

## Book Reviews / Comptes rendus de livres

**Leila C. Kahwati & Heather L. Kane. (2019). *Qualitative Comparative Analysis in Mixed Methods Research and Evaluation*. Mixed Methods Research Series: Vol. 6. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE. Paperback, 289 pages. (ISBN: 978-1-5063-9021-5)**

---

**Reviewed by Debbie Gowensmith, University of Denver/  
Groundswell Services, Inc.**

Though evaluators often want to understand the combination of complex conditions that lead to specific outcomes, many traditional statistical tests merely yield information about the significance of discrete variables rather than how specific *configurations* of variables lead to an outcome. For these complex situations, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is a method worth considering. QCA was initially developed in the late 1980s by Charles C. Ragin (now at the University of California-Irvine), who nestled set theory logic and Boolean algebra within a deep knowledge of cases in order to assess which combinations of conditions were necessary or sufficient contributors to outcomes. In this book, author-evaluators Leila C. Kahwati and Heather L. Kane provide a primer on QCA with explanation and examples of its application in mixed methods evaluation, including recent developments in the method since its creation.

As one example, Kahwati and Kane (and co-evaluators) used QCA and interviews to evaluate a weight-loss program across 22 veterans outpatient clinics to ascertain program features that were *necessary or sufficient conditions*—common QCA research-question language—for weight loss. The evaluators employed QCA to address contextual complexity, using the contextual factors as conditions to assess which ones affected the outcome of weight loss. Even though each site was unique, evaluators found several necessary and sufficient conditions present across a majority of sites—for example, a standard curriculum, group support, and physician-champions (Kahwati et al., 2011).

Social sciences editors are publishing QCA research in increasing numbers, from fewer than 100 articles prior to 2008 to more than 1,000 in 2018 (Mello, 2019), including a handful of QCA articles in the *American Journal of Evaluation* beginning in 2011. Methodological advances since the 1980s—the ability to use nondichotomous conditions, for example—have improved the applicability of QCA to a variety of scenarios. Kahwati and Kane suggest that evaluators also are using QCA more frequently to address the weaknesses and preserve the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. With QCA, evaluators delve beyond the “monocausal explanations” common to statistical analysis, moving instead

**Corresponding Author:** Debbie Gowensmith, [Debbie.Gowensmith@du.edu](mailto:Debbie.Gowensmith@du.edu)

toward “complex causality” (Sager & Andereggen, 2012, p. 61) while assessing quantitatively how strongly the conditions explain the outcome.

## OVERVIEW

In a slim volume of 255 pages (plus supplementary material), Kahwati and Kane guide readers from an introduction to QCA through each step that an evaluator must take to complete an evaluation using QCA. The authors introduce the logic of set theory and then progress to ever-increasing complexity in QCA design—selecting cases and outcome conditions, analyzing data, and interpreting results. For those who wish to dig deeper, the authors summarize several advanced QCA topics such as multi-value QCA (used with nondichotomous categorical data) and temporal QCA (used for sequences of events). Kahwati and Kane even devote a chapter to writing and presenting about QCA, including preparing proposals and manuscripts. The final chapter brings everything together with guidance on using QCA in mixed methods research.

The authors liberally use examples that elucidate concepts and decisions that evaluators who use QCA will face. Their practice tips and reflection questions prepare readers to begin their own projects, and the graphs, diagrams, tables, checklists, and R-output examples show—rather than tell—how to implement QCA. The authors also provide access to supplementary materials—practice questions and sample data—through a SAGE website, which eases what may be an intimidating barrier to using QCA for some (analysis using R). What readers will not find in these materials are the R scripts; for this, the authors direct readers elsewhere.

Kahwati and Kane provide the methodological rationale for QCA, but the real value of the text is in the examples of practical application they use and the resources they provide to help expand readers’ knowledge base beyond the book.

## RELEVANCE

According to the authors, evaluators can use QCA with smaller or interdependent samples—a characteristic for which the method is well known. Importantly, evaluators can use QCA with sample sizes that are larger than small-N studies, appropriate for traditional qualitative methods, and with sample sizes that are smaller than large-N studies, appropriate for traditional statistical approaches. The authors caution, however, that a configural research question rather than sample size should drive evaluators’ use of QCA.

Finally, as the setting of this text within the Mixed Methods Research Series indicates, Kahwati and Kane position QCA as an especially relevant method within mixed methods research and evaluation. Because evaluators can focus on conditions derived from qualitative or quantitative data, they can use QCA leading to or during the mixed methods process of integration. So while all evaluators can benefit from exploring the methodological relevance of QCA as it gains traction in evaluation, mixed methods evaluators will find this text particularly relevant.

Of course, not everyone supports the use of QCA. Kahwati and Kane devote a small portion of one chapter to critiques of the method. It is relatively new, and regular innovation aims to improve it. Some qualitative researchers argue that QCA loses the contextual detail of cases, while some quantitative researchers argue that grounding a study in an evaluator's case knowledge, as happens when using QCA, is subjective and biased (pp. 195–200). Criticism of QCA comes from multiple sources, and evaluators who plan to use it are advised to explore this topic using the additional resources that the authors cite.

## CONTRIBUTION

No other text fills the niche that this book fills. To this point, evaluators have had to wade through thick, comprehensive QCA textbooks. Kahwati and Kane, in their efforts to use QCA in their own evaluations, found limited resources. They wrote the book from their experiences training colleagues in QCA when no other texts could do the job efficiently. We the readers benefit, as the book provides a focused, applied approach that is practical and useful. Don't be surprised to see evidence of evaluators increasingly using QCA in the wake of this publication.

## REFERENCES

- Kahwati, L. C., Lewis, M. A., Kane, H., Williams, P. A., Nerz, P., . . . Kinsinger, L. S. (2011). Best practices in the Veterans Health Administration's MOVE! Weight Management Program. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 41(5), 457–464. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2011.06.047>
- Mello, P. (2019). *Qualitative comparative analysis: Lecture 1—Course introduction* [PowerPoint presentation]. Lugano, Switzerland: Swiss Summer School on Methods in the Social Sciences.
- Sager, F., & Andereggen, C. (2012). Dealing with complex causality in realist synthesis: The promise of qualitative comparative analysis. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 33(1), 60–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214011411574>