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**INTERDISCIPLINARITY,
QUALITATIVE
RESEARCH, AND
THE COMPLEX
PHENOMENON:**

**Toward an Integrative Approach to
Intercultural Research**

by

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Abstract: This article is a collaboration by the lead faculty member in a Masters program in Intercultural Studies and students who completed the program under his aegis. This article presents the program's approach to its research course sequence, an approach involving the integration of interdisciplinary and qualitative research. The authors first provide a theoretical justification for this approach by highlighting key principles and practices of both interdisciplinary and qualitative research that act as points of integration. Then, they contextualize this approach by framing it within the graduate program's three-course research sequence. The authors then illustrate this integrative approach with one cohort's collaborative project on Bedouin communities in Oman, focusing on three key features of integration: the multidisciplinary literature search, the data collection process, and the integrative analysis. The authors conclude with a model for integrative intercultural research.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, qualitative research, intercultural studies, complex phenomenon, research methodology

Introduction

This article presents one graduate program's unique approach to its research course sequence, an approach involving the integration of interdisciplinary and qualitative research. As stakeholders in an M.A. in Intercultural Studies (MAIS) program—one faculty member and three graduates—our objective is to present a theoretical justification for as well as an experiential account of the use of key features of interdisciplinary research (Repko, 2011) along with elements of qualitative inquiry to form a hybridized approach to researching intercultural phenomena. This integrative approach affords the “thick, rich description” (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of complex phenomena (Repko, 2011) that intercultural researchers seek.

In this article we provide a theoretical rationale for and an example of this integrative approach to qualitative research. First, we contextualize this approach through an overview of the MAIS. Next, we present a theoretical framework for this program's unique approach to research: Integrating key features of both interdisciplinary and qualitative research provides an invaluable tool for researching complex intercultural phenomena. After presenting this framework, we outline a three-course sequence in the program in which students develop this approach to research. Then, we illustrate this approach with one particular collaborative project, research on the Bedouin of Oman, illuminating three key points of integration: the multidisciplinary literature search, the data collection process, and the integrative analysis. We then conclude by framing this approach as a structured model for

intercultural research, highlighting its flexibility and including additional examples of its implementation.

Overview of the MAIS Program

The MAIS is intentionally neither a social sciences program nor a humanities program; it is integrative. While developed and taught by both social sciences and humanities faculty, the program's distinction does not align with one particular methodology. Borrowing from Denzin and Lincoln (2008), we see intercultural research as a *bricolage*, an art form in which the artist incorporates a variety of media to achieve a given work. Similarly, the intercultural researcher, driven by the complexities of the phenomenon, accesses an array of disciplinary materials and research approaches necessary to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Recognizing the inherent complexities of intercultural study, research, and engagement, a key goal of the MAIS is to provide an integrative theoretical and research-based framework for globally engaged students. The program, consisting of students from a wide range of disciplinary undergraduate backgrounds, offers a multidisciplinary range of courses addressing various aspects of intercultural issues, incorporating theory and research from the social sciences, humanities, and professional disciplines. In addition, the MAIS includes four courses dedicated specifically to research: a three-course sequence employing an integrative approach to qualitative research and a fourth course designated as an exclusively interdisciplinary capstone. These four research courses act as the program's integration points for the students to begin to understand the complexity and necessity of interdisciplinary approaches to intercultural phenomena.

This article focuses on the three-course sequence in which students integrate interdisciplinary and qualitative research. The intention of this three-course sequence is not to fulfill disciplinary expectations but to provide students with an integrative framework for understanding how key features of interdisciplinary research complement key features of qualitative research, both working in tandem to provide a thick, rich description of the complex phenomenon. While some students in the MAIS come from intentionally interdisciplinary undergraduate programs, the majority come from traditional disciplinary programs, providing little exposure to the theory and research of interdisciplinarity. Furthermore, few in our program, even students coming out of the social sciences, have had undergraduate research training in qualitative methods.

Integrating Interdisciplinary and Qualitative Research: The Complex Phenomenon

Central to the program's research model is the notion of the complex phenomenon. Repko (2011) suggests that with such forces as globalization and digitalization, complex problems are becoming more prevalent. As a result, cultures negotiate evolving frontiers based on dynamic boundaries (Omoniyi, 2010). In describing complex problems, Klein suggests that while "classic disciplinary problems" are characterized as having "impermeable boundaries" (1996, p. 38), complex problems are ill defined; they are "open-ended, multi-dimensional, ambiguous, and unstable" (p. 40); they reflect a "complex array of phenomena with ill-understood and unpredictable feedbacks to the knowledge system" (p. 45). The MAIS approaches intercultural phenomena—evolving, elusive, relative, even mythical—as complex by Klein's description. To better understand how to navigate these spaces as researchers, students in this program are trained to explore complex phenomena with a hybridized research approach that employs both key components of interdisciplinary research and key components of qualitative research.

