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This is the second edition of a volume in the Applied Social Research Methods Series. Maxwell presents a model outlining his approach to qualitative research, comprising goals, conceptual framework, research questions, methods and validity. He uses this simple framework as a basis for an ‘interactive model’, with the five components closely tied to several others, rather than being linked in a linear or cyclic sequence (p. 4). It is this integrated and interacting whole that Maxwell presents as his innovative approach to what are well-accepted parts of the research process. Within the model, he defines two ‘triangles’ of closer relationships, with goals, conceptual frameworks closely linked research questions, and in turn, these questions also link closely to the second group, comprising the feasibility of methods and issues and threats to validity. A more complex set of contextual factors influencing research design are overlaid on the basic model, to enhance discussion and understanding of constraints, tensions and factors that facilitate research.

Chapter 1 describes the model, with each component then forming the basis of chapters within the book. Chapter 2 addresses goals, outlining personal, practical and intellectual goals. By beginning the discussion with personal goals, Maxwell acknowledges the influence of personal experiences and the importance of motivation in completing research projects, particularly for students who are faced with competing demands. Personal goals also influence choice of qualitative approach, and in turn the validity of any study. Personal desires and interests must also be balanced by objective and careful assessment of other factors related to the topic, especially methods and conclusions. Spending time to identify personal goals also requires recognition of the influence of personal values and identity, both closely aligned to the validity of research outcomes. Practical goals are directed towards what the research will accomplish, for example the social impact of the work, or a situation to be changed. The understanding sought from the study is in turn addressed by intellectual goals.

Chapter 3 deals with the conceptual framework—the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs and theories that support and inform research. Here, Maxwell draws on the work of Miles and Huberman to define a conceptual framework as a product that ‘explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts or variables—and the presumed relationships among them’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 18). He then expands on his propositions that the ‘idea context’ for a study is a plan that will inform the design and shape many of the decisions to be made along the way. In particular, the framework helps to justify the research and put it in the context of existing theories. Despite how well thought out or thorough a framework might be, Maxwell highlights its tentative nature, it is flexible and evolving. He cautions against viewing the conceptual framework as equating simply to the literature review. The framework is not only descriptive, its
role is to be a critical analysis of evidence, theories, previous work and broader issues that construct a structure to support the proposed study and as such, impact on the research questions. This chapter presents a thorough discussion of many related steps and suggestions to help in this developmental stage. He explains the importance of situating proposed work within a research paradigm, using experiential knowledge and making links to previous research and existing theories.

Identifying the development and use of theory as possibly the most daunting part of a qualitative study for many students, Maxwell draws on ‘concept mapping’ as a tool to assist in the process of identifying existing theory and developing the tentative theories related to a proposed study. He dedicates a significant part of the chapter to this exercise, using examples of previous work to illustrate techniques and tools. Specifically, he notes things to avoid and strategies to make the planning process effective.

Maxwell uses a further technique I found interesting—that of ‘thought experiments’, used in physical and social sciences, but not widely in the design of qualitative research. Using the work of Lave & March (1975), he describes them as a means to ‘encourage creativity and a sense of discovery, and can help you to make explicit the experiential knowledge that you already possess’ (p. 59). The related exercise uses a scenario that works through three process-oriented steps to test theoretical models. Briefly, he proposes that experience, prior theory and research, pilot studies and thought experiments are the four major sources of the conceptual framework used in the development stage of a research study.

Research questions are the focus of the fourth chapter, and at the centre of Maxwell’s model, linking directly to all other components. Maxwell maintains that, while qualitative researchers are likely to develop and refine questions during the research, after collection and analysis of what might be a significant amount of data, they don’t start devoid of questions, even though these might be provisional in nature. In this chapter, he discusses the purposes of research questions, the kinds of questions best suited to qualitative research and provides guidance for development of appropriate and productive research questions. He makes some explicit distinctions between aspects of research that he sees as commonly confused. This includes separating the intellectual issues, what is to be understood by the study, as distinct from what is to be accomplished, so that practical concerns should not be incorporated in questions. Another helpful strategy he uses is to distinguish between research and interview questions, and similarly, between research questions and hypotheses that might be used in qualitative designs.

