INTERDISCIPLINARY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

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INTERDISCIPLINARY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

A Concise Guide

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marco J. Haenssgen is Assistant Professor in Global Sustainable Development at the University of Warwick. He is an interdisciplinary mixed-method researcher with interests in international development, policy implementation, socio-technological change, and global health, and with experience in evaluation, development finance and economics, and policy advisory. He has received multiple awards for his teaching practice in global health, and his interdisciplinary research has been published in leading international journals such as *World Development*, *Social Science and Medicine*, and *Health Policy and Planning*. He holds degrees in International Development from the University of Oxford and General Management from the European Business School.

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INTRODUCTION

WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECTS?

> *Qualitative research can do something that, for me, quantitative studies almost never do, and that is yield an aha! moment that lets you know you have just learned something truly new.*
>
> *— (Press, 2005, p. 158)*

> *Beyond morbidity, mortality and economic cost, qualitative research will be particularly important to estimate the wider societal cost of [drug resistance], including the loss of efficacy of antimicrobials (and the effect of this on modern medicine), as well as deleterious effects of [drug resistance] on human capital, labour force, gross domestic product and economic growth.*
>
> *— (Zellweger et al., 2017, p. 2969)*

As researchers and research funders increasingly recognise the complexity, interconnectedness, and contestation

of global development problems, interdisciplinary work is often held as the 'future of research' (Castán Broto, Gislason, M., & Ehlers, 2009; Lyall & Meagher, 2012, p. 609; Sardar, 2010). Collaboration across disciplines involving qualitative research can push the boundaries of knowledge and practice: It can answer to pragmatic research needs ('How do we make this intervention work?'), promote research that is locally relevant, cross-fertilise understanding through new disciplinary perspectives, and create opportunities to engage hitherto distant target populations. Qualitative research collaboration across the disciplines also stimulates new research ideas and enables innovative theoretical approaches. Poteete, Janssen, and Ostrom (2010, p. 251) argued, for instance, in the context of natural resource management that, 'Most periods of rapid theoretical development have occurred as a result of methodological and disciplinary cross-fertilization' – not only as a sequential process over time but also within discrete research projects. Researchers in such constellations benefit, too, through greater intellectual freedom, more creative engagement with a research problem, and the possibility of 'exciting breakthroughs' (Castán Broto et al., 2009; Lyall & Meagher, 2012, p. 613).

Yet, it may come as no surprise that interdisciplinary work can create misunderstandings and arguments about good research practices between project team members (Castán Broto et al., 2009; Lyall & Meagher, 2012). Qualitative research methods mean different things to different people, both within and across the social sciences, humanities, natural, and medical sciences. When we talk about observations, are we thinking about researchers immersed in their study setting, or entries in a survey data set? Does a case report involve the detailed and contextualised description of a decision-making problem, or the documentation of a patient's illness? Is an 'in-depth' interview a 20-minute

conversation that follows a structured topic guide, or an open-ended two-hour investigation into someone's psyche? Answers to these questions are likely to conflict. Depending on whom you ask, qualitative research can be described as 'words' rather than 'numbers' (Creswell, 2009, p. 3), techniques to understand people's behaviour and attitudes that help to improve the design of services and technologies (Seaman, 1999; Tolley, Ulin, Mack, Robinson, & Succop, 2016), the pursuit of 'a holistic understanding of complex realities and processes where even the questions and hypotheses emerge cumulatively as the investigation progresses' (Mayoux, 2006, pp. 116–118), or even as social science research as a whole (Zellweger et al., 2017, p. 2969). This jungle of interpretations is bound to create uneven expectations.

This book is to help qualitative research newcomers to navigate this space of varied purposes and techniques, and to communicate and defend methodological choices with researchers from backgrounds that you are likely to encounter in interdisciplinary global development research. However, semantic differences are also symptomatic for the presence of different research 'paradigms', or world views, that make assumptions of how reality is constructed and what counts as a valid way to inform our understanding of that reality (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) – for example, that there exist objectively true facts outside of human cognition, and that we can discover these through experimentation. Contrasting views of what qualitative research is and can do – and how it relates, for example, to quantitative research – are often attributed to different philosophical positions between science and humanism (Bernard & Gravless, 2015a), between constructivism and positivism (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), or various other paradigms like pragmatism, critical realism, or even Yinyang philosophy (Fetters & Molina-Azorin,

2019; Shannon-Baker, 2016). The recognition of different and conflicting paradigms can help us reflect on our research assumptions, many of which only transpire when working in interdisciplinary projects.

Research paradigms are often held responsible for implicit or explicit hierarchies between qualitative and quantitative research (Creswell, 2009; Lunde, Heggen, & Strand, 2013; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), and it can indeed be the case that researchers in an interdisciplinary project have irreconcilable views on how to generate knowledge and insights from, say, a set of interviews. But these stereotypes can also create artificial boundaries. Not only can we respectfully agree to disagree and make our different viewpoints explicit. Our views also need not be fixed. Paradigms are fluid as they themselves have evolved through our training and experiences – of which interdisciplinary work is one. Bernard and Gravless (2015a, p. 6) further argued against false philosophical dichotomies because 'lots of scientists do their work without numbers, and many scientists whose work is highly quantitative consider themselves to be humanists'. The lines between qualitative and quantitative research are similarly blurry: surveys can involve interviews for questionnaire testing and the interpretation of their results; 'qualitative comparative analysis' is essentially a semi-quantitative analysis technique; and the textual content of Tweets can be categorised into codes for statistical analysis of disease outbreaks just as much as it can serve to understand language use and discourses in online activism (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015; Schmidt, 2012).