This hybridized approach—integrative intercultural research—necessitates a multivocalic narrative—a richer, fuller exploration that reflects the complexities of researching lived experience. Developing a contextualized, thick, rich description of a cultural phenomenon requires an intentional depth of engagement and inquiry. This focus on the phenomenon and/or themes emerging from the collected data frees the researcher to focus on an integrative interpretation of data instead of depending on the "validity" of a methodology to legitimize the research. Janesick describes this emphasis on qualitative methods as "methodolatry": "a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told" (1994, p. 215). Janesick's argument is especially important given the limitations of the standard social science model for understanding the human condition and lived experience (Pinker, 2003).

Interdisciplinary Research in the Three-Course Sequence. Repko (2011) establishes a foundational guide and protocol for interdisciplinary research predicated on the idea of the complex phenomenon. In so doing, he outlines the value and importance of both interdisciplinary research for answering complex research questions about complex phenomena and disciplinary research for contributing to a given discipline's understanding of a given phenomenon. Disciplines, used to organize branches of knowledge, are the foundation upon which education has been built. Each discipline creates its own rules of engagement and methods of organization as well as develops its own vernacular, research foci, and methodology (Repko,

2011; Shulman, 2002). In intercultural research and the study of complex issues, research from a single discipline is no longer adequate to address such phenomena comprehensively, for “real-world research problems that scientists address rarely arise within orderly disciplinary categories, and neither do their solutions” (Palmer, 2001, p. vii).

Interdisciplinary thinking involves “identifying and blending knowledge from relevant disciplines to produce an interdisciplinary understanding of a particular problem or intellectual question that is limited in time and to a particular context,” according to Repko; this understanding would “not be possible by relying solely on a single disciplinary approach” (2011, p. 23). Inspired by Klein’s suggestion that “‘reality’ is a nexus of interrelated phenomena that are not reducible to a single dimension” (2001, p. 48), we suggest that the reality of complex intercultural phenomena cannot be adequately researched and understood with a single disciplinary lens. The richness of culture warrants the richness of integrative thinking; the scope of interdisciplinarity within a given project is based on the range of disciplinary perspectives that time and topic allow.

In this approach, interdisciplinary research begins with a multidisciplinary literature search. In traditional social sciences research, the literature review is the grounding work upon which new research evolves: A disciplinary research endeavor typically builds off of prior disciplinary research about the phenomenon. For MAIS students, a multidisciplinary literature search plays a different role in the research process. Specifically, in this course sequence, instead of being the grounding framework upon which a hypothesis and study are designed, the multidisciplinary literature search plays three roles in the research design: as a contributor to framing initial research questions (but not necessarily determining the full set); as a provider of data to be coded in conjunction with qualitative data; and as a source of illustrations and examples of the emergent themes. Not intended to be exhaustive, the literature search in this course sequence is intended to complement and integrate with the qualitative data.

Qualitative Research in the Three-Course Sequence. Interdisciplinary research is specifically designed for complex phenomena; qualitative research, while designed for broader application across the social sciences, is well suited for researching aspects of lived experience within complex intercultural phenomena. In this program, qualitative research is seen as one approach to representing others’ representations of themselves and others. This view captures four values of qualitative research that are also evident in the ethos of the broader MAIS program: context, subjectivity, interpretation, and reflection. We argue that these values, consistent with both interdisciplinary and qualitative research, provide the researcher with the tools essential for

navigating ill-defined, complex phenomena. No longer solely dependent on sheer method, the intercultural researcher mindfully navigates a spectrum of considerations that may not be factored into traditional disciplinary research.

As a nongeneralizable approach to understanding lived experience, postpositivistic qualitative research affords researchers a relational, reflective, and highly contextualized process to better understand the phenomenon in question. Arguably, a more positivistic approach to intercultural research may fail to recognize the complexities of lived experience, the stuff of culture; to the contrary, it tends to objectify others and necessitates no measurable intercultural competence on the part of the researcher. On the other hand, postpositivistic qualitative inquiry is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world, and specifically, the complex phenomenon being researched, visible. These practices transform our understanding of the phenomenon into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Second, qualitative research design and methodology are subjective acts that are shaped by a researcher's "personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4). Specifically, the identification of the phenomenon to be researched, the selection of particular types of data collection methods used, and the analysis and interpretation of data are all highly subjective. According to Strauss and Corbin, researchers cannot completely divorce themselves from who they are or what they know: "The theories that we carry within our heads inform our research in multiple ways, even if we use them quite un-self-consciously" (1998, p. 47). In fact, according to Agar, "the ethnographer's background is the initial framework against which similarities and differences in the studied group are assessed" (1996, p. 93). This background, including one's personality, rules of social interaction, learned academic perspectives, and cultural biases, is significant to the development of a given study. For stakeholders in this program, recognizing and embracing the subjectivity inherent in intercultural research is, in fact, an ethical commitment on the part of the researcher—a commitment that contributes to what De Laine describes as "the moral career" of the researcher (2000, p. 5).

