

Chapter 1 The Selection of a Research Approach

Research approaches are plans and the procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This plan involves several decisions, and they need not be taken in the order in which they make sense to us and the order of their presentation here. The overall decision involves which approach should be used to study a topic. Informing this decision should be the philosophical assumptions the researcher brings to the study; procedures of inquiry (called **research designs**); and specific **research methods** of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The selection of a research approach is also based on the nature of the **research problem** or issue being addressed, the researchers' personal experiences, and the audiences for the study. Thus, in this book, *research approaches*, *research designs*, and *research methods* are three key terms that represent a perspective about research that presents information in a successive way from broad constructions of research to the narrow procedures of methods.

The Three Approaches to Research

In this book, three research approaches are advanced: (a) qualitative, (b) quantitative, and (c) mixed methods. Unquestionably, the three approaches are not as discrete as they first appear. Qualitative and quantitative approaches should not be viewed as rigid, distinct categories, polar opposites, or dichotomies. Instead, they represent different ends on a continuum (Creswell, 2015; Newman & Benz, 1998). A study *tends* to be more qualitative than quantitative or vice versa. **Mixed methods research** resides in the middle of this continuum because it incorporates elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Often the distinction between **qualitative research** and **quantitative research** is framed in terms of using words (qualitative) rather than numbers (quantitative), or better yet, using closed-ended questions and responses (quantitative hypotheses) or open-ended questions and responses (qualitative interview questions). A more complete way to view the gradations of differences between them is in the basic philosophical assumptions researchers bring to the study, the types of research strategies used in the research (e.g., quantitative experiments or qualitative **case studies**), and the specific methods employed in conducting these strategies (e.g., collecting data quantitatively on instruments versus collecting qualitative data through observing a setting). Moreover, there is a historical evolution to both approaches—with the quantitative approaches dominating the forms of research in the social sciences from the late 19th century up until the mid-20th century. During the latter half of the 20th century, interest in qualitative research increased and along with it, the development of mixed methods research. With this background, it should prove helpful to view definitions of these three key terms as used in this book:

- *Qualitative research* is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation.
- *Quantitative research* is an approach for testing objective **theories** by examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures. The final written report has a set structure consisting of introduction, literature and theory, methods, results, and discussion. Like qualitative researchers, those who engage in this form of inquiry have assumptions about testing theories deductively, building in protections against bias, controlling for alternative or counterfactual explanations, and being able to generalize and replicate the findings.
- *Mixed methods research* is an approach to inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks. The core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the integration of qualitative and quantitative data yields additional insight beyond the information provided

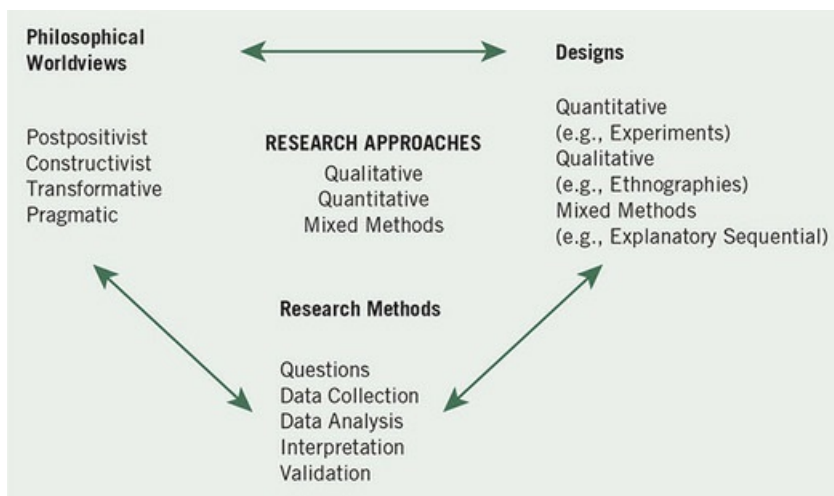
by either the quantitative or qualitative data alone.

These definitions have considerable information in each one of them. Throughout this book, we will discuss the parts of the definitions so that their meanings will become clear to you as you read ahead.