If you remain convinced that qualitative research is specific to a particular worldview or discipline, or that qualitative and quantitative methods cannot be combined for theoretical reasons, then this is a legitimate position but this book is not for you. You would be better advised to consult disciplinary text books on qualitative research, for example, Bernard and

Gravless (2015b) for anthropological research methods or Tolley et al. (2016) for qualitative public health research. This introduction does not attempt to reconcile different philosophical positions, nor does it privilege qualitative methods over quantitative methods or the other way round.[1] This book is rather meant to be an agnostic guide through research designs, data collection, sampling, analysis, and collaborative research practice that correspond to a broad interpretation of qualitative research with diverse purposes. Our starting point is that **the best tool for the job is the right method to answer the research question – a judgement that requires broad knowledge of the available tools.** If we draw on this rationale, then let us examine an example of how quantitative and qualitative research can contribute to the understanding of a problem.

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES: THE IMPACT OF A NEW ROAD

What are the consequences of road construction in low- and middle-income countries? Intuitively, we might think of connecting people especially in rural areas to markets and services, or to improve the connectivity and exchange between urban centres and other trading hubs.

This intuition seems to lend itself to quantitative study – let's compare, for instance, the occurrence of poverty both before after road improvements in rural areas of a low-income country, and against a control group of people in the same country who did not receive a new road. This is what Khandker, Shahidur, Bakht, & Koolwal (2009) did in rural Bangladesh. Analysing survey data, the authors argued that,

> *The results suggest that the [road] project impact on household transport expenses is quite substantial […].*

> *Road improvement also has a significant positive impact on aggregate crop output and price indices. […] the poorest households appear to have benefited disproportionately […].*
>
> *— (Khandker et al., 2009, p.720)*

The analysis would suggest that road construction lived up to its anticipated outcomes, but quantitative research can go further. Aggarwal (2018) studied the case of a large-scale rural road construction scheme in India from 2001 to 2010. The combination of administrative data, national statistics, and surveys enabled Aggarwal (2018) to document some surprising outcomes. One the one hand, the author argued that, 'The results presented in this paper, specifically the ones on market integration, primary education, and technology adoption underscore the great importance of investment in road construction', while, on the other hand, 'the increased probability of older children dropping out of school is both unexpected and unintended' (Aggarwal, 2018, p. 391). The seemingly conclusive testing of plausible hypotheses and the detection of possible unintended consequences suggests an open-and-shut case. One-nil for quantitative research?

Although it is informative, quantitative research struggles with complex realities, especially if they go off script and contradict our assumptions. For example, what does economic impact even mean in the context of a new road? Klaeger (2012) studied the social ecosystem around new roads in Ghana, specifically in a suburb of Accra. In a detailed ethnographic study, the author observed and interacted with mobile vendors selling loafs of bread and other products to slow-moving vehicles passing by. The qualitative study uncovered a pulsing alteration of idleness and a rush to business during which '[…] all principles and practices of market exchange are creatively converged, maybe also condensed, or in parts

lost, in one brief instant' (Klaeger, 2012, p. 551). This example shows the intricate social context that has co-evolved with the infrastructural development, shaping patterns of daily life. But qualitative research does not only add depth to the understanding of a development. It can also suggest consequences that are otherwise difficult to hypothesise prior to quantitative research.

One of these examples is again an ethnographic study by Pedersen and Bunkenborg (2012). As part of a larger study of Chinese infrastructure developments, the authors repeatedly visited Chinese-managed oilfields in rural Mongolia over several years and observed how road construction influenced the relationships between the Chinese and the resident Mongolians. The authors described that, despite an existing functional road network, local officials in Mongolia insisted on further infrastructural augmentation to lubricate any remaining transport frictions. Rather than fostering local integration and exchange (as we might initially expect), however, the road construction fed into the distrust between the Chinese and Mongolian sides. Pedersen and Bunkenborg (2012, p. 565) thus describe that,

> *officials and leaders from both sides seemed to have worked hard to minimise whatever possibility there might arise for ad hoc interactions between the two sides, whether in the form of romantic relationships, trade and barter exchanges, or roadside encounters.*

Roads divided the local groups.

The locally embedded qualitative studies therefore do not only add potentially unexpected illustrations of the economic consequences of road construction suggested in the quantitative studies. The qualitative research also broadens the understanding of the range of possible outcomes of these

developments, and challenges intuitive notions of roads as connecting technologies.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THIS BOOK

The book is set up as guidebook and reference point for applied researchers rather than a textbook. It provides a broad and general introduction whose structure follows the research project process from a decision on the research purposes and design, via the development of data collection instruments, the decision on sampling methods based on the study population, the data analysis process, and the presentation of research outputs. Quite evidently, however, this book cannot and does not aspire to do everything. Every single research design deserves a handbook-length publication to address its paradigmatic, theoretical, methodological, and practical dimensions. Readers of this book are therefore strongly advised to see it only as a starting point and to consult the bibliography at the end of this book for further in-depth study.

This book therefore speaks to students, professional researchers, and practitioners in global development without prior qualitative research experience. The narration addresses the person learning and doing qualitative research, but this should not exclude readers in interdisciplinary projects who are confronted with qualitative research at the other end of the table. As Poteete et al. (2010, p. 257) argued, 'Scholars are more likely to incorporate multiple disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches in their research if they are familiar with the work of colleagues who use different approaches'. **Along the presentation**, we will explore different disciplinary positions and ways to navigate the ambiguous language and sometimes conflicting