According to Carr, "those who profess to carry out value-neutral research are deluding themselves. They are misleading others by presenting their research as depersonalized and value-free No matter how well designed, research can never be value-free" (as cited in Greenbank, 2003, p. 792). The researcher's values may influence any aspect of the research, from

the theoretical approach of the project, to the data collection process, to the analysis of the data (Greenbank, 2003; Repko, 2011).

Third, by readily accepting these notions of context and subjectivity—that relativity of experience is an integral part of our perception—a qualitative researcher can truly begin to understand the benefits of reflecting on the vital role of interpretation and its value in understanding a particular phenomenon in a particular context. These benefits include, but are not limited to, an honest acknowledgement of the subjective nature of research, a more complex understanding not just of a phenomenon but also of the act of researching it, and a move toward authenticity. Furthermore, interpretation leads to construction and re-construction:

The constructivist or interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors. To prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer's construction of the constructions of the actors one studies. (Schwandt, as cited in Bishop, 1999, p. 94)

Qualitatively, projects in this course sequence are largely phenomenographic (Marton, 1986) in their approach. Phenomenography allows researchers to explore, describe, and explain a given phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced this phenomenon. As previously noted, the goal is for researchers to represent others' representations of themselves and others. With research questions developed at the onset of the project, researchers then employ qualitative data collection methods, including but not limited to interviews, observations, artifact collection, and photography. Researchers then analyze, or code the collected data for emergent themes.

Integrating Interdisciplinary and Qualitative Research. For students in the MAIS program, then, the phenomenon is the driving force—the point of inquiry and entry into the research project. Because intercultural phenomena are typically complex, researchers must become *bricoleurs* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), accessing relevant disciplinary research through literature and gathering data qualitatively from individuals whose narratives contribute to the researchers' understanding of the phenomenon. Both research approaches—one highly interdisciplinary, one qualitative—provide data that a researcher integrates for a complex and comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon. The resulting *bricolage* is driven

by the phenomenon: Data from multiple disciplines and multiple participants meld into an organized, thematic understanding of the phenomenon.

In addition, both research approaches recognize the value of an intentionally reflective approach to research, tasking the researcher with acknowledging her or his own subjectivities and the implications of these subjectivities throughout her or his research process. The intended result—increased transparency and authenticity—provides the researcher with a more fully developed understanding of others through the recognition of the researcher’s undeniable impact on the research design, data collection, and analysis. The benefit, then, for integrating interdisciplinary research with qualitative research—in addition to skills development, or even capturing complexities—is the reinforcement of a highly reflective approach to research with implications beyond the research field or the classroom.

Repko describes interdisciplinary research as a reflective decision-making process: “This means being self-conscious or self-aware of disciplinary or personal bias that may influence one’s work and possibly skew the evaluation of insights and thus the product of integration” (Repko, 2011, p. 71). He suggests that an on-going process of challenging one’s work is essential for interdisciplinary research (Repko, 2011). This intentional self-challenging is integrated into a self-reflective research process. Researchers benefit from taking a step back from their data during the collection and analysis processes and taking a look at the whole—the ethics, the motives, the agendas—and their roles in the task. Nothing should go unconsidered (Repko, 2011).

Repko’s views are similar to those of Paolo Freire’s philosophy of education; in fact, students in this course sequence read Freire for foundational insights into a more critical approach to qualitative research. Freire suggests with reflective thinking, one gains a more comprehensive understanding of reality: “When people lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting constituent elements of the whole... they cannot truly know that reality” (Freire, 2005, p. 104). Intercultural research demands that complex phenomena be looked at through a lens of critical self-reflection. To accomplish this, intercultural researchers must attempt to stand outside their experience and attend to it in such a way that they move beyond what appear to be common sense interpretations of what things mean. They are able to approach setting aside their ordinary assumptions about their situations and attain a heightened consciousness and clarified understanding about them (Sirotnik & Oates, 1986, p. 35).

Self-reflection, then, allows the researcher a healthy amount of distance for critical evaluation. Freire argues that when this is practiced, individuals are better able to transcend what he calls “limit-situations” to engage

“untested feasibility” (Freire, 2005, p. 102). Self-reflection has the ability to transform the researcher’s understanding of reality and to transform her/his future actions. For intercultural researchers, the contextualized, subjective, and highly interpretive nature of their craft has implications beyond the course sequence or project. This challenge-based approach is known in qualitative research as a crisis of representation (DeLaine, 2000; Delamont, 2004), referring to the necessity for an ethically engaged and reflective researcher to be critically aware and ever-vigilant not only with regard to her or his biases and subjectivities but also with regard to the power structures inherent in the research process.