I carried out this review from the perspective of a researcher currently undertaking research studies and as a teacher. I find Maxwell’s approach very worthwhile, and in particular the clear distinctions he makes between elements of the planning process. For example, he delineates between certain types of research questions: generic and particularistic; instrumentalist and realist; variance and process, before presenting a succinct approach, accompanied by an exercise in developing questions. By taking time to work through these distinctions and to get a clear picture of strategies to link methods and questions, he gives the researcher, and especially students, an opportunity to develop more specific and focused proposals.

Chapter 5 moves the focus to methods, with Maxwell emphasising that he will not present ‘cookbook’ guidance. He advocates both formal and informal data-gathering
strategies, with the researcher as the key research instrument. He describes four main components of methods as being: the research relationship with those being studied; site and participant selection; data collection; and finally, data analysis. He suggests setting a balance between structuring methods prior to commencing the study, and being responsive to the directions that develop during data collection.

Like other chapters, this one incorporates examples and exercises to bring the concepts together. The first exercise is a reflective memo and the second one presents the use of a matrix as a tool to be used in the steps of design, monitoring of selection and data collection and data analysis, again drawing on the work of Miles and Huberman (1994). This exercise has two parts, the first being construction of a matrix of questions, selection decision, data collection methods and possible kinds of analyses. Secondly, Maxwell asks for a narrative justification of the choices made in constructing the matrix. This reflection on process takes time, but will strengthen the researcher’s potential use of strategies.

Taking his realist approach, Maxwell uses Chapter 6 to discuss validity as a distinct component of research design, identifying and suggesting approaches to deal with validity threats to a research study. He challenges the notion that approaching validity in general, theoretical terms and using abstract strategies protects a study from invalidity and proposes that ‘the main emphasis of a qualitative proposal ought to be on how to will rule out specific plausible alternatives and threats to your interpretations and explanations’ [italics in the original] (p. 107). Specifically, he addresses researcher ‘bias’ and reactivity—the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals being studied. He cites other authors to show that for both these threats, the important thing is not to try to avoid these influences, but to understand them and how they affect the validity of conclusions. He presents a checklist to test validity, an eight-step tool to address issues specific to the study being planned or implemented. The final issue addressed is generalisation, which Maxwell considers to be separate from validity proper. He further distinguishes between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ generalisability.

The final chapter outlines presentation and justification of a research proposal, accompanied by an example included as an appendix. While Maxwell acknowledges that design evolves throughout a qualitative study, he cautions against preparing a proposal that is not thorough in addressing issues of design and how decisions will be made throughout the study. He warns that a proposal that sets out a ‘façade’, ignoring actual theories, goals, questions and the conditions for the study is likely to result in problems when the study is implemented. As with the other chapters, he sets out an approach to guide the researcher/student through the steps, using diagrams to show the relationships between design and proposal argument, and the structure of the proposal.

Maxwell uses descriptive examples throughout his chapters. These are colourful and bring an element of action to the portrayal of quite complex wordy perspectives of the research process. From the outset, Maxwell acknowledges his perspective as being one of ‘philosophical realism’. It is obvious that he writes with the experience of researcher and teacher. He aims for both range and depth of the material presented and also gives insight into learning and teaching of research. Examples are drawn from his work and that of students.
For readers who relate to visually presented information, the author uses diagrams to enhance his narrative examples. I found this useful, a good example of how simple visual techniques can reinforce presentation of frameworks for use in developing a proposal, or for teaching stages of the research process. Each chapter uses two supportive aids for learning. Firstly, examples drawn from previous work, and secondly, exercises to be related to the reader’s own work. These exercises take the form of memos, incorporated by Maxwell to demonstrate use of a research tool in a learning context. They are designed to develop understanding, and are ‘ways of getting ideas down on paper (or in a computer), and of using this writing as a way to facilitate reflection and analytic insight’ (p. 12). By starting with these tasks early and consistently through the text, Maxwell encourages the reader to be an active participant. The examples Maxwell uses to illustrate specific points are clearly presented in text boxes, as are the exercises. In summary, this text is a useful resource for teachers, as well as a reference for researchers wanting to reinforce or redefine their work.

References

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