

MIXED METHODS RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

In discussions about methods, researchers typically do not see specific questions or hypotheses especially tailored to mixed methods research. However, discussion has begun concerning the use of mixed methods questions in studies and also how to design them (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). A strong mixed methods study should start with a mixed methods research question, to shape the methods and the overall design of a study. Because a mixed methods study relies on neither quantitative or qualitative research alone, some combination of the two provides the best information for the research questions and hypotheses. To be considered are what types of questions should be presented and when and what information is most needed to convey the nature of the study:

- Both qualitative and quantitative research questions (or hypotheses) need to be advanced in a mixed methods study in order to narrow and focus the purpose statement. These questions or hypotheses can be advanced at the beginning or when they emerge during a later phase of the research. For example, if the study begins with a quantitative phase, the investigator might introduce hypotheses. Later in the study, when the qualitative phase is addressed, the qualitative research questions appear.
- When writing these questions or hypotheses, follow the guidelines in this chapter for scripting good questions or hypotheses.
- Some attention should be given to the order of the research questions and hypotheses. In a two-phase project, the first-phase questions would come first, followed by the second-phase questions so that readers see them in the order in which they will be addressed in the proposed study. In a single-phase strategy of inquiry, the questions might be ordered according to the method that is given the most weight in the design.
- Include a **mixed methods research question** that directly addresses the mixing of the quantitative and qualitative strands of the research. This is the question that will be answered in the study based on the mixing (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This is a new form of question in research methods, and Tashakkori and Creswell (2007, p. 208) call it a “hybrid” or “integrated” question. This question could either be written at the beginning or when it emerges; for instance, in a two-phase study in which one phase builds on the other, the mixed methods questions might be placed in a discussion between the two phases. This can assume one of two forms. The first is to write it in a way that conveys the *methods* or *procedures* in a study (e.g., Does the qualitative data help explain the results from the initial quantitative phase of the study? See

Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The second form is to write it in a way that conveys the *content* of the study (e.g., Does the theme of social support help to explain why some students become bullies in schools? (see Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007.)

● Consider several different ways that all types of research questions (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed) can be written into a mixed methods study:

- Write separate quantitative questions or hypotheses and qualitative questions. These could be written at the beginning of a study or when they appear in the project if the study unfolds in stages or phases. With this approach, the emphasis is placed on the two approaches and not on the mixed methods or integrative component of the study.
- Write separate quantitative questions or hypotheses and qualitative questions and follow them with a mixed methods question. This highlights the importance of both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study as well as their combined strength, and thus is probably the ideal approach.
- Write only a mixed methods question that reflects the *procedures* or the *content* (or write the mixed methods question in both a procedural and a content approach), and do not include separate quantitative and qualitative questions. This approach would enhance the viewpoint that the study intends to lead to some integration or connection between the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study (i.e., the sum of both parts is greater than each part).

Example 7.8 *Hypotheses and Research Questions in a Mixed Methods Study*

Houtz (1995) provides an example of a two-phase study with the separate quantitative and qualitative research hypotheses and questions stated in sections introducing each phase. She did not use a separate, distinct mixed methods research question. Her study investigated the differences between middle-school (nontraditional) and junior high (traditional) instructional strategies for seventh-grade and eighth-grade students and their attitudes toward science and their science achievement. Her study was conducted at a point when many schools were moving away from the two-year junior high concept to the three-year middle school (including sixth grade) approach to education. In this two-phase study, the first phase involved assessing pre-test

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and post-test attitudes and achievement using scales and examination scores. Houtz then followed the quantitative results with qualitative interviews with science teachers, the school principal, and consultants. This second phase helped to explain differences and similarities in the two instructional approaches obtained in the first phase.

With a first-phase quantitative study, Houtz (1995, p. 630) mentioned the hypotheses guiding her research:

It was hypothesized that there would be no significant difference between students in the middle school and those in the junior high in attitude toward science as a school subject. It was also hypothesized that there would be no significant difference between students in the middle school and those in the junior high in achievement in science.

These hypotheses appeared at the beginning of the study as an introduction to the quantitative phase. Prior to the qualitative phase, Houtz raised questions to explore the quantitative results in more depth. Focusing in on the achievement test results, she interviewed science teachers, the principal, and the university consultants and asked three questions:

What differences currently exist between the middle school instructional strategy and the junior high instructional strategy at this school in transition? How has this transition period impacted science attitude and achievement of your students? How do teachers feel about this change process?

(Houtz, 1995, p. 649)

Examining this mixed methods study shows that the author included both quantitative and qualitative questions, specified them at the beginning of each phase of her study, and used good elements for writing both quantitative hypotheses and qualitative research questions. Had Houtz (1995) developed a mixed methods question, it might have been stated from a *procedural* perspective:

How do the interviews with teachers, the principal, and university consultants help to explain any quantitative differences in achievement for middle-school and junior high students?

Alternatively, the mixed methods question might have been written from a *content* orientation, such as:

How do the themes mentioned by the teachers help to explain why middle-school children score lower than the junior high students?

Example 7.9 *A Mixed Methods Question Written in Terms of Mixing Procedures*

To what extent and in what ways do qualitative interviews with students and faculty members serve to contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this predicting relationship between CEEPT scores and student academic performance, via integrative mixed methods analysis?

(Lee & Greene, 2007)

This is a good example of a mixed methods question focused on the intent of mixing, to integrate the qualitative interviews and the quantitative data, the relationship of scores and student performance. This question emphasized what the integration was attempting to accomplish—a comprehensive and nuanced understanding—and at the end of the article, the authors presented evidence answering this question.

SUMMARY

Research questions and hypotheses narrow the purpose statement and become major signposts for readers. Qualitative researchers ask at least one central question and several subquestions. They begin the questions with words such as *how* or *what* and use exploratory verbs, such as *explore* or *describe*. They pose broad, general questions to allow the participants to explain their ideas. They also focus initially on one central phenomenon of interest. The questions may also mention the participants and the site for the research.

Quantitative researchers write either research questions or hypotheses. Both forms include variables that are described, related, categorized into groups for comparison, and the independent and dependent variables are measured separately. In many quantitative proposals, writers use research questions; however, a more formal statement of research employs hypotheses. These hypotheses are predictions about the outcomes of the results, and they may be written as alternative hypotheses specifying the exact results to be expected (more or less, higher or lower of something). They also may be stated in the null form, indicating no expected difference or no relationship between groups on a dependent variable. Typically, the researcher writes the independent variable(s) first, followed by the dependent variable(s). One model for ordering the questions in a quantitative proposal is to begin with descriptive questions followed by the inferential questions that relate variables or compare groups.