Three Components Involved in an Approach

Two important components in each definition are that the approach to research involves philosophical assumptions as well as distinct methods or procedures. The broad research approach is the *plan or proposal to conduct research*, involves the intersection of philosophy, research designs, and specific methods. A framework that we use to explain the interaction of these three components is seen in [Figure 1.1](#). To reiterate, in planning a study, researchers need to think through the philosophical **worldview** assumptions that they bring to the study, the research design that is related to this worldview, and the specific methods or procedures of research that translate the approach into practice.

Figure 1.1 A Framework for Research—The Interconnection of Worldviews, Design, and Research Methods



Philosophical Worldviews

Although philosophical ideas remain largely hidden in research (Slife & Williams, 1995), they still influence the practice of research and need to be identified. We suggest that individuals preparing a research proposal or plan make explicit the larger philosophical ideas they espouse. This information will help explain why they chose qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches for their research. In writing about worldviews, a proposal might include a section that addresses the following:

- The philosophical worldview proposed in the study
- A definition of basic ideas of that worldview
- How the worldview shaped their approach to research

We have chosen to use the term *worldview* as meaning “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). Others have called them *paradigms* (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Mertens, 2010); *epistemologies* and *ontologies* (Crotty, 1998), or *broadly conceived research methodologies* (Neuman, 2009). We see worldviews as a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study. Individuals develop worldviews based on their discipline orientations and research communities, advisors and mentors, and past research experiences. The types of beliefs held by individual researchers based on these factors will often lead to embracing a strong qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approach in their research. Although there is ongoing debate about what worldviews or beliefs researchers bring to inquiry, we will highlight four that are widely discussed in the literature: postpositivism, constructivism, transformative, and **pragmatism**. The major elements of each position are presented in [Table 1.1](#).

The Postpositivist Worldview

The postpositivist assumptions have represented the traditional form of research, and these assumptions hold true more for quantitative research than qualitative research. This worldview is sometimes called the *scientific method*, or doing *science research*. It is also called *positivist/postpositivist research*, *empirical science*, and *postpositivism*. This last term is called postpositivism because it represents the thinking after positivism, challenging the traditional notion of the absolute truth of knowledge (Phillips & Burbules, 2000) and recognizing that we cannot be absolutely positive about our claims of knowledge when studying the behavior and actions of humans. The postpositivist tradition comes from 19th-century writers, such as Comte, Mill, Durkheim, Newton, and Locke (Smith, 1983) and more recently from writers such as Phillips and Burbules (2000).

Postpositivists hold a deterministic philosophy in which causes (probably) determine effects or outcomes. Thus, the problems studied by postpositivists reflect the need to identify and assess the causes that influence outcomes, such as those found in experiments. It is also reductionistic in that the intent is to reduce the ideas into a small, discrete set to test, such as the variables that comprise hypotheses and research questions. The knowledge that develops through a postpositivist lens is based on careful observation and measurement of the objective reality that exists “out there” in the world. Thus, developing numeric measures of observations and

studying the behavior of individuals becomes paramount for a postpositivist. Finally, there are laws or theories that govern the world, and these need to be tested or verified and refined so that we can understand the world. Thus, in the scientific method—the accepted approach to research by postpositivists—a researcher begins with a theory, collects data that either supports or refutes the theory, and then makes necessary revisions and conducts additional tests.

Table 1.1 Four Worldviews	
Postpositivism	Constructivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determination • Reductionism • Empirical observation and measurement • Theory verification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding • Multiple participant meanings • Social and historical construction • Theory generation
Transformative	Pragmatism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political • Power and justice oriented • Collaborative • Change-oriented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consequences of actions • Problem-centered • Pluralistic • Real-world practice oriented

In reading Phillips and Burbules (2000), you can gain a sense of the key assumptions of this position, such as the following:

1. Knowledge is conjectural (and antifoundational)—absolute truth can never be found. Thus, evidence established in research is always imperfect and fallible. It is for this reason that researchers state that they do not prove a hypothesis; instead, they indicate a failure to reject the hypothesis.
2. Research is the process of making claims and then refining or abandoning some of them for other claims more strongly warranted. Most quantitative research, for example, starts with the test of a theory.
3. Data, evidence, and rational considerations shape knowledge. In practice, the researcher collects information on instruments based on measures completed by the participants or by observations recorded by the researcher.
4. Research seeks to develop relevant, true statements, ones that can serve to explain the situation of concern or that describe the causal relationships of interest. In quantitative studies, researchers advance the relationship among variables and pose this in terms of questions or hypotheses.
5. Being objective is an essential aspect of competent inquiry; researchers must examine methods and conclusions for bias. For example, standard of validity and reliability are important in quantitative research.

