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Mixed Methodology in Multilevel, Multisetting Inquiry

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Community psychologists are frequently interested in phenomena that occur at multiple levels of analysis, including individuals, families, groups, neighborhoods, communities, and cultures. Taking an ecological view invites complex methodological questions regarding how to capture group- or setting-level influences on human behavior and community change. Given the centrality of understanding the interplay between individuals and their environments, the field frequently examines contextual effects and key sources of influence at the setting level (Todd, Allen, & Javdani, 2011). One way to do this is to engage in multilevel, multisetting research so that key patterns of setting-level variance can be observed across multiple sites. Yet "zooming out" in such multisetting research can result in a loss of the context-specific understandings offered by "zooming in" on a smaller number of settings. Indeed, consideration of cross-site and site-specific inquiry can even result in contradictory findings. Thus, a mixed methods approach affords the researcher an opportunity to engage in multifaceted exploration of multilevel, multisite phenomena. To illustrate this, the second part of this chapter will describe a study that aimed to capitalize on the strengths of mixed methodology in a multilevel, multisetting study of community collaboration in response to family violence.

Mixed methodology is particularly well suited to multilevel, multisetting inquiry, as it allows for the phenomenon of interest to drive methodological decision making. The employment of a mixed methods design encourages engagement with each level of analysis on its own terms and avoids sacrificing specificity at one level of analysis for another (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Applying mixed methodology to multilevel, multisetting inquiry is time and resource intensive, posing unique challenges related to site and participant selection and recruitment, study design, coordination of data collection efforts across sites that may be geographically distant, validity of data collected across sites, and data analysis and interpretation (e.g., Khorsan et al., 2013). However, mixed methods inquiry has the potential to yield an understanding that more richly presents the true complexity of the settings under study. A mixed methods approach to multilevel, multisetting inquiry invites us to engage such methods side by side and also to allow for their strategic interplay at multiple stages of the inquiry process from data collection to interpretation. Thus, it is not just the effective, independent use of quantitative and qualitative methods that is desired, but their interaction with one another, that produces a richer understanding than one would achieve by treating them independently.

INTRODUCTION TO MIXED METHODS INQUIRY

When designing a multisite study using mixed methodology, a critical consideration is the purpose of mixing methods. As with any research design, it is important that the methods be consistent with the study goals. Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) articulated a set of five mixed methods purposes that have relevance to multisite work. We describe each and provide illustrative applications.

First, the mixed methods purpose of triangulation involves increasing the convergent validity of results by simultaneously collecting data on

the same phenomenon using multiple, independent methods of data collection and analysis, with the goal of obtaining consistent results (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Greene & McClintock, 1985). Indeed, the perceived strength of triangulation derives from the intentional use of methods with counteracting biases in order to facilitate information corroboration (Greene, 2007). Although the beginnings of mixed methods research in social sciences can arguably be traced back to triangulation (Greene, 2007), the meaning and appropriate labeling of mixed methods research as triangulation remains an ongoing challenge; multiple variants of triangulation designs (e.g., Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007) and applications of mixed methods mislabeled as triangulation are evident in mixed methods literature (Greene, 2007).

A number of common challenges in the effective utilization of a triangulation purpose have been noted. First, triangulation assumes the presence of a single, objective reality (Campbell, Gregory, Patterson, & Bybee, 2012), and this assumption may be complicated by the inclusion of qualitative methods, which are commonly associated with assumptions of co-created realities. Second, because triangulation seeks cross-validation of results, discrepancies invalidate results rather than serving as a source of further information. Third, it can be difficult to effectively maintain independence between methods and use them concurrently to describe the same phenomenon (Greene & McClintock, 1985). As an example of dealing with this challenge, Greene and McClintock (1985) described using two separate evaluation teams to maintain independence of methods in their multisite, multilevel study of an adult community education program. One team used questionnaires, and the second used interviews; both focused on the use of information in program development.

