided some helpful guidance on this issue by highlighting the importance of making procedures public rather than private, and therefore explicit and replicable. You should know what you are going to do with your data before you collect it, practice your procedures, and write them down in advance. In Chapter 13, you'll become familiar with some of the possibilities for analysis. Here I'll focus on considerations in making decisions about the design of the study.

In addition to a critical perspective like that of a review panel member, a study designer should review the research paths previously established in qualitative

methodology traditions. A qualitative tradition is a general way of thinking about conducting qualitative research. It describes, either explicitly or implicitly, the purpose of the qualitative research, the role of the researcher(s), the stages of research, and the method of data analysis. The term *tradition* may make you think that we must be talking about “old stuff,” but perhaps as with music, there are roots in the traditions that continue to produce lively new branches. Here, four of the major qualitative traditions are introduced: ethnography, phenomenology, field research, and grounded theory.

8-1 Ethnography

The ethnographic approach to qualitative research comes largely from the field of anthropology. The emphasis in **ethnography** is on studying a phenomenon in the context of its culture. Originally, the idea of a culture was tied to the notion of ethnicity and geographic location, but it has been broadened to include virtually any group or organization.

Ethnography is an extremely broad area with a great variety of practitioners and methods. However, the most common ethnographic approach is participant observation as a part of **field research**. The ethnographer becomes immersed in the culture as an active participant and records extensive field notes. As in **grounded theory**, there is no preset limiting of what will be observed and no obvious ending point in an ethnographic study.

One example of a researcher who has made extensive and very productive use of ethnographic methods is Professor Myra Bluebond-Langner of Rutgers University. Since the 1970s, she has been studying the experiences of children with life-threatening illness as well as the experiences of their families (2000). Bluebond-Langner used ethnography to capture the complexity of the life circumstances of children and families in this situation. She documented the effects of physical, psychological, environmental, ethical, legal, cultural, and other variables by recording and studying the lived experience of the people in their own words. Her current work involves a prospective study of how children make decisions when cure for disease is not likely. The design of the study is longitudinal (over 2 years) and includes participant observation and collection of transcripts of formal and informal conversations involving approximately 80 children, their relatives and health care providers.*

8-2 Phenomenology

The **phenomenology** tradition emphasizes the study of how the phenomenon is experienced by respondents or research participants. It has a long history in several social research disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and social work. Phenomenology is a school of thought that focuses on people’s subjective experiences and interpretations of the world. That is, the phenomenologist wants to understand how the world appears to others.

For some researchers, the phenomenological approach is more philosophy than methodology. In an attempt to maintain the essence of the study of subjective lived experience, but also meet criteria for scientific investigation, Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) developed a more systematic and specific set of procedures for phenomenological studies. Their model is represented in Figure 8–1.

One of the key features of the model is the emphasis on maintaining the meaning of the original verbalizations of the participants throughout the steps in the study. As with the previously cited work by Bluebond-Langner, the phenomenologi-

ethnography

Study of a culture using qualitative field research.

field research

A research method in which the researcher goes into the field to observe the phenomenon in its natural state.

grounded theory

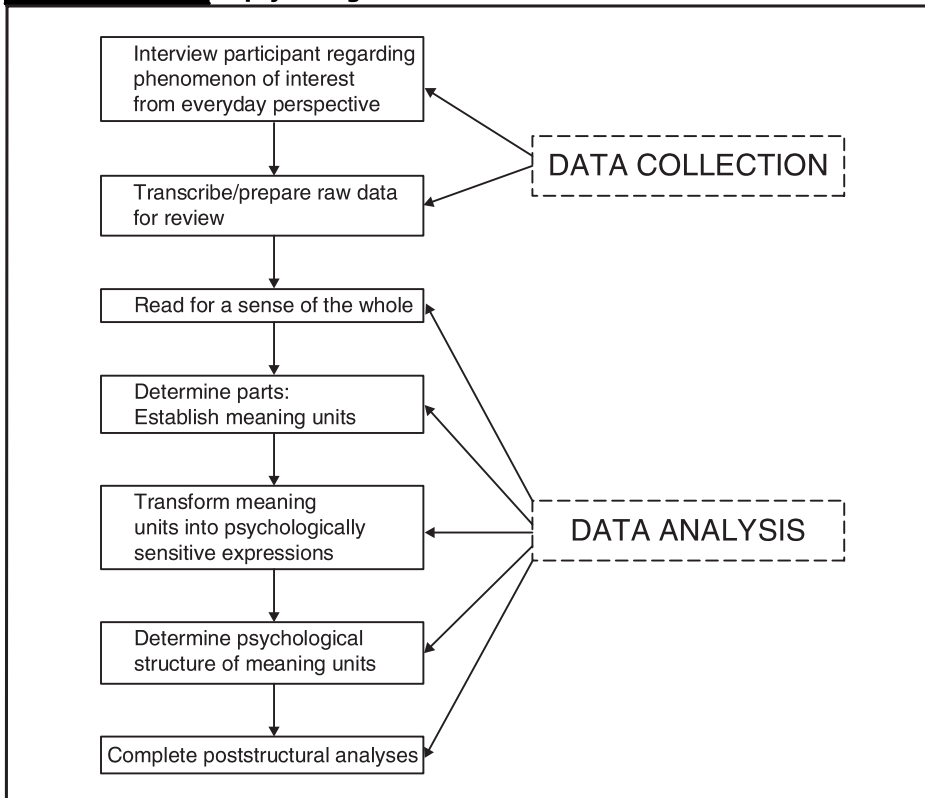
An iterative qualitative approach that includes initial generative questions, gathering qualitative data, identifying theoretical concepts, verifying emerging concepts in data, reconsidering theoretical concepts, and so on, until a detailed theory that is grounded in observation is achieved.