The Constructivist Worldview

Others hold a different worldview. Constructivism or social constructivism (often combined with interpretivism) is such a perspective, and it is typically seen as an approach to qualitative research. The ideas came from Mannheim and from works such as Berger and Luckmann's (1967) *The Social Construction of*

Reality and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. More recent writers who have summarized this position are Lincoln and colleagues (2011), Mertens (2010), and Crotty (1998), among others. **Social constructivists** believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. The questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life settings. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. They are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. Thus, constructivist researchers often address the processes of interaction among individuals. They also focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. Researchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences. The researcher's intent is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory (as in postpositivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning.

For example, in discussing constructivism, Crotty (1998) identified several assumptions:

1. Human beings construct meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Qualitative researchers tend to use open-ended questions so that the participants can share their views.
2. Humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives—we are all born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture. Thus, qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally. They also interpret what they find, an interpretation shaped by the researcher's own experiences and background.
3. The basic generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community. The process of qualitative research is largely inductive; the inquirer generates meaning from the data collected in the field.

The Transformative Worldview

Another group of researchers holds to the philosophical assumptions of the transformative approach. This position arose during the 1980s and 1990s from individuals who felt that the postpositivist assumptions imposed structural laws and theories that did not fit marginalized individuals in our society or issues of power and social justice, discrimination, and oppression that needed to be addressed. There is no uniform body of literature characterizing this worldview, but it includes groups of researchers that are critical theorists; participatory action researchers; Marxists; feminists; racial and ethnic minorities; persons with disabilities;

indigenous and postcolonial peoples; and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer communities. Historically, the transformative writers have drawn on the works of Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, and Freire (Neuman, 2009). Fay (1987), Heron and Reason (1997), Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998), Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), and Mertens (2009, 2010) are additional writers to read for this perspective.

In the main, these inquirers felt that the constructivist stance did not go far enough in advocating for an action agenda to help marginalized peoples. A **transformative worldview** holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever levels it occurs (Mertens, 2010). Thus, the research contains an action agenda for reform that may change lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life. Moreover, specific issues need to be addressed that speak to important social issues of the day, issues such as empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation. The researcher often begins with one of these issues as the focal point of the study. This research also assumes that the inquirer will proceed collaboratively so as to not further marginalize the participants as a result of the inquiry. In this sense, the participants may help design questions, collect data, analyze information, or reap the rewards of the research. Transformative research provides a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness or advancing an agenda for change to improve their lives. It becomes a united voice for reform and change.

This philosophical worldview focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society that may be marginalized or disenfranchised. Therefore, theoretical perspectives may be integrated with the philosophical assumptions that construct a picture of the issues being examined, the people to be studied, and the changes that are needed, such as feminist perspectives, racialized discourses, critical theory, queer theory, and disability theory—theoretical lens to be discussed more in [Chapter 3](#).

Although these are diverse groups and our explanations here are generalizations, it is helpful to view the summary by Mertens (2010) of key features of the transformative worldview or paradigm:

- It places central importance on the study of lives and experiences of diverse groups that have traditionally been marginalized. Of special interest for these diverse groups is how their lives have been constrained by oppressors and the strategies that they use to resist, challenge, and subvert these constraints.
- In studying these diverse groups, the research focuses on inequities based on gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class that result in asymmetric power relationships.
- The research in the transformative worldview links political and social action to these inequities.
- Transformative research uses a program theory of beliefs about how a program works and why the problems of oppression, domination, and power relationships exist.

The Pragmatic Worldview

Another position about worldviews comes from the pragmatists. Pragmatism derives from the work of Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey (Cherryholmes, 1992). Other writers include Murphy (1990), Patton (1990), and

Rorty (1990). There are many forms of this philosophy, but for many, pragmatism as a worldview arises out of actions, situations, and consequences rather than antecedent conditions (as in postpositivism). There is a concern with applications—what works—and solutions to problems (Patton, 1990). Instead of focusing on methods, researchers emphasize the research problem and question and use all approaches available to understand the problem (see Rossman & Wilson, 1985). As a philosophical underpinning for mixed methods studies, Morgan (2007), Patton (1990), and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) convey its importance for focusing attention on the research problem in social science research and then using pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about the problem. Using Cherryholmes (1992), Morgan (2007), and our own views, pragmatism provides a philosophical basis for research:

- Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality. This applies to mixed methods research in that inquirers draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when they engage in their research.
- Individual researchers have a freedom of choice. In this way, researchers are free to choose the methods, techniques, and procedures of research that best meet their needs and purposes.
- Pragmatists do not see the world as an absolute unity. In a similar way, mixed methods researchers look to many approaches for collecting and analyzing data rather than subscribing to only one way (e.g., quantitative or qualitative).
- Truth is what works at the time. It is not based in a duality between reality independent of the mind or within the mind. Thus, in mixed methods research, investigators use both quantitative and qualitative data because they work to provide the best understanding of a research problem.
- The pragmatist researchers look to the *what* and *how* to research based on the intended consequences—where they want to go with it. Mixed methods researchers need to establish a purpose for their mixing, a rationale for the reasons why quantitative and qualitative data need to be mixed in the first place.
- Pragmatists agree that research always occurs in social, historical, political, and other contexts. In this way, mixed methods studies may include a postmodern turn, a theoretical lens that is reflective of social justice and political aims.
- Pragmatists have believed in an external world independent of the mind as well as that lodged in the mind. But they believe that we need to stop asking questions about reality and the laws of nature (Cherryholmes, 1992). “They would simply like to change the subject” (Rorty, 1990, p. xiv).
- Thus, for the mixed methods researcher, pragmatism opens the door to multiple methods, different worldviews, and different assumptions, as well as different forms of data collection and analysis.

Research Designs

The researcher not only selects a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods study to conduct; the inquirer also decides on a type of study within these three choices. Research designs are types of inquiry within qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches that provide specific direction for procedures in a research study. Others have called them *strategies of inquiry* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The designs available to the researcher have grown over the years as computer technology has advanced our data analysis and ability to analyze complex models, and as individuals have articulated new procedures for conducting social science research. Select types will be emphasized in the methods of [Chapters 8, 9, and 10](#)—designs that are frequently used in the social sciences. Here we introduce those that are discussed later and that are cited in examples throughout the book. An overview of these designs is shown in [Table 1.2](#).

Quantitative Designs

During the late 19th and throughout the 20th century, strategies of inquiry associated with quantitative research were those that invoked the postpositivist worldview and that originated mainly in psychology. These include *true experiments* and the less rigorous experiments called *quasi-experiments* (see, an original, early treatise on this, Campbell & Stanley, 1963). An additional experimental design is *applied behavioral analysis or single-subject experiments* in which an experimental treatment is administered over time to a single individual or a small number of individuals (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007; Neuman & McCormick, 1995). One type of nonexperimental quantitative research is *causal-comparative research* in which the investigator compares two or more groups in terms of a cause (or independent variable) that has already happened. Another nonexperimental form of research is the *correlational design* in which investigators use the correlational statistic to describe and measure the degree or association (or relationship) between two or more variables or sets of scores (Creswell, 2012). These designs have been elaborated into more complex relationships among variables found in techniques of structural equation modeling, hierarchical linear modeling, and logistic regression. More recently, quantitative strategies have involved complex experiments with many variables and treatments (e.g., factorial designs and repeated measure designs). Designs often employ longitudinal data collection over time to examine the development of ideas and trends. Designs have also included elaborate structural equation models that incorporate causal paths and the identification of the collective strength of multiple variables. Rather than discuss all of these quantitative approaches, we will focus on two designs: surveys and experiments.

Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed Methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experimental designs • Nonexperimental designs, such as surveys • Longitudinal designs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative research • Phenomenology • Grounded theory • Ethnographies • Case study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convergent • Explanatory sequential • Exploratory sequential • Complex designs with embedded core designs

- **Survey research** provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a

population by studying a sample of that population. It includes cross-sectional and longitudinal studies using questionnaires or structured interviews for data collection—with the intent of generalizing from a sample to a population (Fowler, 2008).

- **Experimental research** seeks to determine if a specific treatment influences an outcome. The researcher assesses this by providing a specific treatment to one group and withholding it from another and then determining how both groups scored on an outcome. Experiments include true experiments, with the random assignment of subjects to treatment conditions, and quasi-experiments that use nonrandomized assignments (Keppel, 1991). Included within quasi-experiments are single-subject designs.

