seven

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

General comments _____

There are three main general points which I want students to understand about the topic of qualitative research design:

1. Research design (qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods) is driven by a research strategy. 'Strategy' as used here is not a technical term. Rather, by strategy, I mean simply a logical set of steps by which the researcher will collect and analyse empirical information (i.e. data) to answer research questions. It is important that students are able to identify the strategy they propose to use, to articulate it and to describe it in very simple non-technical terms. I find that many students struggle with this concept of strategy, when first introduced, and they often need discussion and help to understand what is required, and to produce an effective description of their strategy. So spending class discussion time on this is valuable. (Depending on the class size, I will often ask each student to describe the proposed research strategy.) I don't think students are ready to proceed to technical and methodological details until a clear description of strategy has been developed. I stress here, and again later on in the book, that a short non-technical, one-paragraph description of strategy, before any technical design terms are used, adds to the impact of any research proposal (and is particularly helpful in those situations where non-expert reviewers are involved).

    The term design, a more technical term, can then be attached to strategy. In this sense, design formalises strategy.

    Discussing examples of these strategy paragraphs in class is useful, as is then 'translating' these non-technical descriptions into more technical design terms.

2. Design (and strategy) connect research questions with data, as shown in the diagram in Figure 7.1. This connection is all-important and is at the heart of the idea of the internal consistency and validity of a research proposal and project. Once again, it is worth spending considerable time on this connection, making sure that the connection is clear and that the data proposed fit in with the research questions – making sure, in other words, that the questions can be answered with the proposed data. As the diagram shows, strategy is again central in making this connection work, and the way ahead to sampling, and to data collection and analysis, is also indicated. Details regarding sampling, data collection and analysis come later.

3. Covered in section 7.2, this point concerns diversity in qualitative research strategy and design. There are several different possible strategies and designs in qualitative research, and there is more diversity here than in quantitative research. There are, however, common elements

within the diversity, as shown in 7.2.1. Diversity implies that there are both many different ways to go about qualitative research, and, at the same time, no one 'correct' way. Again, this is important for students to understand.

Against the background of these three general points, this chapter then focuses on case studies, ethnography, grounded theory and action research as common and widely applicable qualitative strategies and designs.

Case studies

The main point I want to get across here is that case study research is potentially very powerful and valuable, if used properly. I stress this because there is in many quarters a negative view of case study research. 'Properly' here means many things, but one central thing is that any particular case study design needs to be based on a clear strategy. 'Case study' is a technical design term – a case study is a type of research design – and in line with the first general point above, the first step in developing the case study design is to articulate a clear strategy on which it is based. This strategy – stated in non-technical terms – should indicate which case(s) is being studied, with what purposes and why. Then more technical details can be addressed, especially the issues of within-case sampling, sources of data and methods of data collection and analysis. The dot points in 6.3.4 summarise the main methodological issues.

Four other points I stress are:

1. The need for research questions: a well-developed case study proposal will include clear research questions to guide the inquiry. These should follow on from, and fit in with, the strategy statement. In other words, it is not sufficient just to say 'a case study approach will be taken'. What research questions about the case will guide the inquiry?

2. Adding comparison to case studies – if it can be done – strengthens their designs. The comparative case study is a particularly valuable type of research design, as long as it is driven by a clear strategy, which of course would include the basis of the comparison and therefore the selection of the cases.

3. While case studies are usually thought of as a form of qualitative research (and I have listed case studies here under qualitative research design), they will – and should – use any and all types of data which assist in a deeper and more complete understanding of the case. This includes quantitative data, as and when appropriate. In this sense, a case study may often be more accurately described as mixed method – although it is perfectly possible to have a totally qualitative case study, of course (and, in fact, many case studies are entirely qualitative).

4. An important factor in raising the scholarly level of a case study concerns the type of data analysis. Case studies make their most important contribution when they go beyond mere description and identify concepts or propositions which apply to the case and may at the same time have wider applicability. This fits in with the description versus explanation distinction discussed in Chapter 2 and also points ahead to issues in the analysis of qualitative data, to be discussed in Chapter 8. We can call this conceptualising and/or theorising the data. A good way to push the analysis in this direction is to continually ask 'why' of the data (explanation) and not simply 'what' (description).

