



Designing Comparative Qualitative Case Studies in Culturally Conservative Contexts: Methodological Reflections from Libya

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تصميم دراسات حالة نوعية مقارنة في سياقات ثقافية محافظة: تأملات منهجية من ليبيا

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Abstract:

Qualitative research into students' educational choices presents distinctive methodological challenges, particularly within culturally conservative and socially diverse contexts. While existing literature has largely prioritized quantitative models of student choice, less attention has been paid to the methodological complexities involved in exploring this phenomenon qualitatively across multiple sites. This paper reflects on the design and implementation of a comparative qualitative case study conducted across four universities in Libya. Grounded in an interpretivist epistemological stance, the study employed a multi-site case study design supported by methodological triangulation, including interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and documentary analysis. Rather than reporting substantive findings, the paper critically examines the methodological decisions underpinning the research, the challenges encountered during fieldwork, and the strategies adopted to address issues of access, ethics, researcher positionality, validity, and transferability. The paper offers practical methodological insights for educational researchers conducting qualitative case study research in higher education, particularly within conservative and transitional societies.

Keywords: qualitative research; comparative case study; research methodology; higher education; culturally conservative context.

الملخص

طرح البحث النوعية المتعلقة بالاختيارات التعليمية للطلبة تحديات منهجية متميزة، ولا سيما في السياقات المحافظة ثقافياً والمتنوعة اجتماعياً. وعلى الرغم من أن الأدبيات القائمة ركزت بدرجة كبيرة على النماذج الكمية لتفسير اختيارات الطلبة، فإن الاهتمام بدراسة هذه الظاهرة نوعياً عبر موقع مؤسسي متعدد لا يزال محدوداً نظراً لتعقيدات المنهجية المرتبطة بهذه الظاهرة. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى التأمل النقدي في تصميم وتنفيذ دراسة حالة نوعية مقارنة أجريت في أربع جامعات ليبية. وانطلاقاً من المنظور المعرفي التفسيري، اعتمدت هذه الدراسة المنهج الكيفي، النوعي، لدراسة حالة متعددة الموقع مدعومة بأدوات المنهج الثلاثي، مستخدمة المقابلات، ومجموعات النقاش المركزة، والاستبيانات، وتحليل الوثائق. وبدلاً من عرض النتائج الجوهرية للدراسة فإن الورقة تركز على تحليل القرارات المنهجية التي أسست البحث، والتحديات التي واجهت العمل الميداني، والاستراتيجيات المعتمدة لمعالجة قضايا الوصول إلى الميدان، والأخلاقيات البحثية، وتموضع الباحث، والصدق، وقابلية نقل النتائج. وتقدم الورقة في هذا الإطار إسهامات منهجية عملية تفيد الباحثين في مجال الدراسات التربوية الذين يجرون بحوث، دراسات حالة نوعية، في التعليم العالي، لا سيما في المجتمعات المحافظة والمجتمعات الانتقالية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البحث النوعي؛ دراسة حالة مقارنة؛ المنهجية البحثية؛ التعليم العالي؛ السياق الثقافي المحافظ.

1. Introduction

Understanding how students choose their field of study has become a significant area of inquiry within higher education research. This interest is closely linked to broader concerns about educational access, social mobility,

labour market alignment, and institutional planning. Much of the existing research on student choice has relied on quantitative approaches, emphasizing measurable variables such as academic achievement, socio-economic status, and labour market returns. While such approaches have generated valuable insights, they often provide limited understanding of the socially embedded and culturally mediated processes through which educational choices are made.

Qualitative approaches offer an alternative lens through which student choice can be examined as a dynamic process shaped by family expectations, cultural norms, institutional structures, and individual aspirations. However, conducting qualitative research on sensitive educational decisions presents considerable methodological challenges, particularly in culturally conservative contexts where social norms influence access to participants, patterns of communication, and ethical boundaries (Bryman, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

These challenges are further amplified when a comparative case study design is adopted across multiple research sites. Comparative qualitative research requires balancing sensitivity to local context with analytical coherence across cases, while also addressing issues of access, trust, and transferability. Despite these challenges, there remains a relative lack of methodological reflection on how such research can be effectively designed and conducted in higher education settings within conservative or transitional societies.

This paper seeks to address this gap by offering a methodological reflection on a comparative qualitative case study conducted across four Libyan universities. Rather than focusing on empirical findings, the paper foregrounds the methodological rationale, fieldwork challenges, and strategies adopted to enhance research quality. In doing so, it aims to contribute to methodological discussions in educational and social science research and to provide practical guidance for researchers working in similar contexts.

2. Philosophical and Epistemological Positioning

Methodological decisions in social and educational research are inseparable from the philosophical assumptions that underpin them. Ontological and epistemological positioning shapes how researchers conceptualise social reality, define knowledge, and select appropriate research strategies (Crotty, 1998). In studies concerned with human decision-making, such as students' choice of field of study, these assumptions play a particularly central role.

This study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemological perspective, which assumes that social reality is socially constructed and contextually situated. From this standpoint, educational choices are not viewed as objective outcomes of isolated variables, but as processes embedded within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Bryman, 2016). Interpretivism emphasises understanding participants' perspectives and the meanings they attach to their actions, making it particularly suitable for exploring complex educational phenomena.

