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The Methodology Chapter

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Recognize what is involved in writing a methodology chapter which transparently documents the research process.
- Understand the key questions which this chapter must answer.
- Consider the nature and advantages of writing this chapter in a 'natural history' format.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

We can distinguish three different kinds of student dissertation: theoretical, methodological and empirical. Each of these demands different discussion of 'methods'.

- 1 *Theoretical*: here you claim to develop some theoretical insights by means of a critical review of a body of literature. In the theoretical dissertation, your methodology chapter will need to discuss your rationale for selecting your corpus of literature and any illustrative examples. It will also need to show how you have attempted to produce a systematic analysis, e.g. by considering the arguments for positions that you reject.
- 2 *Methodological*: here you may be mainly concerned to develop a method (e.g. focus groups or textual analysis) or to compare and contrast the use of several different methods. Here the whole thesis may be devoted to methodological matters and so a separate chapter called 'methodology' may be redundant or simply devoted to explaining why you have chosen certain methods to compare and/or which data you choose to use for this exercise.
- 3 *Empirical*: in this, the most common form of research report or dissertation, you will analyse some body of data. Here you will be expected to show that

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you understand the strengths and weaknesses of your research strategy, design and methods.

This chapter focuses on empirically based research reports. It argues for openness and clarity about what actually happened during your research. It argues that a bland account in the passive voice is an entirely inappropriate format for your methodology chapter.

Qualitative researchers are often interested in the narratives or stories that people tell one another (and researchers). Indeed, our data-analysis chapters tell (structured) stories about our data. It is only natural, then, that our readers should expect to be told how we gathered our data, what data we ended up with and how we analysed it.

This is why all research reports seem to have a methodology chapter or at least a section devoted to 'data and methods'. Within that rubric, however, as I show later in this chapter, there are many different (non-bland) formats we can use to give an account of our data and methods. First, however, we need to clear the ground about the issues you need to cover in your methods chapter.

22.2 WHAT SHOULD THE METHODOLOGY CHAPTER CONTAIN?

In a quantitative study, there is a simple answer to this question. You will have a chapter usually entitled 'Data and Methods'. As Table 22.1 shows, this chapter will typically contain four elements.

The straightforward character of a quantitative methods chapter unfortunately does not spill over into qualitative research reports. At first sight, this simply is a matter of different language. So, in reporting qualitative studies, typically we do not talk about 'statistical analysis' or 'research instruments'. These linguistic differences also reflect broader practical and theoretical differences between quantitative and qualitative research.

More particularly, in writing up qualitative research, we need to recognize:

- the (contested) theoretical underpinnings of methodologies
- the (often) contingent nature of the data chosen
- the (likely) non-random character of cases studied
- the reasons why the research took the path it did (both analytic and chance factors).

Each of these four features raises issues which should not be concealed or generate guilt. Your research training courses and your reading should have made you aware of the theories on which your methods rest. So the rule here, in writing your methods chapter, is simply: *spell out your theoretical assumptions*.

Everybody realizes that contingent events related to personal interest, access or even simply being in the right (wrong) place at the right (wrong) time often

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TABLE 22.1 THE METHODS CHAPTER IN A QUANTITATIVE THESIS

1	Subjects studied
2	Research instruments used
3	Procedures used in applying these instruments to these subjects
4	Statistical analysis

Source: adapted from Rudestam and Newton (1992: 61)

determine which data you are able to work upon. So be straightforward: *spell out the (sometimes contingent) factors that made you choose to work with your particular data.*

Finally, everybody knows that qualitative researchers can work fruitfully with very small bodies of data that have not been randomly assembled. If this is the case, *explain how you can still generalize from your analysis.* For example, in Chapter 9, I discussed four different but positive answers to this question of how we can obtain generalizability:

- combining qualitative research with quantitative measures of populations
- purposive sampling guided by time and resources
- theoretical sampling
- using an analytic model which assumes that generalizability is present in the existence of *any* case.

So, when writing your methodology chapter, avoid over-defensiveness. Many great researchers will have used similar methods with few qualms. So draw from their strength.

On the other hand, self-confidence should not mean lack of appropriate self-criticism. Your literature review chapter will already have considered other studies in terms of 'the strengths and limitations of different research designs and techniques of data collection, handling and analysis' (Murcott, 1997: 2).

Treat your methodology chapter in the same way – as a set of cautious answers to questions that another researcher might have asked you about your work (e.g. why did you use these methods; how did you come to these conclusions?). This means that your methods chapter should aim to *document* the rationale behind your research design and data analysis.

