

# METHODS BRIEFING 30

## Practice and Process in Integrating Methodologies (PPIMs)

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### Context

Research designs which use multiple methods can provide increased confidence in the accuracy of findings, improve measurement, add new knowledge through synthesis, present multiple voices, build complex explanations, or logically implement a theoretical framework.

The practicalities of using multiple methods are rarely discussed, however, especially in projects that generate data using methodologies that cross paradigms. We sought to address this deficit through our project, which involved integrating data from different sources at the design, fieldwork, analysis, and interpretation stages of the research. Substantively, the project explored the concept of 'vulnerability'. We conducted five small-scale studies using different methods and – our methodological contribution – we focused reflexively on the practices and processes involved in integrating these multiple methods.

### Vulnerability

Vulnerability was a fruitful concept to study, as it operates at a number of levels and in different domains. We designed the five studies around an initial proposition that vulnerability has dimensions that operate at different levels:

- Area level (e.g. area level statistics on crime; risk of flooding)
- Spatial environmental level (e.g. architecture and structured vulnerabilities)
- Community level (e.g. different 'communities' – neighbourhoods, ethnic groups, or socially defined categories of people such as children or the homeless – may differ in vulnerability and response)
- Household level (e.g. distributions of vulnerability amongst individual household members)
- Individual level (e.g. individual vulnerabilities and contexts).

## The research

The research was concerned to develop understandings of the process of integrating different research methods. It was organised around the investigation of a single topic – vulnerability – through five small-scale studies which varied by research approach or research sample. The five studies were inter-linked but methodologically discrete in terms of the data generated. The five studies consisted of:

- secondary analysis of official and public quantitative data and statistics relating to the geographical area in which the research was based;
- photo-elicitation and video interviews with a cross-section of respondents with a focus on their neighbourhoods (visual data);
- in-depth interviews with respondents who were homeless (narrative data);
- in-depth interviews with all members of selected households (interview data from individual family members that could be aggregated to the household level); and
- in-depth interviews with a sample of respondents who lived on their own (individual level interview data).

The studies were conducted in several neighbourhoods of one town in England, which we called ‘Hilltown’. In addition to the research studies, we held discussions with key local policy makers to explore their uses of data in local planning and their approaches to multiple data sets.

## Methodological outcomes

Our research leads us to argue that integration needs to be considered a special form of combining multiple methods. Neither integrating methods nor mixing them is necessarily synonymous with claims to triangulation.

We contend that the term ‘integration’ should be used to describe a type of relationship where equal weight is given to the contribution of different methods to understand the phenomenon being researched.

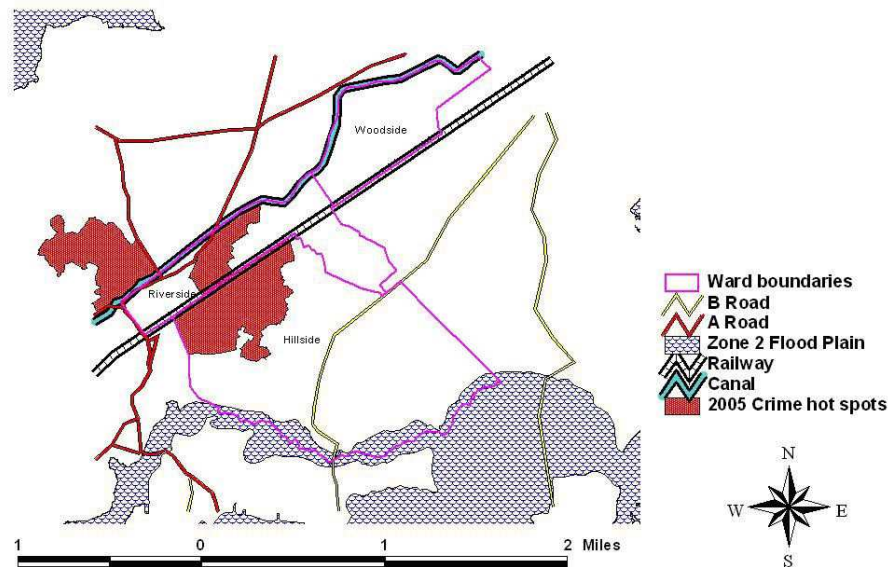
We consider that the relationship of integration can be achieved at different points in the research process, ranging from full integration of research/data-generating instruments, through analytic integration of data that has been generated more or less independently, to interpretative integration where separate analyses are brought together via a theoretical framework.