Freire posits that “authentic education is not carried on by ‘A’ for ‘B’ or by ‘A’ about ‘B,’ but rather ‘A’ with ‘B,’ mediated by the world—a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it” (Freire, 2005, p. 93). The MAIS’s interdisciplinary qualitative research process provides the space for student researchers to engage these challenges through a self-reflective approach to understanding complex phenomena. This approach, in turn, provides the space for student researchers to further develop intercultural competence, one of the core goals of the MAIS program.

The MAIS Three-Course Research Sequence

In the MAIS’s three-course research sequence, students enroll in a methods course, then a field experience course, and, finally, a write-up course. Research experiences in this course sequence may either be structured as cohort-wide, collaborative projects or as individual projects, depending on a number of resource factors, including the campus (on which the program is being offered), cohort size, and students’ individual interests.

Regardless of whether or not students conduct course research collaboratively or individually, given the scope and scale of this course sequence, students are not primarily tasked with developing a new or innovative understanding of a phenomenon in the sense that Repko describes as essential for interdisciplinary research (Repko, 2011). The primary task in the three-course sequence is for students to develop the skills necessary to execute key aspects of both interdisciplinary and qualitative research. While not denying the epistemological value of generating a new and innovative understanding, program stakeholders value students generating a more comprehensive and complex understanding of a given phenomenon than they would have achieved with either interdisciplinary or qualitative research alone. The course sequence provides a structured space for students to develop the skills necessary to generate this understanding.

The Methods Course. In the methods course, the first in the sequence, students explore a wide array of qualitative research topics beyond the traditional “qualitative vs. quantitative” dynamic. For example, students complexify the nature of social sciences by considering the intercultural research implications of behaviorism, with its dominating influence on our understanding of human nature/behavior (Pinker, 2003). They also explore critical theory, with its demands for exploring/exposing power structures inherent not only in the context of the phenomenon but also in the context of the research itself (Lassiter, 2005). Readings, discussions, class activities, and research projects in this initial methods course provide students an opportunity to explore the complexities of qualitatively researching and representing lived experience through the following means: to approach a research project as dialogically as possible; to recognize and include the impact of their own subjectivities as researchers throughout the research project; to describe, not prescribe; and to work collaboratively with peers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds towards a common research goal.

Methodologically, students are given an introduction to qualitative data collection, coding, and analysis. In addition, students conduct an appropriately scaled, qualitative research project as a course assignment. Specifically, students are exposed to and practice a wide range of qualitative data collection approaches, including ethnographic interviews, observations, and visual data collection. Students code data, identifying themes that emerge from the collected data.

The Field Experience Course. In the second course in the series, students—either collaboratively or individually—are tasked with designing and implementing an interdisciplinary qualitative research project. In this project, a six-week field experience, students move from the foundations of qualitative inquiry in the first course to an expanded research approach that integrates key features of both interdisciplinary research and qualitative research. Building off of the prior methods course, students identify and problematize a cultural phenomenon and develop a research plan, including data collection methods and coding. They secure project approval through the University’s institutional review board.

For the interdisciplinary component, students develop a multidisciplinary literature search related to the research phenomenon, serving three roles in the research design. First, students access major themes emerging from the bibliography that contribute to framing initial research questions. Students generate additional initial research questions based on personal interest or perceived potential relevance. Second, in a centralized, secure data storage and sharing space, students upload annotations from the literature search. As the research progresses through its qualitative component, through careful

coding, students integrate data from both the multidisciplinary literature search and the qualitative component of the project around strongly identifiable and triangulated themes. Third, as students prepare the written document and presentation that accompany the research, they continue to integrate data from the multidisciplinary literature search with qualitative data for a more comprehensive and complex understanding of the phenomenon.

By integrating data from the multidisciplinary literature search with data from qualitative research, students create an expanded understanding of the complex phenomenon. Literature from a variety of disciplines dovetails with the perceptions and narratives of the participants to form a more integrative understanding than either of the two alone could have generated. This is the key to the hybridized nature of the research approach: Students are integrating the data from both the multidisciplinary literature search and the qualitative component based on identifiable emergent themes.

The Write-Up and Presentation Course. For the third course in the sequence, students are challenged to generate an interdiscursive text that reflects the integrated approach the researchers have employed. This write-up includes an explanation of the phenomenon being researched, including the context and participants; the methodology, including a review of the multidisciplinary literature search, the qualitative data collection, the coding procedure, and the integrative analysis; the findings, organized around emergent themes, each with synthesized relevant multidisciplinary and qualitative data; and a concluding section on implications. Students also formally present their research to a campus and community audience.

Integrative Intercultural Research: The Bedouin Communities Project

Having provided an overview of the program, a rationale for an interdisciplinary qualitative approach to research, and a description of the MAIS's three-course research sequence, we now focus on a specific collaborative research project as an illustration of this approach to research. The faculty author of this article, as professor of record, acted as initial contact for this project development and implementation phase,¹ and the student authors and their peers designed and implemented the research. In the following illustration, the student authors provide a process analysis of their integrative intercultural research project on Bedouin communities in

¹ We would like to thank Dr. Catherine Cushinberry for her contribution to this research project, specifically her leadership in guiding the cohort through their research writing and presentation development process.