Qualitative Designs

In qualitative research, the numbers and types of approaches have also become more clearly visible during the 1990s and into the 21st century. The historic origin for qualitative research comes from anthropology, sociology, the humanities, and evaluation. Books have summarized the various types, and complete procedures are now available on specific qualitative inquiry approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) constructed a picture of what narrative researchers do. Moustakas (1994) discussed the philosophical tenets and the procedures of the phenomenological method; Charmaz (2006), Corbin and Strauss (2007; 2015), and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) identified the procedures of **grounded theory**. Fetterman (2010) and Wolcott (2008) summarized ethnographic procedures and the many faces and research strategies of **ethnography**, and Stake (1995) and Yin (2009, 2012, 2014) suggested processes involved in case study research. In this book, illustrations are drawn from the following strategies, recognizing that approaches such as participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000), discourse analysis (Cheek, 2004), and others not mentioned are also viable ways to conduct qualitative studies:

- **Narrative research** is a design of inquiry from the humanities in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives (Riessman, 2008). This information is then often retold or restoried by the researcher into a narrative chronology. Often, in the end, the narrative combines views from the participant's life with those of the researcher's life in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
- **Phenomenological research** is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants. This description culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. This design has strong philosophical underpinnings and typically involves conducting interviews (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).
- **Grounded theory** is a design of inquiry from sociology in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants. This process involves using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2007, 2015).
- **Ethnography** is a design of inquiry coming from anthropology and sociology in which the researcher studies the shared patterns of behaviors, language, and actions of an intact cultural group in a natural

setting over a prolonged period of time. Data collection often involves observations and interviews.

- Case studies are a design of inquiry found in many fields, especially evaluation, in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. Cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009, 2012, 2014).

Mixed Methods Designs

Mixed methods involves combining or integration of qualitative and quantitative research and data in a research study. Qualitative data tends to be open-ended without predetermined responses while quantitative data usually includes closed-ended responses such as found on questionnaires or psychological instruments. The field of mixed methods research, as we know it today, began in the middle to late 1980s. Its origins, however, go back further. In 1959, Campbell and Fisk used multiple methods to study psychological traits—although their methods were only quantitative measures. Their work prompted others to begin collecting multiple forms of data, such as observations and interviews (qualitative data) with traditional surveys (Sieber, 1973). Early thoughts about the value of multiple methods—called mixed methods—resided in the idea that all methods had bias and weaknesses, and the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data neutralized the weaknesses of each form of data. Triangulating data sources—a means for seeking convergence across qualitative and quantitative methods—was born (Jick, 1979). By the early 1990s, mixed methods turned toward the systematic *integration* of quantitative and qualitative data, and the idea of ways to combine the data through different types of research designs emerged. These types of designs were extensively discussed in a major handbook addressing the field in 2003 and reissued in 2010 (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Procedures for expanding mixed methods developed such as follows:

- Ways to integrate the quantitative and qualitative data, such as one database, could be used to check the accuracy (validity) of the other database.
- One database could help explain the other database, and one database could explore different types of questions than the other database.
- One database could lead to better instruments when instruments are not well-suited for a sample or population.
- One database could build on other databases, and one database could alternate with another database back and forth during a longitudinal study.

Further, the designs were developed and notation was added to help the reader understand the designs; challenges to working with the designs emerged (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, 2018). Practical issues are being widely discussed today in terms of examples of “good” mixed methods studies and evaluative criteria, the use of a team to conduct this model of inquiry, and the expansion of mixed methods to other countries and disciplines. Although many designs exist in the mixed methods field, this book will focus on the three primary designs found in the social and health sciences today:

- **Convergent mixed methods** is a form of mixed methods design in which the researcher converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. In this design, the investigator typically collects both forms of data at roughly the same time and then integrates the information in the interpretation of the overall results. Contradictions or incongruent findings are explained or further probed in this design.
- **Explanatory sequential mixed methods** is one in which the researcher first conducts quantitative research, analyzes the results and then builds on the results to explain them in more detail with qualitative research. It is considered explanatory because the initial quantitative data results are explained further with the qualitative data. It is considered sequential because the initial quantitative phase is followed by the qualitative phase. This type of design is popular in fields with a strong quantitative orientation (hence the project begins with quantitative research), but it presents challenges of identifying the quantitative results to further explore and the unequal sample sizes for each phase of the study.
- **Exploratory sequential mixed methods** is the reverse sequence from the explanatory sequential design. In the exploratory sequential approach the researcher first begins with a qualitative research phase and explores the views of participants. The data are then analyzed, and the information used to build into a second, quantitative phase. The qualitative phase may be used to build an instrument that best fits the sample under study, to identify appropriate instruments to use in the follow-up quantitative phase, to develop an intervention for an experiment, to design an app or website, or to specify variables that need to go into a follow-up quantitative study. Particular challenges to this design reside in focusing in on the appropriate qualitative findings to use and the sample selection for both phases of research.
- These basic or core designs then can be used in more complex mixed methods strategies. The core designs can augment an experiment by, for example, collecting qualitative data after the experiment to help explain the quantitative outcome results. The core designs can be used within a case study framework to deductively document cases or to generate cases for further analysis. These basic designs can inform a theoretical study drawn from social justice or power (see [Chapter 3](#)) as an overarching perspective within a design that contains both quantitative and qualitative data. The core designs can also be used in the different phases of an evaluation procedure that spans from a needs assessment to a test of a program or experimental intervention.

Research Methods

The third major element in the framework is the specific research methods that involve the forms of data collection, analysis, and interpretation that researchers propose for their studies. As shown in [Table 1.3](#), it is useful to consider the full range of possibilities of data collection and to organize these methods, for example, by their degree of predetermined nature, their use of closed-ended versus open-ended questioning, and their focus on numeric versus nonnumeric data analysis. These methods will be developed further in [Chapters 8](#) through [10](#).

Researchers collect data on an instrument or test (e.g., a set of questions about attitudes toward self-esteem) or gather information on a behavioral checklist (e.g., observation of a worker engaged in a complex skill). On the other end of the continuum, collecting data might involve visiting a research site and observing the behavior of individuals without predetermined questions or conducting an interview in which the individual is allowed to talk openly about a topic, largely without the use of specific questions. The choice of methods turns on whether the intent is to specify the type of information to be collected in advance of the study or to allow it to emerge from participants in the project. Also, the type of data analyzed may be numeric information gathered on scales of instruments or text information recording and reporting the voice of the participants. Researchers make interpretations of the statistical results, or they interpret the themes or patterns that emerge from the data. In some forms of research, both quantitative and qualitative data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Instrument data may be augmented with open-ended observations, or census data may be followed by in-depth exploratory interviews. In this case of mixing methods, the researcher makes inferences across both the quantitative and qualitative databases.

Table 1.3 Quantitative, Mixed, and Qualitative Methods		
Quantitative Methods	Mixed Methods	Qualitative Methods
Pre-determined	Both predetermined and emerging methods	Emerging methods
Instrument based questions	Both open- and closed-ended questions	Open-ended questions
Performance data, attitude data, observational data, and census data	Multiple forms of data drawing on all possibilities	Interview data, observation data, document data, and audiovisual data
Statistical analysis	Statistical and text analysis	Text and image analysis
Statistical interpretation	Across databases interpretation	Themes, patterns interpretation

Research Approaches as Worldviews, Designs, and Methods

The worldviews, the designs, and the methods all contribute to a research approach that *tends* to be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed. [Table 1.4](#) creates distinctions that may be useful in choosing an approach. This table also includes practices of all three approaches that are emphasized in remaining chapters of this book.

Typical scenarios of research can illustrate how these three elements combine into a research design.

- *Quantitative approach*: Postpositivist worldview, experimental design, and pretest and posttest measures of attitudes

In this scenario, the researcher tests a theory by specifying narrow hypotheses and the collection of data to support or refute the hypotheses. An experimental design is used in which attitudes are assessed both before and after an experimental treatment. The data are collected on an instrument that measures attitudes, and the information is analyzed using statistical procedures and hypothesis testing.

- *Qualitative approach*: Constructivist worldview, ethnographic design, and observation of behavior

In this situation, the researcher seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of participants. This means identifying a culture-sharing group and studying how it develops shared patterns of behavior over time (i.e., ethnography). One of the key elements of collecting data in this way is to observe participants' behaviors during their engagement in activities.

- *Qualitative approach*: Transformative worldview, narrative design, and open-ended interviewing

For this study, the inquirer seeks to examine an issue related to oppression of individuals. To study this, stories are collected of individual oppression using a narrative approach. Individuals are interviewed at some length to determine how they have personally experienced oppression.

