

Chapter 12

Designing a PhD Proposal in Mixed Method Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the challenges and advantages of writing a mixed method research (MMR) proposal. The argument put forward is that a mixed method approach overcomes the shortcomings of the commonly used qualitative and quantitative methods. A brief definition of a research proposal is followed by a discussion on the different interpretations of a mixed method and what makes mixed methods ideal in the proposal example that follows. A mixed method can be either one that utilizes qualitative and quantitative methods to different degrees or it can be regarded as a distinct method by itself. A mixed method is suitable where both different types of data can be collected, when the data adds value to what would be achieved using one approach and where cost also justifies it. A hypothetical case example where an application is being made to conduct an evaluation of an anti-truancy program is presented.

DEFINING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

A PhD, or doctor of philosophy, research proposal is a document written by a research scholar outlining ideas of an investigation they propose to carry out during their candidature. It should describe the process from the beginning to the end, including any experiments and financial outlays, before their candidature can be confirmed. A PhD is the highest academic qualification and therefore the proposal should demonstrate that the research will generate either new knowledge, products or new approaches to professional practice. A research proposal is an important part of the research process, whether for a dissertation or funding application by an experienced researcher. It presents a comprehensive plan for your research design to answer your research question or questions (Kumar, 1996). The function of the proposal then is to outline what your research is about and the method you intend to apply (Bryman, 2016). Alston and Bowles (2018) describe the proposal as a road map that anyone can follow to see how the research will be conducted and that the researcher has the right skills and is following an appropriate methodology.

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A review of the relevant literature is a critical part of the proposal. This includes the key studies or authors on the topic (Bryman, 2016). The literature review should include the current state of knowledge and the gaps in knowledge and whether that is related to conceptual or methodological limitations (Kumar, 1996). The review therefore helps to establish the need for the proposed research and locates it within the existing literature. After establishing the gap in knowledge the challenge becomes one of formulating the research question to be answered in order to close the identified gap in knowledge. The research question is absolutely critical because it helps you to narrow the focus of your research and identify what literature you need to search and what data you need to collect. Bryman (2016) identifies seven reasons why research questions are critical and argues that they will:

- Guide your literature search
- Guide your decision about the kind of research design to employ
- Guide your decision about what data to collect and from whom
- Guide your analysis of the data
- Stop you from going off in unnecessary directions; and
- Provide your readers with a clearer sense of what your research is about. (Bryman, 2016, p.9).

The structure of your research question will also indicate whether you aim to test relationships or broaden understanding of an issue. Therefore, the research question will indicate what the most appropriate methodology is likely to be.

There are several factors that determine the research methodology or design. Alston and Bowles (2018) suggest that the choice of methodology depends on: the purpose of your research or study; your own skills; background and beliefs you hold about research; the stated needs or the agenda of the funding or commissioning institution; the accessibility of participants or secondary data and; the perspectives of people or programs you wish to study. Whatever choice you make; you have to provide a detailed description and justification of what you intend to do. The MMR does not have specific steps to follow in its design. As explained below, different MMR researchers will approach the design in a variety of ways. It is generally expected that a well described design means that if someone else was to follow the described procedure they will conduct the research in the same way as you would. A poor design is sketchy and difficult to follow with some gaps on how to proceed.

QUANTITATIVE, QUALITATIVE AND MIXED RESEARCH ALTERNATIVES

Research involves accumulation of information and attempting to make sense of it. This is done by imposing or identifying patterns in the accumulated information or data. Depending on the type of data, the purpose and your inclination as a researcher, the three key methods used are quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods.

The quantitative research methods are the dominant and oldest ones and originated from the natural sciences. The quantitative methods of choice include surveys, questionnaires and structured observations (Alston and Bowles, 2018). Quantitative research is concerned with measurement, establishing relationships, generalization and replication (Bryman, 2016). The key strength of the quantitative methods is therefore the use of statistics in order to generalise from small representative samples to large populations. However, quantitative research methods are criticised for equating the social world with the natural

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