Ethnography

Ethnographic research is very valuable and powerful but at the same time very demanding. This puts full-scale ethnographies beyond the scope of most graduate research projects (except perhaps for those in anthropology). Therefore, unless a full-fledged anthropological study is being proposed, we may have to settle for 'elements of an ethnographic approach'. Yet adding this to a study can greatly enhance many applied social science research projects, especially when the concepts of culture and sub-culture are employed.

The ethnographic approach, more than any other, stresses the need for the 'insider's view'. (In anthropology, the terms 'emic' and 'etic' are often used – emic means viewed from the inside; etic means viewed from the outside.) Thus, it is interesting to hold class discussions about taken-for-granted aspects of our culture, how these aspects would appear to people from a totally different culture and how it would not be possible for these 'outsiders' to understand the meaning and significance of what they can see unless they can (somehow) get on the inside. This all points to the central role of participant observation in ethnography (see Chapter 7). It also connects very nicely with symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism has been a very influential approach in many areas of social science. Its central ideas are clear enough:

- The perceived world is the behaviourally relevant world.
- People behave in terms of the way they see (or interpret, define or give meaning to) situations, not in terms of the way situations 'in fact' are.
- Meanings arise out of (and are modified by) the social interactions people have.
- If we want to understand why people act the way they do, the first thing we have to understand is their perception (or definition, interpretation or meaning) of the situation in which they are placed.
- The central concept thus becomes 'the actor's definition of the situation' (or similar terminology).

Because this set of ideas is easy to understand, obviously relevant and easy to apply, I find students are often very keen to use symbolic interactionism in the way they develop research strategies and research questions. I see nothing wrong with this. However, if we have *only* symbolic interactionist studies, which focus on people's perceptions of situations, we are in danger of neglecting what people actually do – their behaviour or actions. Often, therefore, we do well to include a focus on what people do, as well as what they see (and say they intend to do).

Grounded theory

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of misunderstanding about grounded theory. At the same time, it is, as both Denzin and Lincoln, and Bryant and Charmaz have noted, the most widely used approach in qualitative social science research today. These two points together produce a very confused situation.

A common example of the misunderstanding goes as follows:

Me, meeting a researcher in a university: 'Tell me about the research you are doing.'

Researcher: I'm doing grounded theory.

Me: So what are you developing a theory about?

Researcher: I'm not trying to develop a theory.

Such a conversation has happened many times. I see two problems with it. First, I asked a substantive question, a question about the content (area and topic) of the research. The response was in terms of a method. This is an example of the point about methodolatry made in Chapter 2 – putting method ahead of content. Second, the point of grounded theory research is to discover (or generate – see below) a theory about whatever is being studied. If this is not being done, the research is not really using grounded theory – unless a special case is made (see below).

Part of the problem of misunderstanding stems from the term 'grounded theory' itself. It is not a theory – it is an approach or a method. I understand why Barney Glaser began using this term, and we will certainly not be changing the term now – its use is far too widespread – but it is unfortunate, by seeming to imply that we are talking about a theory, and therefore not clearly indicating that we are talking about a method or approach.

I have given a short history of grounded theory (section 7.5.2) because I think it helps explain not only the use of the term, but how and why this approach developed and caught on. Its history was already complicated because of the different points of view between Glaser and Strauss, and has now become even more complicated with the fragmentation of grounded theory into different varieties. This is why Bryant and Charmaz talk about grounded theory today as a 'family of methods'.

There is an important implication of this in today's research world. If a researcher today proposes to use grounded theory, I believe he/she should be able to say what variety or type of grounded theory is proposed and why. I think this is especially important at doctoral level. As a supervisor, I leave it up to the doctoral student to decide what type of grounded theory and why – I don't think that this is my decision. The student's responsibility is to understand the different types of grounded theory approaches, to choose among them in a way that fits in with the overall logic of the study, and to articulate (and, if necessary, be able to defend) that choice. My responsibility is to support the student, once these things have been done.