A second mixed methods purpose is development, or the use of the findings from one method to inform further methodological decisions (e.g., around sampling, measurement, or study implementation; Caracelli & Greene, 1993; Greene et al., 1989). Thus, methods are typically used sequentially rather than concurrently (Greene et al., 1989). As an example, researchers could conduct initial stages of qualitative data collection at selected sites to inform a broader multisite quantitative data collection effort. In this vein, Waysman and Savaya (1997) employed a three-stage development approach in their study of nonprofit organizations receiving assistance from an Israeli nonprofit called SHATIL. The first stage used qualitative methods (i.e., interviews with SHATIL staff and focus groups with staff from organizations receiving assistance) that were then utilized to inform the development of a questionnaire sent in the second stage to all organizations receiving assistance from SHATIL. In the third stage, the researchers selected organizations that reported being particularly satisfied or dissatisfied with SHATIL on the Stage 2 survey and conducted focus groups with staff members.

Third, the purpose of complementarity involves the use of different methods to complement, enhance, illustrate, clarify, or elaborate on each other (Greene et al., 1989). Mixed methods designs with a complementarity purpose measure similar (but not identical) aspects of the same phenomenon (Caracelli & Greene, 1993) and typically implement both methods concurrently (Greene et al., 1989). Researchers using mixed methods for the purpose of complementarity across sites could use one method to collect data about a phenomenon at the individual level (e.g., client perceptions of their own improvement, obtained from qualitative interviews) and a second method to collect data about a similar phenomenon at the setting level (e.g., percentage of clients graduating from the program, as recorded in archives). In a multisite study of learning outcomes in liberal arts institutions with a complementarity purpose, Seifert, Goodman, King, and Baxter Magolda (2010) quantitatively identified cross-institution aspects of the college experience that were associated with intercultural effectiveness among students while using qualitative interviews with students to elaborate on the specific experiences that led them to develop intercultural effectiveness.

Fourth, an initiation mixed methods purpose involves a search for contradiction or contrast between methods (Greene et al., 1989). This purpose can be contrasted with a triangulation purpose, which looks for corroboration across methods. Research questions using one method can be studied from a different perspective using a second method (Caracelli & Greene, 1993). In a multisite study, researchers could intentionally search for discrepancies between trends across all sampled sites and local manifestations of the same issues. Of particular relevance to

community-based research, the exploration of contradictions can facilitate more effective action. The previously described SHATIL evaluation provides an example of an emergent initiation purpose in practice (Waysman & Savaya, 1997). While their qualitative focus group findings suggested that some clients felt patronized by SHATIL staff, their quantitative survey findings did not support that SHATIL staff were widely seen as patronizing. Thus, the researchers investigated which clients felt patronized and provided the results as feedback to SHATIL, increasing the organization's ability to promote culturally sensitive services.

Fifth, the purpose of expansion involves broadening the scope of inquiry through the use of different methods for different (nonoverlapping) phenomena (Greene et al., 1989). Although triangulation designs study identical phenomena and complementarity designs study similar phenomena, expansion designs study fully distinct phenomena (Caracelli & Greene, 1993). This purpose may be ideal for studies in which methods are pragmatically selected to study the phenomena to which they are best suited (e.g., quantitative archival methods can be used to identify program outcomes, while qualitative interviews can be used to understand how people at each program site understand the challenges of their work). When evaluations fail to demonstrate that a program has produced desired outcomes, expansion designs have been used as a strategy to illuminate other aspects of the program (Greene et al., 1989). As an example, the quantitative component of the Donmoyer, Yennie-Donmoyer, and Galloway study (2012) of principal preparation programs showed mixed results with regard to the programs' impact on student test scores; however, qualitative interviews with principals suggested a number of ways in which the program affected principal practices that might not be directly evidenced in student test scores.

CASE STUDY

Background and Aims

Sarason's broad conceptualization of settings include "any instance in which two or more people come together in new relationship over a sustained period of time in order to achieve certain goals" (Sarason, 1972, p. 1). This is a useful definition because it allows for settings to be conceptualized without the typical boundaries of formal organizations. Indeed, settings can take many forms, including, for example, classrooms in charter schools, councils and taskforces, grassroots organizations, and public housing advisory boards. The settings of interest in the current case study were Family Violence Councils (FVCs), a statewide (Illinois) network of coordinating councils that aim to improve systems' (i.e., criminal justice, human service, health care) responses to family violence, including child abuse, intimate partner violence, and elder abuse (Allen et al., 2009). These settings were formed over time by a state-level FVC affiliated with the administrative body of the state courts. FVCs were formed in each of the state's judicial circuits. These FVCs typically included a steering committee comprised of key local leaders (e.g., judges, domestic violence program executive directors, prosecutors, chiefs of police). They also included other committees that focused on particular geographic counties within judicial circuits and/or around particular substantive areas in the system's response to family violence (e.g., community/youth education, faith settings, law enforcement, child protection; see Allen et al., 2009, for a more extensive description).