In focusing attention on the nature of integration as a process, we show how the pragmatic nature of doing research has an impact on implementing a multiple methods design. We argue that greater attention must be paid to the importance of critical thinking during the research process concerning the ways in which the practical decisions shape and are shaped by the goals of integration. Furthermore, the issues of conceptualisation, sampling and analytic approaches occupy central positions in this process.

## Substantive findings

Whilst individuals and groups may or may not be categorized as vulnerable, lived experiences of vulnerability are relative, fluid, and contextual. Participants who were officially classed as homeless showed this most strongly but this finding also emerged in the interview accounts with other participants. Vulnerabilities emerged which related to finance and future security as much as to a threat to self in the here and now. An etic perspective, which is often found in empirical work on vulnerability, defines vulnerable individuals on the basis of demographic characteristics. An emic viewpoint, in contrast, opens up questions about vulnerability on the basis of meanings held by individuals arising from their lived experience. Through analytic integration we

**Figure 1: A map of Hilltown showing vulnerability to floods (flood plain) and crime (hot spots)**



find that vulnerability also needs to be understood as a *complex* of attribute (risk of hazards at a group level), contingency (related to location of the self), context (changes with respect to outside/external circumstances), and negotiation.

The visual data gave an understanding of an interplay between place, space, aesthetics and vulnerability which moved beyond the findings generated in the interview data alone. For example, the visual data showed that people were as concerned about the aesthetics of their neighbourhoods as they were about more conventional elements of the built environment, such as safety. In addition, the quantitative data showed that mapping conventional indicators of vulnerability was important in terms of contextualising the ways in which respondents related to their neighbourhoods and other locales. Again, the fluid nature of vulnerability was transformed in etic measures to more fixed states which obscured how relativity and personal resources were important in the experience of everyday vulnerability.

Whilst the research was designed to explore how respondents managed their experiences of vulnerability, we found that management strategies were complex and emerged out of individual positionings in respect of aspects of self such as age, gender, disability and social class. Respondents of all ages used tactics such as avoidance of places or activities to reduce their feelings of physical vulnerability. This avoidance was complex and at times nuanced, and related strongly to detailed local knowledge of the ‘status’ of certain areas in the study site. However, it also became clear that many respondents felt financially vulnerable, or took on risks concerning money. Respondents who had faced repeated challenges to their abilities to manage their everyday lives tended to talk in terms of resistance and survival.

Most respondents detailed multiple ways in which they felt vulnerable but when reflecting on vulnerability as an abstract state related it as a condition that affected other people. In distancing themselves from vulnerability the notable element was that vulnerability was perceived as a situation for

**Figure 2: Photo taken by a 13-year-old girl to illustrate vulnerability to road accidents (fast cars, no footpath)**



which the person had few or no resources to draw on, in comparison to the participants perspective of their own personal strategies, resources and resourcefulness.

### **Training materials**

A set of training materials have been produced which are designed to help researchers explore the processes and practices involved in integrating different methods. They are available on CD by request.

### **Key publications**

Victoria D. Alexander, Ann Cronin, Jane Fielding, Jo Moran-Ellis and Thomas, Hilary (Forthcoming 2007). 'Mixed Methods', in Nigel Gilbert, ed. *Researching Social Life*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Sage.

Cronin, Ann, Victoria D. Alexander, Jane Fielding, Jo Moran-Ellis, and Hilary Thomas (Forthcoming 2007). 'The Analytic Integration of Qualitative Data Sources', in Pertti Alasuutari, Julia Brannen and Leonard Bickman, eds., *Handbook of Social Research Methods*, Sage.

Moran-Ellis, Jo, Victoria D. Alexander, Ann Cronin, Jane Fielding and Hilary Thomas (2006). 'Analytic Integration and Multiple Qualitative Data Sets,' *Qualitative Researcher*, 2 (Spring): 2-4. Qualidata.

Moran-Ellis, Jo, Victoria D. Alexander, Ann Cronin, Mary Dickinson, Jane Fielding, Judith Sleney, and Hilary Thomas (2006). 'Triangulation and Integration: Processes, Claims and Implications', *Qualitative Research*, 6 (1): 45-59. Sage.

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