In contrast to positivist paradigms, which prioritise objectivity, quantification, and hypothesis testing (Husen, 1997; Robson, 2011), an interpretivist approach recognises that human behaviour and decision-making are shaped by subjective interpretations and social interactions. In the Libyan context, students' educational choices are closely intertwined with family expectations, regional norms, and broader cultural values. Understanding these influences requires methodological approaches capable of capturing depth, nuance, and context.

Adopting an interpretivist stance informed not only the choice of qualitative methods but also the overall research design. It justified the use of open-ended data collection tools, the emphasis on participants' narratives, and the selection of a case study strategy that allowed the phenomenon of student choice to be examined within its real-life context.

3. Methodological Approach and Research Design

3.1 Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

The research adopted a qualitative methodological approach due to its exploratory nature and its focus on understanding processes rather than measuring outcomes. Qualitative research is particularly effective in examining how individuals interpret their experiences and how social meanings are constructed within specific contexts (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Patton, 2015).

In this study, the aim was not to test predetermined hypotheses or to generalise statistically to a wider population, but to develop a contextually grounded understanding of how students navigate the process of choosing a field of study. This required methods capable of capturing students' perceptions, reflections, and interactions, as well as the social and cultural influences shaping their decisions.

3.2 Comparative Multiple Case Study Design

A comparative multiple case study design was adopted to explore student choice across four universities located in different regions of Libya. Case study research is particularly appropriate when investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts, especially where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred (Yin, 2018).

Each university constituted a distinct case, reflecting unique regional, cultural, and institutional characteristics. The comparative design enabled cross-case analysis, allowing patterns and contrasts to emerge while preserving sensitivity to local context (Gerring, 2007). This approach strengthened the analytical depth of the study by facilitating the identification of both shared and context-specific influences on student choice.

The selection of cases was guided by purposeful sampling criteria, including geographical diversity, institutional relevance, and feasibility of access. By focusing on multiple cases within a single national context, the study sought to balance depth with comparative breadth, thereby enhancing the potential for analytical and theoretical insight.

4. Data Collection and Methodological Triangulation

To enhance the credibility and robustness of the study, methodological triangulation was employed through the use of multiple data collection methods (Denzin, 1978; Cohen et al., 2018). Data were generated using:

- Semi-structured individual interviews
- Focus group discussions
- Questionnaire surveys
- Documentary analysis

Triangulation allowed the phenomenon of student choice to be examined from multiple perspectives and reduced reliance on any single data source. It also facilitated cross-validation of emerging interpretations, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The use of different methods was particularly valuable in addressing contextual constraints. For example, focus groups were employed as a culturally appropriate alternative to individual interviews in certain settings, while documentary analysis provided historical and institutional context that complemented participants' accounts.

5. Fieldwork Challenges and Methodological Responses

Conducting qualitative research in a culturally conservative context presented several methodological challenges. Gaining access to participants required negotiation with institutional gatekeepers, while social norms influenced patterns of interaction, particularly in relation to gender. In some cases, one-to-one interviews with female students were not culturally appropriate, necessitating the use of focus group discussions as an alternative data collection strategy (Morgan, 1997; Ulin et al., 2005).

Researcher positionality also played a significant role in shaping the research process. The researcher occupied a hybrid insider–outsider position: sharing national and cultural background with participants, while simultaneously conducting research across regions with distinct local norms. This positionality facilitated access and rapport but also required ongoing reflexivity to mitigate potential bias (Bereday, 1964; Merriam et al., 2001).

These challenges were addressed through prolonged engagement, transparent communication with participants, and methodological flexibility. Such strategies contributed to building trust, enhancing data quality, and ensuring that the research process remained ethically and culturally sensitive.

6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to all stages of the research. Informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw were prioritised throughout the study (Bryman, 2016). Participants were provided with clear information about the purpose of the research, the use of data, and measures taken to protect their anonymity.

Given the sensitivity of educational choice within family and social contexts, particular care was taken to avoid harm and to respect cultural norms. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee, and ethical reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process (Diener & Crandall, 1978; Stake, 1995).

7. Validity and Transferability

In qualitative research, validity is closely associated with credibility, trustworthiness, and transparency rather than statistical precision (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several strategies were employed to enhance research quality, including triangulation, thick description, reflexive engagement, and careful documentation of methodological decisions.

Rather than aiming for statistical generalisation, the study sought to support transferability by providing detailed contextual descriptions that enable readers to assess the applicability of the research to other settings with similar characteristics (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The comparative design further strengthened analytical generalisation by identifying patterns across multiple cases.

8. Methodological Contribution

The methodological contribution of this paper lies in its systematic reflection on the design and conduct of a comparative qualitative case study within a culturally conservative higher education context. By explicitly addressing challenges related to access, gender norms, researcher positionality, and ethical sensitivity, the paper extends existing methodological discussions beyond Western research settings.

The strategies outlined here demonstrate how methodological flexibility, triangulation, and reflexivity can be employed to enhance research quality in complex social contexts. These insights may inform future qualitative studies in higher education and contribute to the development of more context-sensitive methodological frameworks.

9. Conclusion

This paper has offered a methodological reflection on the design and implementation of a comparative qualitative case study conducted in Libyan higher education. By foregrounding methodological challenges and the strategies adopted to address them, the paper contributes to broader debates in qualitative educational research.

The reflections presented here may be of value to researchers undertaking qualitative case study research in higher education, particularly within conservative, transitional, or under-researched societies. Future studies may build on this work by further exploring methodological adaptations required in diverse cultural contexts.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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