FVCs provided a fascinating case for multisetting, multilevel research, given that each setting was embedded in a unique local community context with a different set of human and material resources. Yet they shared a mission and often aimed to achieve similar reforms locally (making desired outcomes common across sites), making cross-site comparisons meaningful. The study presented here aimed to answer multilevel, multisetting questions regarding council effectiveness and its correlates but also aimed to illuminate critical local processes by which these (relatively) new settings achieved local change.

In the study of FVCs, methods could be used in collaboration with each other to zoom in and zoom out in the pursuit of complex multilevel, multisetting research. In some cases, we were interested in an in-depth understanding of a single setting, for example, the specific forms that power negotiation and conflict resolution took in a council, with attention to those in different roles (e.g., advocates and judges). At other times, though, we were interested in drawing conclusions in multiple settings, for example, regarding the extent to which shared power in decision making and effective conflict

resolution influenced councils' capacity to achieve institutionalized community change (e.g., Walden, 2011) and how perceived conflict, conflict resolution, and power interacted in council functioning (Walden, Javdani, & Allen, 2014). That is, when looking across multiple sites, we could ask questions regarding the extent to which these features of the council setting affected council effectiveness. When we considered conflict and power in a single setting, we could assume that this was an important facet of council work, given its salience to us as investigators and as students of group dynamics. Yet it is through the multisetting context that we could directly test that hypothesis. Did the degree to which power and conflict were effectively negotiated explain variance in effectiveness across sites? Given that FVCs had formed throughout a single state, we were interested in understanding the wholesale effect of these settings on improving the system's response to family violence and explaining differences in effectiveness across sites. To do the latter, we could capitalize on having multiple settings. Yet we wanted to retain sufficiently rich contextual information about the settings to shape cross-site data collection processes and make meaning of study findings.

Methodology

The study of FVCs included multiple types and sources of data. It had two major components: a statewide inquiry that included all FVCs in the state (with the exclusion of those differently structured in the context of a major city) and an in-depth examination of three exemplar sites. We mixed qualitative and quantitative methods within and across each of these components. The particular strength of the statewide inquiry was the ability to zoom out in order to examine variability across FVCs with regard to proximal and distal outcomes and to examine what accounts for such variability (e.g., council age, councils' collaborative capacity, community support). This study component involved cross-sectional analyses largely reliant on FVC members' perceptions of the council setting (i.e., interviews with FVC coordinators, surveys of FVC membership). However, the statewide inquiry also included analyses of archival criminal justice and service utilization statistics, as well as FVC annual reports, which provided a source of triangulation of member perceptions. Furthermore, the analysis of archival data (e.g., criminal justice system statistics recorded from 1996 to the present) provided an opportunity to conduct a longitudinal analysis of FVC effects on the system's response to intimate partner violence with regard to arrests and orders of protection.

Examining trends across FVCs was invaluable, but examining the effectiveness of FVCs could not be accomplished without considerable attention to the community context in which such collaborative efforts take place and the dynamic and developmental processes that characterize such efforts (Adler, 2002; Yin & Kaftarian, 1997). Thus, we zoomed in to focus on particular FVC councils via case studies. The case studies employed a series of key informant interviews, informal and formal observations of council meetings, and review of council archives. Three FVCs were chosen as exemplary efforts but also represented different organizational structures and geographic locations and configurations (e.g., councils varied with regard to the number of counties in their judicial circuit).

Mixed Methods Purposes Illustrated

The primary aims in employing mixed methods in the current study were initiation, complementarity, and expansion. However, each of the five aforementioned mixed methods purposes can be illustrated using examples from the study. Being explicit about the purpose of mixing methods in the planning process can aid in designing studies with intentionality. For example, by design our study was implemented in phases. This allowed us to make changes in real time as we pursued different purposes in our study process.