Oman. In this process analysis, we present the chronological development and implementation of this project while highlighting three key aspects of its integrative nature: the project's multidisciplinary literature search, the qualitative data collection, and the integrative data analysis. We also consider our findings in light of this approach.

Throughout this discussion we are mindful of the positive impact that our multidisciplinary team had on the research process, recognizing that a team of eleven people, each with an undergraduate degree representing a different discipline, played a significant role in the integrative aspect of the research project. Reflecting the research elements essential to intercultural study—context, subjectivity, interpretation, and reflection—this process captures the iterative, emergent, and synthesizing approach the team took to developing a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the lives and perceptions of the Bedouin research participants.

Project Inception

An Omani travel company that regularly interfaces with Bedouin communities on desert tours contacted our professor of record to request our help researching the impact recent Omani governmental changes have had on the lives and identities of those in its Bedouin communities. (The travel company employs a former graduate of the MAIS who is familiar with our approach to intercultural research.) The travel company provided our cohort with several points of inquiry that we then developed into the following initial research questions:

- How, if at all, does information travel between the rural villages and the cities?
- What, if any, are generational issues in the Bedouin experience?
- How does a child's education occur in the Bedouin community?
- Are Bedouins living in rural settings or moving to the city as they get older?
- What are the religious beliefs of the Bedouin?
- What role do stories play in the Bedouin culture?
- How do the Bedouins view themselves? How do they define their cultural identity and what sets them apart from other people in the Arabian Peninsula?

With these initial research questions, our research team began the highly negotiated and evolving process of designing and implementing a research project that would integrate interdisciplinary and qualitative research. At

this beginning point, we were completing the first course in the research sequence—the qualitative methods course—and entering the second course in the sequence, the field experience, in which we would integrate interdisciplinary research based in part on Repko (2011) with our newly-acquired qualitative research skills to research the phenomena we were to explore in Oman.

Multidisciplinary Literature Search

Having established our initial research questions, we then developed a multidisciplinary literature search that acted as a critical heuristic activity, aiding in our initial understanding of the complexities of life for Omani Bedouins. Specifically, each cohort member researched and annotated ten current academic sources relevant to the questions posed by the host regarding Omani Bedouin life in the twenty-first century. The students listed disciplines and topics related to their lines of inquiry and then divided the initial research among the group; for the most part, each student chose topics connected to his or her academic discipline. For example, one cohort member with a degree in architecture searched for sources on how Omani Islamic buildings might represent or give clues into the people's cultural values. With a background in anthropology, another cohort member selected a topic focused on Oman's history and the repeating patterns of its historical development. A third member, who is an educator, studied the educational system of Oman and how it is used to disseminate information. Other topics our group researched included but were not limited to religion, infrastructure, health care, gender roles, and language. Given the time constraints of our assignment, our initial goal was simply to construct some entry-points into understanding the complexities of the phenomenon we were exploring.

Prior to departure to Oman, we compiled our annotations into a single document and discussed the similarities and differences among the gathered literature entries. Each student shared disciplinary insights from the multidisciplinary literature search, identifying key ideas that connected to other topics in the literature search and providing insights into the research questions. For example, the role of education and religion, more specifically, Ibadhi Islam, was a significant point of research and analysis in our discipline-specific sources, including history, anthropology, theology, art history, architecture, and women's studies.

While each individual's disciplinary training, knowledge, and perspectives enhanced the complexity of the data analysis, this disciplinarity often posed challenges, as well. Productive disciplinary contributions provided the group with insights into the cultural context. Conflict in views

often became counterproductive, however, when a team member would place singular value on her or his own disciplinary expertise at the expense of other perspectives. Therefore, it became important for us to identify conflict early and then create a space for dialogue in order to maintain integrative balance. To optimize a productive approach to our research, we drafted and signed an agreement at the onset of the project that honored all the voices in the group—an accord that acted as a crucial aspect of cooperation in our collaborative effort (MacGregor & Smith, 1992). This accord addressed what we felt were essential considerations for negotiating the collaborative nature of the research. At points in the research process, we found ourselves referring back to this accord in an attempt to steer the project clear of unnecessary and unproductive conflicts.

This multidisciplinary literature search, along with extensive dialogue among team members, allowed for more research questions to emerge. Building upon the host's initial points of inquiry and our original questions, we developed the following additional questions:

- What are the similarities and differences between Bedouins, or nomadic people, and the sedentary, or non-Bedouin, Omani population?
- What role, if any, does institutional education play in the Bedouin culture?
- What impact, if any, does urbanization have on the Bedouin culture?