phenomenology

A philosophical perspective as well as an approach to qualitative methodology that focuses on people’s subjective experiences and interpretations of the world.

*Downloaded from http://children.camden.rutgers.edu/ResearchProjects/Bluebond_MDM.htm; accessed August, 2006

FIGURE 8-1

Giorgi and Giorgi's (2003) descriptive phenomenological psychological method

cal method may be particularly valuable in the study of topics in which trust with participants may be especially important and not easily obtained. In addition, as the Giorgis' study of homophobia illustrates, the method is also well suited to inquiry into topics that are relatively new, complex, and sensitive.

8-3 Field Research

Field research can also be considered either a broad tradition of qualitative research or a method of gathering qualitative data. The essential idea is that the researcher goes into the field to observe the phenomenon in its natural state or "in situ" (on site). As such, it is probably most related to the method of participant observation. The field researcher typically takes extensive field notes that are subsequently coded and analyzed for major themes. The series of studies conducted by Michelle Fine and her colleagues in women's prisons, described in Section 8-5, Mixed Methods, represent an excellent example of field research. Among the striking aspects of this work is the inclusion of prison inmates (who were also students in the program being studied) as collaborators and co-authors.

8-4 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a qualitative research tradition that was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The self-defined purpose of grounded theory is to develop theory about phenomena of interest, but Glaser and Strauss are not talking about abstract theorizing. Instead, the theory needs to be grounded or rooted in observations—hence, the term.

Grounded theory is a complex dynamic iterative process in which the development of a theory and the collection of data related to that theory build on each other. The research begins with the raising of generative questions that help guide the research but are not intended to be either static or confining. As the researcher begins to gather data, core theoretical concept(s) are identified. Tentative linkages are developed between the theoretical core concepts and the data. This early phase of the research tends to be open and can take months. Later, the researcher is more engaged in verification and summary. The effort tends to evolve toward one core category that is central. Eventually, you approach a conceptually dense theory as each new observation leads to new linkages that lead to revisions in the theory and more data collection. The core concept or category is identified and fleshed out in detail.

What do you have when you're finished? Presumably, when you have an extremely well-considered explanation for some phenomenon of interest—the grounded theory. This theory can be explained in words and is usually presented along with much of the contextually relevant detail.

8-5 Content Analysis

As the term implies, content analysis generally refers to the analysis of data, and is a strategy that can be flexibly applied to many qualitative designs. You will read more about content analysis as a data analytic method in Chapter 13. Here I just want to introduce you to an interesting way of thinking about content analysis in terms of study design.

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) described three main purposes of content analysis, each of which has implications for decisions about design. The first type of content analysis research is *conventional content analysis*. In this form of analysis, there is no preconceived theory or coding scheme, but instead an attempt to “let the data speak for themselves” by review, discussion, coding and perhaps model building. In Hsieh and Shannon’s view, this form of content analysis shares much with other qualitative analysis methods, but is less involved than grounded theory analysis, which goes further in theory development.

The second form of design for content analysis is referred to as *directed content analysis*. Directed content analysis is motivated by a specific theory or model, or possibly competing theories or models. The level of detail in the coding is variable, depending on the specificity of the prior work. Hsieh and Shannon cite an example of using Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ stages of grief model to examine the transcripts of interviews with people at various points in the life related to dying and grief for correspondence with the theoretically based expectations.

The third option in content analysis design described by Hsieh and Shannon is *summative content analysis*. In this analysis the researcher adds to the use of a model as in directed content by adding procedures for summarizing content via counting occurrences of particular terms or phrases, but continues with an attempt to identify alternative expressions and underlying meanings in a process referred to as latent content analysis.