We often associate using multiple sources of data collection with the goal of triangulation. The assumption here is that there is some truth that we want to uncover and the convergence of findings from multiple data sources regarding a single phenomenon affirms our conclusion regarding this truth. On the one hand, our study was undeniably interested in summative judgments regarding whether or not FVCs were effective. However, we were not naïve in our inquiry and did not expect a simple yes or no answer given the complex nature of multisite work and the multiple levels of analysis at which outcomes could be measured. Triangulation was relevant to our study in that we could point to multiple data sources to support our conclusion that the FVCs had indeed resulted in observable community change. However, it is worth noting

that triangulation was not the primary goal in mixing methods in our study. Indeed, triangulation was often coupled with a different purpose and was made possible because of the sequential nature of the overall study. For instance, we surveyed FVC conveners about how councils structured their efforts to address geographical challenges after this issue emerged as a clear theme in interviews with council coordinators, serving the purposes of both development (e.g., using interview data to develop items on the convener survey) and triangulation (e.g., multiple data sources corroborating an emerging hypothesis).

Our examination of council effectiveness highlights the benefits and challenges of pursing classic triangulation in multilevel, multisetting research. We did a survey of FVC members across the state and gathered information regarding perceived effectiveness of councils on key, common dimensions of change (e.g., improving policies and practices in the response to family violence). These data indicated that members across sites endorsed their councils to varying degrees as facilitators of desired change and provided a common metric that could be compared across all sites even though their specific local efforts and foci varied. Members' perceptions did not provide a source of objective data regarding council effectiveness (although we would argue that they are a critical subjective source of assessment and no less critical than other systems markers). One of the first sources of evidence for triangulation emerged with respect to studying the variability associated with whether and to what extent FVCs leveraged changes in policies and practices in the response to family violence. Across interviews with coordinators, key informants, and surveys with membership, we noted that FVCs were neither similarly positioned nor attuned to leveraging such changes, and, indeed, we found that this construct had among the highest setting-level variance in our hierarchical linear modeling of council member survey data.

We were further interested in identifying data sources that might support these conclusions (we will discuss contradictions in subsequent illustrations). Thus, we also analyzed 6 years of archival data regarding the specific activities of councils from their regular reports to the state FVC. We recorded all instances of changes in practice, protocol, and policy and found that the degree to which such specific changes were reported was significantly related to the overall ratings of councils by their membership. Members' assessments of their councils appeared to have some validity and supported the idea that some FVCs were indeed facilitating local change in the system's response to family violence. Notably, these data were still quite close to those produced by councils (i.e., based on their standard reports to the state).

We then explored other data sources that more directly reflected observed systems response to family violence, including arrest records and order of protection data. These data provided more objective indices of the specific ways in which the FVCs may have impacted institutionalized change. For example, we utilized existing data from all judicial circuits throughout the state over a 15-year period. Offering additional support for our conclusions regarding FVC capacity (although not uniform) to produce community change, we found that formation and development of the councils was associated with the accessibility of plenary orders of protection (Allen et al., 2013). However, our analysis of arrest data did not support our emerging conclusions but further enhanced them. We did not find support for the FVCs' impact on arrest rates but found that there was much variability within a given FVC's jurisdiction regarding law enforcement response (Javdani, Allen, Todd, & Anderson, 2011). This suggested that the councils may have been more effective at creating changes in the courts (centrally regulated within a judicial circuit) than with law enforcement (where no such central regulation is in place) (Allen et al., 2009). Looking at multiple data sources regarding the question of effectiveness allowed us to make a stronger case regarding the FVCs' potential to produce community change and to offer a more nuanced understanding of the types of outcomes that the councils may be best positioned to achieve.

