Emerging Methodologies and Methods Practices in the Field of Mixed Methods Research

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This special issue marks a reflective turning point in thinking about the theory and practice of mixed methods research. As a field of study, mixed methods practice is both “old” and “emergent.” It is old in that the field of mixed methods has an historical legacy of practice that has remained invisible. Early on, social science research practice employed mixed methods data. Hesse-Biber (2010) notes,

Mixed methods research developed with the earliest social research projects; among these are studies of poverty within families conducted in the 1800s in Europe by researchers such as Frédéric LePlay (1855) and Charles Booth (1891) . . . research practices included the use of demographic analysis, participant surveys and observations, and social mapping techniques. These methods practices filtered into the research landscape in the United States by the beginning of the 20th century. . . . The Chicago School of Sociology, founded in the 1920s, is noted for its prominence in urban ethnography with an emphasis on a qualitative “case study” approach. The founders of The Chicago School also employed quantitative data. . . . Robert Park, a core member of the Chicago School, applied a mixed methods approach to the study of inner-city urban life by integrating both qualitative and quantitative data into his case studies. He found quantitative data particularly valuable as a marker of social processes (p. 2)

The practice of mixing methods was not something readily mentioned in research reports and publications during this time period. In fact, most social scientists in the early 1900s up until very recently, even if they used mixed methods, did not explicitly say so; thus, much of its early practice has gone under the radar of social research methods history or might have been called something different. Jennifer Platt (1996), a social research methods historian, provided a specific tracking of the time of how this process occurred with regard to the practice of participant observation. She notes,

Beatrice Webb used participant observation before “participant observation” had been “invented” as a recognized technique. . . . Selvin . . . showed how Durkheim used analytic strategies which no one had formalized at the time. Lazarsfeld pointed out how Stouffer did novel things which he did not himself label as such, and for which Lazarsfeld received credit. (p. 32)

Platt also asserted that our perception of specific methods and their uses within the social sciences is not fixed in time. For example, the practice and goal of survey research during the early 20th century was to promote social reform and “local community self-improvement” goals. At that historical moment in time, survey research was not considered a method used for gathering large volumes of data with the goal of generalization of findings. She stated,

Surveys were carried out in a “limited geographical area; the typical early ’survey’ collected facts about a town by whatever means came to hand. It had in common with the later survey that it often employed a schedule, though usually one completed by an enumerator, and without questions with a fixed wording to be addressed to individual subjects. It had nothing to do with attitudes, and the jokingly pejorative reference to this sort of activity as ‘outhouse-counting’ was not without foundation.” (p. 45)

Methods Are Flexible and Fluid

What we learn from Platt’s (1996) study is that when we delve deeper into the history of research methods, at least in the United States, we come up with an image of methods practice not as a “fixed” entity but instead one that is flexible and fluid. Methods content and practices are adaptable and ever changing. Taking an historical perspective on the study of methods practices has implications for how we frame the current movement to solidify the practice of mixed methods research. Should we consider mixed methods a “third methodological movement” or even a research paradigm and move to institutionalize its practice?

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The contributors to this special issue hail from a range of disciplines, but they share several commonalities. They seek to open up mixed methods inquiry to reveal important new currents in both its theory and practice. They imagine how we might begin to push the envelope on our understanding of current trends in mixed methods practice and argue how to integrate new theoretical and praxis lenses within mixed methods research.

We begin with an article that provides a historical perspective on the practice of mixed methods research. Norman Denzin’s analysis of the practice of mixed methods presents an historical background leading up to the contemporary popularity of mixed methods research. He notes, “I . . . want to briefly visit the disputes within the mixed methods community between purists, synthesizers, simultaneous, sequential, a-paradigmatic, pragmatic, and multiple paradigm transformative-emancipatory advocates (this issue, p. 420).” He is concerned with the current fixed nature of what mixed methods are and how specific methodological frameworks and their integration are currently perceived within the mixed methods community. His article employs an historical grounding that allows the reader to appreciate the social construction of this method over time and the variety of framers who are now calling for a mixed methods paradigm. Denzin raises a host of incisive questions that serve to destabilize those who advocate shutting down dialogue around this method in favor of those who favor a more fixed approach to methods practices. He notes: “We need a moral and methodological community that honors and celebrates paradigm and methodological diversity” (this issue, p. 425). [Mixed methods] rests on standpoint and decolonizing epistemologies, it establishes links between paradigms, sexuality, gender and ethnicity. It moves forward under a spirit of cooperation and collaboration (this issue, p. 420).