Spencer et al. (2003) argue that this documentation process requires transparency about your methods. In other words, you should anticipate and answer reasonable questions about your research. Table 22.2 sets out the issues involved here.

Another way of putting these kinds of matters has been suggested by Murcott (1997). Table 22.3 shows how we can use our methods chapter to answer a set of questions.

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TABLE 22.2 HOW TO DOCUMENT YOUR RESEARCH
TRANSPARENTLY

-
- Give an honest account of the conduct of the research
 - Provide full descriptions of what was actually done in regard to choosing your case(s) to study, choosing your method(s), collecting and analysing data
 - Explain and justify each of your decisions
 - Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of what you did
 - Be open about what helped you and held you back
-

Source: adapted from Spencer et al. (2003: 76)

TABLE 22.3 QUESTIONS FOR A QUALITATIVE
METHODS CHAPTER

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- 1 How did you go about your research?
 - 2 What overall strategy did you adopt and why?
 - 3 What design and techniques did you use?
 - 4 Why these and not others?
-

Source: Murcott (1997)

To answer the questions in Table 22.3 will usually mean describing the following:

- the data you have studied
- how you obtained that data (e.g. issues of access and consent)
- what claims you are making about the data (e.g. as representative of some population or as a single case study)
- the methods you have used to gather the data
- why you have chosen these methods
- how you have analysed your data
- the advantages and limitations of using your method of data analysis.

22.3 A NATURAL HISTORY CHAPTER?

To answer Murcott's four questions in Table 22.3, in the context of my elaborations above, may now look to be a pretty tall order, particularly if you feel you have to devote a long section to each of these issues.

However, the methodology chapter of a qualitative study can be a much more lively, interesting affair than this suggests. In this context, there are three issues to bear in mind. First, a highly formal chapter can be dull to read as well as to write. Many is the time I have ploughed through a desperately boring methodology

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chapter, usually written in the passive voice. I often get the feeling that the chapter is there for purely formal purposes. In the words of a British song about war, 'because we're here, because we're here, because we're here!' In such cases, I can hardly wait to get on to the (more lively) heart of the study.

Second, 'methodology' has a more flexible meaning in qualitative research than its quantitative sister. In Chapter 7, I defined 'methodology' as 'a general approach to studying research topics'. As such, your readers will be more interested in a methodological discussion in which you explain the actual course of your decision making rather than a series of blunt assertions in the passive voice (e.g. 'the method chosen was ...').

Third, a research study submitted for a university degree, even up to the PhD level, is principally evaluated in terms of how far you can demonstrate that you have the makings of a competent researcher. Hence your examiners will be interested to know something about the history of your research, including your response to the various difficulties and dead ends that we all experience.

As Alasuutari argues, false leads and dead ends are just as worth reporting as the method eventually chosen:

It is precisely for this reason that taking 'field notes' about the development of one's thinking is needed ... The text can be like a detective story, where one presents these 'false leads' until they are revealed to be dead-ends. (1995: 192)

Alasuutari's version of the history of research as a 'detective story' is incompatible with a formal methodology chapter in the passive voice. Instead of a formal, impersonal chapter, one offers the reader 'field notes about the developments of one's thinking'. One way to do this is to rename the 'methodology' chapter 'The natural history of my research'.

In Chapter 3, we saw how some of my research students used their field diaries to write lively natural histories. These informed the reader, among other things, about:

- the personal context of the students' research topic
- the reasons for their research design
- how they developed their research through trial and error
- the methodological lessons they learned.

Examples of how these topics can be treated in your 'natural history' chapter are set out in Table 22.4.

The more informal 'natural history' style of methodology chapter that I recommend should not be taken to mean that 'anything goes'. On the contrary, by asking readers to engage with your thinking *in process*, they are in a far better position to assess the degree to which you were self-critical. Moreover, an autobiographical style is only appropriate to the extent that it allows you to address

TABLE 22.4 TOPICS FOR A NATURAL HISTORY CHAPTER*The personal context*

By the end of my period of undergraduate study, I was greatly vexed by issues surrounding the tendency within the various schools of sociology towards using 'social structure' too loosely as a way of accounting for data. (Simon)

The micro-analysis of social interaction seemed to me to be a valuable way of understanding some of the health issues and problems I had encountered in my experience working in clinical health settings as a psychiatric nurse and as a research nurse. Many of these problems appeared to hinge on the interactive practices and skills of the various parties involved. (Moir)

