

## Part VI

# Paradigm, Theory, and Method

### Introduction

The qualitative research program emerged dramatically in the nineteen eighties. Chapter 2 briefly discussed how it arose partly as a response to the perceived limitations of nursing research of the sixties and seventies. The ensuing debate over qualitative research made questions of methodology prominent. By the early nineteen nineties, it became generally accepted that qualitative and quantitative research constituted two “paradigms” of nursing research. Nursing knowledge has thus been divided along methodological lines. Some nurse scholars see this division as fundamental and, in important ways, unbridgeable. Others have tried a more conciliatory approach, arguing that different methods are consistent, or even complementary. The issue has important practical consequences for nursing research.

The object of the chapters in this part will be to disentangle the issues that underlie the so-called “paradigm wars” in nursing. There are two focal issues. First, there is the idea of a paradigm itself. Taken from Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* ([1962] 1970), the idea that science requires paradigms has become almost axiomatic in nursing. Kuhn’s conception of a paradigm tightly integrates theory, method, and value. It has supported the idea that qualitative research was entirely distinct from quantitative research. Chapter 16 will explore the history of qualitative research in nursing and provide some background for the notion that there are qualitative and quantitative paradigms. Chapter 17 will then unpack the idea of a paradigm, and ultimately argue that that nursing knowledge should not be bifurcated into

qualitative and quantitative varieties. Indeed, the whole idea of a paradigm is best eliminated from nursing discourse.

Even if qualitative and quantitative methods are not part of different paradigms, there remain differences between them which are important for research practice. For example, whether different methods can be combined in a single study depends on how qualitative and quantitative methodologies are understood. Chapter 18 will critically examine the ways in which the methods have been distinguished. With a clear view of the differences, we will be in a position to properly understand the relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods and the research questions they address.

### **Terminological Preliminaries**

Before continuing, two terminological points are in order. First, we will strictly adhere to the common distinction between “method” and “methodology.” A method is something done in the course of research to gather information. Participant observation, unstructured interviews, and focus groups are methods; so is the use of the Beck Depression Inventory to identify depression, or the use of a sphygmometer to measure blood pressure. Methods are thus part of research practice. Methodology is an account of method. A methodology articulates how and why the method works, its strengths and limitations, and its possible sources of bias or confound. When choosing a method, a researcher must determine whether a particular approach will produce reliable and relevant information in the circumstances. This is a methodological question. There are broader questions of methodology as well: what using a method presupposes about the object of study, whether using a particular method is consistent with a given theoretical stance, what values are implicit in a method, and so on.

Second, the words “qualitative” and “quantitative” are troublesome. It is not always clear how a given research technique fits into the two categories. We will tolerate the vagueness, for the ultimate conclusion of Chapter 16 will be that it is harmless. A more acute problem is that the terms “qualitative” and “quantitative” are ambiguous with respect to the method-methodology distinction. This ambiguity has caused some miscommunication in the literature. For example, proponents of multi-method research have touted the use of both qualitative and quantitative *methods*, e.g. both unstructured interviews and the Beck Depression Inventory. In response, opponents of multi-method research have pointed to the inconsistency of quantitative and qualitative *methodologies*. The ambiguity between the qualitative-quantitative distinction as a distinction in method or methodology is not one that can be resolved easily by terminological fiat. It must suffice to note that the main concern herein is with methodology, not method. Our questions are these: Are there two fundamentally different methodologies in nursing? Or is there a unified methodological framework within which the various methods of nursing research can all be appropriately understood?