- *Mixed methods approach*: Pragmatic worldview, collection of both quantitative and qualitative data sequentially in the design

The researcher bases the inquiry on the assumption that collecting diverse types of data best provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative data alone. The study begins with a broad survey in order to generalize results to a population and then, in a second phase, focuses on qualitative, open-ended interviews to collect

detailed views from participants to help explain the initial quantitative survey.

Tend to or Typically . . .	Qualitative Approaches	Quantitative Approaches	Mixed Methods Approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use these philosophical assumptions Employ these strategies of inquiry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructivist/transformational knowledge claims Phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and narrative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positivist knowledge claims Surveys and experiments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pragmatic knowledge claims Sequential, convergent, and transformational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employ these methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open-ended questions, emerging approaches, text or image data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closed-ended questions, predetermined approaches, numeric data (may include some open-ended questions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both open- and closed-ended questions, both emerging and predetermined approaches, and both quantitative and qualitative data and analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use these practices of research as the researcher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positions him- or herself Collects participant meanings Focuses on a single concept or phenomenon Brings personal values into the study Studies the context or setting of participants Validates the accuracy of findings Makes interpretations of the data Creates an agenda for change or reform Collaborates with the participants Employs text analysis procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tests or verifies theories or explanations Identifies variables to study Relates variables in questions or hypotheses Uses standards of validity and reliability Observes and measures information numerically Uses unbiased approaches Employs statistical procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collects both quantitative and qualitative data Develops a rationale for mixing Integrates the data at different stages of inquiry Presents visual pictures of the procedures in the study Employs the practices of both qualitative and quantitative research

Criteria for Selecting a Research Approach

Given the possibility of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches, what factors affect a choice of one approach over another for the design of a proposal? Added to worldview, design, and methods would be the research problem, the personal experiences of the researcher, and the audience(s) for whom the report will be written.

The Research Problem and Questions

A research problem, more thoroughly discussed in [Chapter 5](#), is an issue or concern that needs to be addressed (e.g., the issue of racial discrimination). The problem comes from a void in the literature, and conflict in research results in the literature, topics that have been neglected in the literature; a need to lift up the voice of marginalized participants; and “real-life” problems found in the workplace, the home, the community, and so forth.

Certain types of social research problems call for specific approaches. For example, if the problem calls for (a) the identification of factors that influence an outcome, (b) the utility of an intervention, or (c) understanding the best predictors of outcomes, then a quantitative approach is best. It is also the best approach to use to test a theory or explanation. On the other hand, if a concept or phenomenon needs to be explored and understood because little research has been done on it or because it involves an understudied sample, then it merits a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is especially useful when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine. This type of approach may be needed because the topic is new, the subject has never been addressed with a certain sample or group of people, and existing theories do not apply with the particular sample or group under study (Morse, 1991). A mixed methods design is useful when the quantitative or qualitative approach, each by itself, is inadequate to best understand a research problem and the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research (and its data) can provide the best understanding. For example, a researcher may want to both generalize the findings to a population as well as develop a detailed view of the meaning of a phenomenon or concept for individuals. In this research, the inquirer first explores generally to learn what variables to study and then studies those variables with a large sample of individuals. Alternatively, researchers may first survey a large number of individuals and then follow up with a few participants to obtain their specific views and their voices about the topic. In these situations, collecting both closed-ended quantitative data and open-ended qualitative data proves advantageous.

Personal Experiences

Researchers' own personal training and experiences also influence their choice of approach. An individual trained in technical, scientific writing, statistics, and computer statistical programs and familiar with quantitative journals in the library would most likely choose the quantitative design. On the other hand, individuals who enjoy writing in a literary way or conducting personal interviews or making up-close observations may gravitate to the qualitative approach. The mixed methods researcher is an individual familiar with both quantitative and qualitative research. This person also has the time and resources to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data.

Since quantitative studies are the traditional mode of research, carefully worked out procedures and rules exist for them. Researchers may be more comfortable with the highly systematic procedures of quantitative research. Also, for some individuals, it can be uncomfortable to challenge accepted approaches among some faculty by using qualitative and transformative approaches to inquiry. On the other hand, qualitative approaches allow room to be innovative and to work more within researcher-designed frameworks. They allow more creative, literary-style writing, a form that individuals may like to use. For those researchers undertaking social justice or community involvement, a qualitative approach is typically best, although this form of research may also incorporate mixed methods designs.