Like Silverman's (1987) experience of gaining access to the field of paediatric cardiology, my entry to the field of mental health casework was a chance happening. I met up with a former colleague in a local supermarket. After recounting my difficulty in negotiating access to an in-patient area, he invited me to meet the community team with whom he worked. (Sally)

Reasons for research design

I chose to collect data in the way that I did because it was appropriate to the study of situated action. Audio tapes provide detailed recorded talk which field notes alone cannot provide, while preparing transcripts is itself a research activity. (Sally)

Many qualitative research studies set out clear aims and objectives at the start of a project. These may often refer to collecting and analysing data on a particular topic, such as describing the views of patients about a particular type of illness experience. The aims of ethnomethodological studies such as this one tend to be quite general, centring on the examination of some data. Decisions therefore need to be made about objectives for particular pieces of analysis at each stage. (Moir)

Developing through trial and error

I had initially intended to undertake separate analyses of instances of criticisms of self and of the dead spouse. However, I decided a more constructive tack would be to conduct a closer analysis of members' practices in producing the accounts. This would involve taking a step back in order to take a closer look. (Moir)

To undertake a case study of 'single homelessness' in the context of full-time employment makes heavy demands on the researcher in terms of personal resources and operational constraints. The field is so vast and the nature of subjects' lives so dispersed that I elected to observe professional caseworkers rather than service users. For practical reasons then, I became a participant-observer at weekly case conferences. (Sally)

Methodological lessons I have learned

I was attempting to describe something that I knew was going on but could not see at the start. The need to refrain from introducing my own categorizations *before* producing the description of members' practices that I was aiming for has not been easy. However, I believe that the fine grained analysis of the practices adopted by interview participants has enabled me to contribute new insights to the sociology of health and illness. (Moir)

(Continued)

PART FIVE ● WRITING UP**TABLE 22.4** CONTINUED

With hindsight, I might use more conventional transcription devices if I were to do the transcripts again. This would save the 'creative' work of devising my own. (Sally)

How, then, should this research be seen in terms of both sampling variety and external validity? I believe the answer lies in seeing this research not as an attempt to provide categorical 'truths' about all parents' evenings in general, but as an attempt to raise questions about such meetings by looking at a single case in detail. This study can therefore be seen as being *exploratory* rather *definitive*, examining the achievement of routine by a single individual in a specific setting in such a way that further analytical possibilities are opened up. (Simon)

properly the kind of crucial methodological questions set out in Tables 22.2 and 22.3. Clearly, your readers will not want to hear needlessly and endlessly about how your personal life impinged upon the process of obtaining your degree!

22.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Some universities (like some academic journals) still have a pretty fixed idea of what a methodology chapter (or section) should contain. Therefore, it is probably worth discussing with your teachers whether a 'natural history' format is appropriate to describe the methodology that you have chosen. But even if you do not write your chapter in this way, you will still gain by keeping dated field notes about the trajectory of your project.

However, if you do write a 'natural history' chapter, it is much more likely that you will avoid boring your readers (and yourself). It is also more likely that you will overcome the common problem of failing to explicate to the reader what is now 'obvious' to you. As Alasuutari puts it: 'Researchers always become more or less blind to their texts and thoughts, so that they do not notice that they have failed in spelling out certain premises or starting points without which an outsider has a hard time understanding the text' (*ibid.*). A 'natural history' chapter, based on contemporary field notes, will be more likely to make your readers 'insiders' and to avoid you being an 'outsider' in relation to your own text.

KEY POINTS

All research reports have a methodology chapter or at least a section devoted to 'data and methods'. In it, you will be expected to show that you understand the strengths and weaknesses of your research strategy, design and methods. In this chapter you should explain:

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- your theoretical assumptions
- the factors that made you choose to work with your particular data
- how you can generalize from your analysis.

However, a highly formal methodology chapter can be dull to read as well as to write. Instead, it is often right to offer the reader field notes about the developments of one's thinking called 'The natural history of my research'.

Further reading

The most helpful comments on writing a methodology chapter are to be found in Pertti Alasuutari's *Researching Culture: Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies* (Sage, 1995), Chapters 13 and 14.

Exercise 22.1

Assemble the various memos you have written during your research. Now write 500 words on each of the following topics related to your research:

- 1 The main things that have helped you finish and the main things that have held you back.
- 2 What you have learned about your research topic.
- 3 How you have improved your knowledge of (a) methodology and (b) theory.
- 4 What lessons your research has for other students at your level.

Note: If you have not finished your research yet, do Exercise 2.1 instead.