8-6 Mixed Methods

Earlier in this text you were introduced to the idea of the multitrait multimethod matrix as a way to conceptualize and evaluate specific methodological aspects of a study that may use more than one measurement method and measure more than one trait. The MTMM triangulation procedures are useful in quantitatively isolating a particular phenomenon and partitioning the method variance from the score variance. Now we will consider the possibility that some of the multiple methods in a design could be qualitative as well as quantitative. In recent years, the combina-

tion of multiple methods has come to be called mixed methods research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003). Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004) defined mixed methods research as “the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study” (p. 17).

The emergence of mixed methods thinking has been part of the larger discussion (which some refer to as a paradigm shift, or even a war (e.g., Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998)) of philosophical perspectives on the nature of reality and ways of understanding it. This has included the advocacy of a pragmatist point of view on mixed methods as a third wave, complement, or in some quarters, alternative to, the post-positivist/empiricist/quantitative and constructivist/phenomenological/qualitative positions. Tashakkori & Teddlie (1998) noted that many examples of studies can be found that fit the mixed methods approach, but have not yet been labeled as such because the terminology and concepts of mixed methods are too new.

The emphasis on a complementary perspective is expressed in Johnson & Turner’s (2003) statement of the fundamental principle of mixed methods research: “methods should be mixed in a way that has complementary strengths and nonoverlapping weaknesses” (p. 299). This implies that decision making regarding data collection methods be informed by a thoughtful accounting of the assets and liabilities of procedures. For example, consideration of a focus group strategy should include awareness of strengths such as usefulness in exploring topics, following up with probes, and potentially rapid data collection vs. limits in terms of cost, impact of dominant group members, and potentially time-consuming data analysis, among other strengths and weaknesses. They also outlined the incorporation of cross-sectional and sequential uses of qualitative and quantitative procedures. The use of graphic displays, or study schemas, in the design process may be particularly valuable in making the logic of mixed method design explicit.

Mixed methods research is a relatively new area with tremendous potential. But there are still important issues that need further attention. For example, Miller and Fredericks (2006) cited the lack of standard procedural rules as a limit in evaluating the quality of a study, including the quality of inferences drawn from a mixed methods study. However, they noted that it is possible to identify a design by its components and to critique particular designs with regard to validity. In so doing the critique aids the study designer in choosing the strongest options depending on the research context (e.g., educational evaluation, policy analysis, etc.).

In Chapter 1, you were briefly introduced to my version of concept mapping because of its potential role in conceptualizing a research problem. But concept mapping also represents a kind of mixed methods research strategy because it begins with a qualitative brainstorming procedure, includes multivariate statistical analysis or sorting and rating data, and quite often concludes with a qualitatively oriented interpretation and discussion of utilization. This method can also be described as integrated mixed methods because standard procedures have been developed for use of specific qualitative and quantitative procedures in different study phases (Kane & Trochim, 2006).

Concept mapping can also become part of an ongoing mixed methods research program, beyond a single study. For example, an expert model of children in palliative and hospice care was developed with concept mapping (Donnelly, Huff, Lindsey & Schumacher, 2005). The items in this model then became the basis of a coding scheme used in dissertations by Christina Mesmer and Carrie Fitzgerald that employed case synthesis (multiple case study). This study was most like Hsieh and Shannon’s (2005) description of directed content analysis. The content of the expert model was compared with published case studies, and a correlational analysis of need satisfaction to quality of life was also included.

Another example is the participatory action research conducted by Michelle Fine and a remarkable collaboration of graduate student researchers and inmate

researchers. Fine and her team used both qualitative and quantitative methods in the study of the value of a college education for prison inmates. The study was prompted by a reaction to a federal decision to eliminate funding for about 350 prison-based college programs. The design of the study included questions that were addressed with both quantitative and qualitative methods, though the major emphasis of the chapter describing the project (Fine et al., 2003) is on the research process and the careful attention paid to the complexities of working in one of the most challenging real-world research environments imaginable, a maximum security prison. If you are interested in this project, there is a web site with extensive information on the project and related background at: <http://www.changingminds.ws/>.

Summary

This chapter focused on the design of qualitative and mixed methods studies. Several of the best known qualitative traditions were introduced and you were encouraged to think of qualitative methods as a strong approach to design depending on the nature of the question. The ideas of relevance, rigor and feasibility were described as potential criteria for the evaluation of qualitative designs. It was noted that the design should include plan for analysis and that procedures should be explicit and transparent. Finally, mixed methods, a recently emerging force in the world of research design, was introduced, with some examples of creative mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods.

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