Qualitative Data Collection

After we established initial research questions and completed the multidisciplinary literature search, we then developed a qualitative data collection plan that included ethnographic interviews, observations, and visual ethnography. We also established a systematic approach to storing and coding the collected data, recognizing that data collection, coding, and analysis would need to allow for unanticipated emergent themes beyond those suggested by our initial research questions. For the data collection process, the travel company secured housing for us as well as an individual we employed as a driver, interpreter, and liaison for securing interviews through a friend-of-friend approach (Milroy, 1987) as well as an organizer of cultural excursions and other activities.

During our six weeks in the field, divided into pairs or small groups of researchers, we conducted ethnographic interviews in Bedouin homes and in the local markets. The interviews typically began with interview prompts based on our initial research questions, but often the conversations with the

participants would either shift directions or allow the researchers to probe deeper into specific themes, allowing the cohort a more in-depth look into the lives of our participants.

In addition to conducting the interviews, each member of the team was responsible for documenting what she/he observed during the interviews, such as body language, tone of voice, communication methods, cultural traditions or behaviors, and any other relevant data that could contribute to our research. We also recorded general observations of the everyday lives of our participants as we connected with them casually in the markets, through travel, and in their homes.

Finally, we incorporated visual ethnography into our collection process. Both Pink (2007) and Collier and Collier (1986) explain the art of capturing a story with visuals to recreate the life and energy felt by the researcher during his or her immersion in the setting under study. As the team took photographs of the participants' homes or short videos in the markets, the data came to life and provided further perspective into the participants' daily lives.

Ever mindful of the sociopolitical, geographical, regional, and global context our Omani Bedouin participants operated in, we also considered the various subjectivities we brought to the research, grappling with the challenge of how to clearly represent these participants (DeLaine, 2000; Delamont, 2004). The cohort, therefore, committed to taking an intentionally reflective approach in relation to these factors and their ethical implications, acknowledging the highly political act of researching others and the complex web of implications that arise from such an endeavor. We used three primary means of reflection while in the field: personal field research journals, personal video introspections, and group meetings. With these mechanisms, we were able to conduct our research with an ongoing and intentional awareness of our own biases and their implications for the research. Furthermore, these mechanisms allowed individual researchers to track their own points of development throughout the process.

Over the course of our fieldwork, we regularly uploaded qualitative data to the secure document storage and sharing site that already housed our multidisciplinary literature search annotations. Furthermore, each team member read through the qualitative data set as it was being collected. Through regularly scheduled, structured team meetings, we coded the collected qualitative data, identifying the following initial emergent themes: education, animals, network, movement, health care, culture, family, livelihood, and modernization. We used a flexible set of criteria for identifying these emergent themes, including the depth of a participant's response, the relative emotional investment from a participant, and the potential for more data to be collected about a given theme. We then enhanced these broader themes with sub-themes or sub-codes. For example, we coded the broader

theme of education with the number 1.0; the sub-code of a hopeful future we listed as .20, with other sub-codes .30, .40, and so on. The system allowed us to put broad themes and sub-themes or codes together. In one interview, a Bedouin mother spoke of how families were beginning to place a higher priority on education for their children because it would provide them with more opportunities for the future. We coded this statement as 1.20 to capture the theme of education with its sub-theme, future. Through this process we not only categorized data into manageable parts, but we also created an interface for our data that allowed us to consider new ways of seeing the relationships among the themes and their sub-themes as many often overlapped and connected.

Integrative Data Analysis

While we focused primarily on qualitative data collection in Oman, we also began integrating that information with that resulting from our multidisciplinary literature search. This was a recursive step, not a linear one. Repko (2011) describes what the team experienced as

not simply a matter of moving from point ‘A’ to point ‘B’ to point ‘C’ and on to the end. Rather, when the interdisciplinarian gets to point ‘B,’ point ‘A’ may need to be revisited and revised. In fact, revising work performed under early steps is likely to happen at any given point in the process. (p. 70)

As the research project progressed, we continued to revisit the data we collected in the field along with data previously annotated in the multidisciplinary literature search. Both sources of data—the literature search and the qualitative field data—began to work together recursively, generating new insights as we considered prior data in light of new data.

After we completed six weeks in the field portion of the research sequence, we returned to the US and embarked on the iterative, emergent, and synthesizing process of more thoroughly integrating relevant data from the multidisciplinary literature search with the coded qualitative data. This began the third course in our research course sequence. We organized ourselves into subject teams, each team being assigned to focus on what we ultimately agreed were the qualitative component’s most important themes: education, religion, infrastructure, culture, family, and modernization.