Necessarily, this takes us into paradigm matters. The original difference between Glaser and Strauss was really on paradigm issues, I believe. It is summarised very nicely by Glaser's subtitle 'Emergence versus forcing', as used in his 1992 response to the Strauss and Corbin book. For Glaser, there is theory in data – our job as researchers is to discover this theory, bringing as little as possible in the way of pre-determined concepts (or theories) to the data, and letting the concepts of the theory emerge from the data. For others (e.g. Strauss and Corbin's conditional matrix), it

is OK to bring certain conceptual tools to the data. Glaser sees this as being in danger of <u>forcing</u> theory onto the data. Paradigm matters are further implicated in the more recent developments within grounded theory (e.g. constructivist grounded theory).

This indicates another misunderstanding about grounded theory – that it is a method for use with qualitative data only. (And, like other writers, I am showing grounded theory in this book as a qualitative method. I do this for convenience.) In fact, the original book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, uses several quantitative examples. For Glaser, the method is not at all restricted to qualitative data – in his view, there is theory in any data, quantitative data included; our job is to discover it.

Sometimes, in a proposal, the researcher proposes to use the techniques of grounded theory analysis (open coding, axial coding, selective coding), without proposing a grounded theory study per se. This runs the risk of internal inconsistency, unless a special case is made and the use of this method of analysis is strongly argued for. (I think it can be argued for; I have seen it done quite successfully but constructing the argument can be quite tricky.) In general, if these methods of analysis are proposed, I think it is better to set the study up as a grounded theory study right from the start (see, for example, the Ron Chalmers's proposal in my book, *Developing Effective Research Proposals*).The reason for this is that these methods of analysis were developed to implement the whole inductive approach of grounded theory.

My objective with students for this section of the book (7.5) is for them to have a clear understanding of what grounded theory research is, to know something of its background and history, and to understand theoretical sampling (6.5.4) and the typical use of the literature in a grounded theory study (7.5.5). Issues of grounded theory analysis are covered in Chapter 8.

Action research

Action research is once again popular and its use is increasing. This time around (it was popular before, in the 1970s, especially in education research), its 'credibility' issues are often being tackled by teaming the action professional (e.g. the teacher) with the researcher. The earlier version tended to assume that both sets of skills would be carried out by the same person.

This dilemma points to one of the main problems I find with action research proposals. They tend to be strong on the 'action' side of the project, with all sorts of good ideas and good reasons for the action that is proposed, but weak on the research side. The solution which I try to use for this is what this book is all about. Thus:

- Be able to state clearly the strategy which will underpin the proposed action research design.
- Identify and develop clear research questions to guide the empirical inquiry.
- Address the issues of sampling, data collection and data analysis, in the usual way, with appropriate levels of detail.

The complication is that these strategy-design and methodological issues need to be put in the typical action research context of cycles, or spirals, where action and research are repeated, with each action cycle modified according to evidence from the previous cycle. This makes the action research proposal (and thesis) more demanding to write, and I think students need to be aware of this.

Another common (potential) problem with action research studies is that there is usually no control or comparison group. This means that the basis for concluding that the action produced whatever outcomes have been observed is not as strong as (ideally) it should be. This in turn means that the possibility exists for spurious conclusions, including 'Hawthorne Effect' type conclusions. I see this often in action research dissertations, where conclusions are often over-stated. This does not destroy the validity of action research. Rather, it means that the researcher needs to be aware of this possibility, to indicate this awareness and to be careful about making exaggerated claims for results and conclusions.

Finally, students need to understand that there are several different action research models. As with grounded theory, therefore, students need to study the action research literature, to identify the particular action research model they wish to use, to describe that model and to give reasons why they propose to use it.

In summary, I want students to:

- understand what action research is and how it works
- know that there are different action research models and be able to choose among them, with reasons
- know how to strengthen the research side of an action research project, using the ideas shown above
- be aware of the (usual) design weakness in action research projects – the lack of a control or comparison group – and take it into account when thinking about what conclusions can be drawn.