As the previous example illustrates, full corroboration of findings across all methods, sites, and stakeholders is not a likely or generative goal with complex, multilevel phenomena. Discrepancies did emerge that would have undermined our findings had our sole purpose been triangulation. Our openness to initiation as an emergent mixed methods purpose thus allowed us to enhance our findings. In addition, it is important to note that the application of a triangulation purpose was accompanied by challenges compounded by the multisite and multilevel nature of our study. For instance, classic

triangulation requires the assessment of a single phenomenon (rather than overlapping, similar phenomena, as in a complementarity mixed methods purpose), and whether one phenomenon is truly being assessed is sometimes a matter of debate. In our study, our qualitative methods assessed subjective member perceptions of effectiveness, and our quantitative methods assessed objective indices of system change. Although an argument could be made that both methods assessed system change, it could also be argued that the epistemological assumptions accompanying each method of data collection make the phenomena fundamentally different. An argument could also be made that the fact that these phenomena existed at different levels of analysis (member perceptions were at the individual level, and systems change was at the system level) also made them similar, rather than identical, phenomena. Thus, is it important to be clear about epistemology, particularly when adopting different stances depending on particular research questions (e.g., some qualitative data were collected with postpositivist goals, while others were not).

The purpose of development, or the use of the findings of one method to inform further methodological decisions, figured prominently in the current study. Importantly, development was not in place only at the start of the study; we used it throughout as each data collection approach was developed. This was possible because, by design, data collection was phased in over a multiyear period. A development purpose proved to be useful as we zoomed in and zoomed out across levels of analysis: findings from micro levels informed directions to take at macro levels, and vice versa. The study began with interviews with state FVC staff. This provided a foundation for the subsequent steps in the study, including decisions to seek permission to acquire and analyze order of protection and arrest data. These early interviews provided foundational knowledge regarding the structure of FVCs that informed the next phase of data collection with council conveners across the state. Those interviews then informed the development of a convener and member survey, which informed the development of an interview protocol with key informants in the three case study sites. This sequential design allowed for information gathered to guide next steps and to maximize the relevance of each step. Small findings regarding, for example, the ways that FVCs were structured in response to local geographic realities and considerable local variation in the focus of efforts (e.g., on child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse) informed subsequent data-gathering efforts. Actively incorporating findings into subsequent data collection efforts became a reflexive process and involved all team members, including our community partners, in the study.

A driving purpose in the current study was complementarity, or the elaboration of findings about one phenomenon from one data source and analytic process with findings about a second, similar phenomenon from a second data source and analytic process. For example, in our quantitative analysis from member surveys, we found that our assessment of the intermediate outcomes that we termed "knowledge" and "relationship" development were highly correlated with one another (Javdani & Allen, 2011b). This could not be explained only by shared method variance, given these constructs' lack of shared variance with the other intermediate outcomes assessed in the same scale. Our qualitative data, including both key informant interviews and observations, helped us make meaning of this finding. Specifically, in the qualitative data, perhaps not surprisingly, discussions of relationships and knowledge went "hand in glove." We began to discuss this single construct internally as "intimacy" and later settled on the more conventional and often-studied construct of social capital to understand the inextricable relation between the constructs we had previously conceptualized as distinct (Allen, Javdani, Lehrner, & Walden, 2011). In the absence of the qualitative data and the ability to zoom in on the work of particular community contexts, we would have been inclined to interpret this largely in terms of a measurement failure (this may certainly still be part of the story). The juxtaposition of the quantitative data, gathered across multiple sites and more devoid of context, with the qualitative data, gathered with attention to local processes, gave it substantive meaning that resulted in our reworking of our understanding of our intermediate outcomes to reflect a single reinforcing process of relationship formation and knowledge generation.

Our complementarity efforts did not always bear fruit. Our data regarding the relationship between the formation and development of councils and the accessibility of orders of protection indicated that this was not a uniform finding across

councils (our members' assessments offered similar cross-setting variability in effectiveness; Allen et al., 2013). Yet, despite our best efforts, our other data sources would not shed light on which settings were more likely to have increased access to orders of protection and which were not. This was likely due, at least in part, to the timing of the data gathered. The order of protection data gathered covered a multiyear period for which we did not have data—our data collection followed that period. Still, we "turned over every rock" we could think of regarding time-invariant factors, for example, geographic features (rural versus urban, circuit size) and council characteristics (e.g., year of formation) and were not able to elaborate on how or why councils varied in their capacity to increase access to orders of protection.