Each subject team immersed itself in the five hundred pages of annotated literature and extensive coded qualitative data relevant to the team’s topic. Teams then presented integrated threads of data to the entire cohort, and cohort members suggested additional sources from the multidisciplinary literature search and qualitative data that teams might have overlooked. Individuals also revisited their disciplinary research and personal notes for

more detailed content that could be integrated into the findings. For example, one student who had studied the complexities involved in architecture and its relation to the country's rapidly developing infrastructure re-analyzed literature on city planning to find new insights she might have overlooked on her first review for the team charged with analyzing infrastructure.

At the end of this process, we had integrated a wide range of data from both the multidisciplinary literature search and the qualitative field experience into the six major themes. We then began the process of unifying these themes into a cohesive representation of the phenomenon of Bedouin life. As Repko states, insights cannot be integrated until common ground among them can be established through a common theory, concept, or assumption (2011). We used two compatible theoretical frameworks, systems theory and modernization theory, to develop common ground in our research.

First, general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1972; Bello, 1985; Foss & Littlejohn, 2004) provided us with a theoretical and functional framework for better understanding what the Bedouins were telling us: that their lives are evolving rapidly in light of Oman's development and modernization. As Bedouins, our participants had been living on the literal and figurative frontier of Omani government and society. Now, they are faced with adapting to dramatic modernization initiatives that have implications that extend well into the domains that these participants and their fellow community members have occupied for generations. Despite being on the periphery of Omani culture and society, they are impacted by and impact evolving Omani society. They are part of the larger system, even if they did not necessarily frame themselves this way in our qualitative data collection process.

In addition to systems theory, we incorporated modernization theory (Bell, 1973; Inglehart, 1977; Inglehart, 1997; Marx, 1973) as a framework for analyzing cultural changes our Bedouin participants witness in their daily lives by placing these changes in the broader context of Omani Bedouin developmental history. Modernization theory provided us with a link between the rise of economic development and resulting deeper changes in cultural, social, and political values described by our Bedouin participants. It provided another way of understanding what our participants were describing about their attempts to adapt to centralized governmental and societal changes.

Findings

Given the increasing complexities of Omani Bedouin life in the twenty-first century, and our use of an integrative approach to intercultural research to better capture these complexities, our findings reflect the fuzzy boundaries and the multitude of moving parts that constitute the lives of our participants. With systems theory and modernization theory as common

ground among our emergent themes, our broader findings are a *bricolage*, drawn from a variety of voices and perspectives through integrating elements of interdisciplinary and qualitative research methods. The result for us as researchers is a more comprehensive understanding of this complex topic than we would have had with only one research method or the other.

Through our multidisciplinary literature search we learned about Oman and its Bedouins from the disciplinary research of others. We learned that the infrastructure, education, and religious initiatives put in place by Sultan Qaboos, starting in the late 1970s, were having a significant impact on the deep culture and everyday lives of our participants. We also gained insight into the lives of the Omanis, including their traditions and culture, and how they were changing with access to education. Through our qualitative research in Oman, we discovered a portrayal of Omani Bedouin life that our participants consistently provided: one of hard work, Omani loyalty, a commitment to governmental reforms (even at the expense of cultural traditions and ways of life), cultural pride, and hope for the future.

With only a multidisciplinary literature search or only qualitative interviews, our understanding would have been less developed; we would have been less equipped to construct a thick, rich description. “The interdisciplinarian is accustomed to seeking the kernel of truth in different arguments,” suggests Szostak, “while recognizing their limitations” (Szostak, 2007, p. 35). This aptly describes our data analysis: seeking kernels of truth from a variety of sources, and in spite of those sources’ limitations, developing a more integrative understanding of the intercultural phenomenon. With interdisciplinary research through the literature alone, we would have learned about Omani reform without seeing and hearing firsthand what this means for Bedouins in this society. Likewise, if we had embarked on a solely qualitative research journey, we would not have had the benefit of a theoretical framework, drawn from literature in multiple disciplines, to contextualize the adaptations these Bedouins are going through, seeing them as part of a broader, modernizing system similar to others around the world.

Integrating Interdisciplinary and Qualitative Research

Having provided a theoretical rationale for integrating interdisciplinary and qualitative research and having described a particular cohort’s work with this approach, we now offer this approach as a structured model of integrative intercultural research and consider its adaptability to various interdisciplinary and qualitative research styles. Then, we provide examples of both additional cohort-wide projects similar to the Bedouin communities

project and select individual projects that also employ this model of integrative intercultural research.

A Flexible Model for Integrative Intercultural Research

To review, in the MAIS research course sequence, now in its thirteenth course cycle, students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds are tasked with researching complex intercultural phenomena. Through trial and error—and ongoing reflection and analysis at both the program and curriculum level—MAIS faculty, along with their students, have developed a research approach that is based on the belief that researching complex intercultural phenomena warrants the integration of both interdisciplinary research and qualitative research for a more comprehensive and complex understanding of a given complex phenomenon.

With principles and processes from Repko’s steps for interdisciplinary research (Repko, 2011; Repko, Newell, and Szostak, 2012) and essential features of qualitative inquiry, we provide a model for integrating interdisciplinary and qualitative research (see Table 1). With this model, we integrate the key features of both interdisciplinary research and qualitative research into a flexible but coherent process.