For the mixed methods researcher, the project will take extra time because of the need to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. It fits a person who enjoys and has the skills in both quantitative and qualitative research.

Audience

Finally, researchers write for audiences that will accept their research. These audiences may be journal editors and readers, faculty committees, conference attendees, or colleagues in the field. Students should consider the approaches typically supported and used by their advisers. The experiences of these audiences with quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods studies can shape the decision made about the choice of design.

Summary

In planning a research project, researchers need to identify whether they will employ a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approach. This approach is based on bringing together a worldview or assumptions about research, a specific design, and research methods. Decisions about choice of an approach are further influenced by the research problem or issue being studied, the personal experiences of the researcher, and the audience for whom the researcher writes.

Writing Exercises

1. Identify a research question in a journal article and discuss what approach would be best to study the question and why.
2. Take a topic that you would like to study, and using the four combinations of worldviews, designs, and research methods in [Figure 1.1](#), discuss a project that brings together a worldview, designs, and methods. Identify whether this would be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research. Use the typical scenarios that we have advanced in this chapter as a guide.
3. What distinguishes a quantitative study from a qualitative study? Mention three characteristics.

Additional Readings

Cherryholmes, C. H. (1992, August–September). Notes on pragmatism and scientific realism. *Educational Researcher*, 14, 13–17.

Cleo Cherryholmes discusses pragmatism as a contrasting perspective from scientific realism. The strength of this article lies in the numerous citations of writers about pragmatism and a clarification of one version of pragmatism. Cherryholmes's version points out that pragmatism is driven by anticipated consequences, reluctance to tell a true story, and the idea that there is an external world independent of our minds. Also included in this article are numerous references to historical and recent writers about pragmatism as a philosophical position.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Michael Crotty offers a useful framework for tying together the many epistemological issues, theoretical perspectives, methodology, and methods of social research. He interrelates the four components of the research process and shows in a table a representative sampling of topics of each component. He then goes on to discuss nine different theoretical orientations in social research, such as postmodernism, feminism, critical inquiry, interpretivism, constructionism, and positivism.

Kemmis, S., & Wilkinson, M. (1998). Participatory action research and the study of practice. In B. Atweh, S. Kemmis, & P. Weeks (Eds.), *Action research in practice: Partnerships for social justice in education* (pp. 21–36). New York: Routledge.

Stephen Kemmis and Mervyn Wilkinson provide an excellent overview of participatory research. In particular, they note the six major features of this inquiry approach and then discuss how action research is practiced at the individual, the social, or at both levels.

Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 97–128). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yvonna Lincoln, Susan Lynham, and Egon Guba have provided the basic beliefs of five alternative inquiry paradigms in social science research: (a) positivism, (b) postpositivism, (c) critical theory, (d) constructivism, and (e) participatory. These extend the earlier analysis provided in the first and second editions of the handbook. Each is presented in terms of ontology (i.e., nature of reality), epistemology (i.e., how we know what we know), and methodology (i.e., the process of research). The participatory paradigm adds another alternative paradigm to those originally advanced in the first edition. After briefly presenting these five approaches, they contrast them in terms of seven issues, such as the nature of knowledge, how knowledge accumulates, and goodness or quality criteria.

Mertens, D. (2009). *Transformative research and evaluation*. New York: Guilford.

Donna Mertens has devoted an entire text to advancing the transformative paradigm and the process of transformative research. She discusses the basic features of the transformative paradigm as an umbrella term, provides examples of groups affiliated with this paradigm, and links the paradigm to quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches. In this book she also discusses the research procedures of sampling, consent, reciprocity, data collection methods and instruments, data analysis and interpretation, and reporting.

Phillips, D. C., & Burbules, N. C. (2000). *Postpositivism and educational research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

D. C. Phillips and Nicholas Burbules summarize the major ideas of postpositivist thinking. Through two chapters, “What is Postpositivism?” and “Philosophical Commitments of Postpositivist Researchers,” the authors advance major ideas about postpositivism—especially those that differentiate it from positivism. These include knowing that human knowledge is conjectural rather than unchallengeable and that our warrants for knowledge can be withdrawn in light of further investigations.

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