The purpose of initiation is to search actively for contradiction or contrast between methods. This was also a part of our process, particularly in the study's analytic phase, and sometimes as an emergent purpose when we were actually in the pursuit of complementarity, as discussed previously. In particular, we pushed in our qualitative case study inquiry to understand salient differences in the functioning of individual councils as compared to general cross-site patterns. For example, geographic constraints were discussed at great length in two case study sites. Yet, despite this being a shared concern at these two sites, when we zoomed out and looked across sites, we could find no evidence that geographic constraints were a source of variance in perceived effectiveness across sites. This is one example of contradiction, or at least a lack of convergence, depending on the perspective privileged. The lack of findings across sites could lead one to conclude that this was a not a key factor in explaining what constrained council efforts, but it was undeniably a salient factor from the perspective of single-site reports. This led us to further question how both of these seemingly contradictory findings were true and to take them up side by side in our inquiry with regard to other critical facets of council functioning, including, for example, member participation (Dworkin, Javdani, & Allen, in press).

The heart of this investigation is illustrated in the purpose of expansion, which involves broadening the scope of inquiry through the use of different methods for different phenomena. Different methods bring different strengths to the inquiry process. By casting a broad methodological net, we exploited the relative strengths of the methods. Quantitative approaches are particularly well suited to examining setting-level effects by exploring setting- and individual-level variance on key dimensions of interest (e.g., multilevel modeling). For example, by examining 15 years of archival data on orders of protection, we were able to examine how the introduction and development of councils were associated with access to orders across sites. The qualitative methods we employed in each case study site shed light on the local processes that made councils likely to achieve such outcomes. Qualitative approaches are particularly well suited to the rich understanding of the contextual realities that shape the way a setting functions and positions itself to influence (or not). For example, in our quantitative data we assessed leader effectiveness, a common factor implicated in the success of collaborative efforts. However, in our study, there was very little variability in our quantitative assessment. There was such a high degree of satisfaction with local council conveners that there was not appreciable cross-site variability. In the quantitative analysis, what does not vary does not covary. Yet it would be incorrect to assert that leadership was not a critical component of council success; indeed, it was uniformly important and often successful. Our qualitative interviews and observations offered a nuanced understanding of how leadership figured centrally in council functioning and also pushed beyond typical conceptualizations of leadership to explore the critical role that informal setting leaders (i.e., those not in the role of convener or chair) played in building council capacity to pursue institutionalized change efforts. These developing interpretations further led us to expand our conceptual models about, for instance, contextual factors that may promote member empowerment to pursue such changes across sites beyond formal council leadership (Javdani & Allen, 2011a).

In general, our multisite, quantitative analysis offered the opportunity to build models that work together to explain variation in effectiveness. However, by design, operating at the setting level of analysis across all sites required us to pursue more generic and universal aims. The findings from these facets of the study advanced generalizable knowledge of what is important in these settings, yet they left us wanting regarding the how and why of council effectiveness. The qualitative

findings allowed for a more idiographic exploration of collaborative work, with attention to the critical processes involved in collaborative work and the realities of local sites.

Each of the five mixed methods purposes has clear application to multisite, multilevel research. Different methods may be better fits for phenomena at different levels of analysis, and in an expansion purpose, the phenomena of interest can drive methodological decision making in order to maximize coverage across levels. As we have emphasized, multisite work invites both zooming in and zooming out; in the present study we searched for both the nomothetic (generalizations across sites) and the idiographic (site-specific findings). We were able to obtain both and use information from one site or level to inform research at other sites or levels of analysis, as in a development purpose. We were also able to look for ways in which phenomena manifested at different levels of analysis (as in complementarity) and ways in which phenomena differed across levels (as in initiation). Finally, there are notable challenges in applying a triangulation purpose to multisite, multilevel research given its inherent complexity, but there may be cases in which it is possible to do so.

CONCLUSION

Mixed methodology in multisite, multilevel contexts allows community-based researchers to actively juxtapose the strengths of mixed methods in order to advance understanding. The research presented here illustrated how five purposes of mixed methods approaches—triangulation, development, complementarity, initiation, and expansion—can be operative in one study. Explicit attention to each purpose has implications at all phases of a study—development, implementation, data analysis, and interpretation—yielding rich rewards in the process.

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