Table 1: <i>Interdisciplinary Qualitative Research</i>	
1.	State the problem/Identify the complex phenomenon; develop initial research questions.
2.	Justify using an interdisciplinary approach to qualitative research.
3.	Identify relevant disciplines, research site, participants, qualitative data collection methods.
4.	Conduct literature search; develop adequacy among relevant disciplines; re-consider initial research questions.
5.	Collect qualitative data; code the qualitative data for emergent themes.
6.	Integrate relevant data from the multidisciplinary literature search with the emergent themes from the qualitative data.
7.	Produce a comprehensive and complex understanding of the phenomenon.
8.	Generate new lines of inquiry.

While this model is linear by design for ease of access and for clarity,

as mentioned in the discussion of the Bedouin communities project, in application it is recursive. As new data emerge, especially from the qualitative component (step 5), researchers may reconsider the aspects of the research design, including the initial research questions (step 1) and the range of multidisciplinary sources used (step 3). Or, as researchers integrate the interdisciplinary data with the qualitative data, they may discover that more qualitative questions arise (step 5) or that they need to include additional qualitative data collection methods (step 3).

In addition to its recursive nature, this structured yet flexible model is designed to be adaptable to various styles of qualitative inquiry, for individual researchers as well as cohorts of researchers, and for a variety of contexts. First, this model is designed as a flexible set of guidelines that are amenable to researchers' goals. Not only are there a wide range of complex intercultural phenomena to be researched, but qualitative research can entail a wide range of techniques and purposes. For example, in terms of scope, qualitative research can range from short-term case studies involving a single participant to long-term, to multivocalic ethnographies, to performance ethnography. This model allows for whatever range of time, participants, and delivery a researcher or researchers deem necessary. Furthermore, methodologically, this model is amenable to a wide range of qualitative data collection methods beyond the interviews, observant participation, and photoethnography used in the Bedouin communities project. Depending on the complex phenomenon, researchers may include qualitative data from focus groups, artifacts, and action research.

Additional Project Examples

In addition to the Bedouin communities project presented in this article, other MAIS projects have involved cohorts doing intercultural research using this model. For example, one team immersed themselves in central Mexico with the overarching goal of understanding daily life for Zacatecans. Specific lines of inquiry included the ongoing diaspora north, the drug war, and the role of government in terms of the evolution of Mexican society and its impact on everyday citizens. The team developed a multidisciplinary literature search based in part on their disciplinary backgrounds (communications, education, religion) and in part on their specific lines of inquiry. This cohort developed an understanding of these participants' daily lives as a series of dualities that participants construct and navigate. For their research write-up, the cohort integrated two specific theories from their literature search—analytic realism and world systems theory—as a cohesive framework for the emergent themes they explored.

Another team of researchers explored ethnolinguistic identity among ethnic Chinese in Singapore. This team consisted of students with backgrounds in elementary education, history, and political science; these backgrounds informed the disciplinary threads they used in their multidisciplinary literature search. Their research centered on the Singaporean Chinese concept of *kiasu*, roughly translated, a motivating fear of losing. During their data collection and analysis, the cohort presented their emergent themes—framed around *kiasu*—to their participants, co-constructing the findings with the participants. In doing so, this cohort further expanded the notion of the collaborative co-construction of knowledge beyond the cohort through a dialogical approach with their participants.

While collaboration is a key integrative feature of these projects and of team research in general in this program, individual students have successfully completed independent research using this model. For example, one student researched Kurdish refugees, now living in the United States, who served as military interpreters during the Iraq war. This student integrated a number of disciplinary threads—anthropology, business, and art (film)—into her qualitative data collection. She also focused on Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* as a unifying thread that captures the complexities of these Kurdish individuals' experiences with uprooting and return. Another student conducted a case study exploring the motivations behind volunteerism at a mega-church. This student integrated sources from business, sociology, and psychology to better elucidate the narratives and perceptions her participants provided her through ethnographic interviews. Finally, a student integrated theory and research from sociology, psychology, cultural studies, political science, and literature into his qualitative project exploring psychosocial identity negotiation among Arab expatriates living in a small town in the Southeastern United States.

As this article has argued, integrating key features of interdisciplinary research with elements of qualitative inquiry yields a hybridized approach to researching intercultural phenomena. This approach allows the intercultural researcher to not only access disciplinary research and theory appropriate to the given phenomenon, but to also qualitatively engage individuals living out the phenomenon to form a more comprehensive and complex understanding of the phenomenon than either approach alone would generate. The complementary nature of interdisciplinary and qualitative research—both philosophically and at key points methodologically—allows for a flexible but coherent model of research that affords the researcher the means for developing the thick, rich description of complex phenomena that intercultural research warrants.

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