The next two articles are empirically grounded studies that assess the extent to which mixed methods is being incorporated into funding agencies’ agendas. Vicki Plano Clark’s article, “The Adoption and Practice of Mixed Methods: U.S. Trends in Federally Funded Health-Related Research,” is an empirical examination of the extent and type of self-identified mixed methods funded proposals in health-related research supported by U.S. federal funding sources, including the National Institutes of Health. Plano Clark notes that while federally funded support for mixed methods is on the rise, such funding still only constitutes a small fraction of the funding provided by federal agencies in this field. Nonetheless, her results indicate how the mixed methods lexicon is filtering down into mainstream research practice. As Plano Clark notes, “The nature of the projects indicates that researchers are adopting many of the conventions of the field of mixed methods research and planning sophisticated mixed methods approaches that integrate rigorous qualitative and quantitative designs and procedures (this issue, p. 428).” Plano Clark’s empirical tracking of mixed methods, funded research projects uncovers and begins to trace the work style and structure contained within funded-proposal abstracts. What she finds is a glimpse of the beginnings of mixed methods becoming institutionalized in mainstream-methods practices across a range of health-related disciplines.

It has been argued that paying attention to funding agencies, both private and governmental, can provide clues as to the degree of influence they have in how research methods are practiced and which methods become “the standard” within a given field. Funding agencies may steer the practice of certain methods that lie within their “methods funding comfort zone.” Early on, sociologist Alvin Gouldner, in his classic work, The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology, argued that funders and funding agencies are the major stakeholders in what methods get utilized in a given discipline and have unduly influenced the types of methods and research problems within the field of sociology used in applied research that is empirically driven (Gouldner, 1971, p. 444).

Yet the results of an examination of the influence funding agencies have on research outcomes is mixed. Jennifer Platt’s research found that while funding agencies “may tip the balance” somewhat, there remain additional factors that contribute to our understanding of what types of projects get funding beyond the intellectual and economic interests of these agencies (see Platt, 1996). She specifically notes the importance of academic context. For example, in her study of the discipline of sociology, departmental culture is a strong factor in influencing what research practices dominate publications and the teaching of methods at the departmental level, especially when core faculty include graduate students in their research projects utilizing specific methods.

Keeping these ideas in mind, the next article in our special issue delves into the culture of publication in the field of mixed methods by examining how one approach to mixed methods, a transformative approach, is actually practiced. David Sweetman, Manijeh Bandiee and John Creswell’s article, “Use of the Transformative Framework in Mixed Methods Studies,” is an analysis of a small sample of articles whose stated theoretical perspective is a “transformative lens,” one that promotes social advocacy and justice goals. The authors examine what specific transformative criteria researchers employed in these studies and on the basis of their findings recommend key criteria for integrating a transformative perspective into a mixed methods project. By analyzing the current atmosphere of mixed methods practice through this specific case study of the transformative mixed methods approach, the authors provide clues as to how one particular theoretical approach to mixed methods research enters into disciplinary practice.

The academic context in which research is performed can also play a role in influencing which specific methods are employed in research studies in a given discipline. Platt’s (1996) in-depth historical examination of the culture of sociology departments suggested that the culture of sociology departments at any particular university also factors into the
determination of which research methods will come to dominate publications and the teaching of methods courses. The result is a new generation of sociologists—students—embracing the methods practices they inherit from professors in both the classroom and coauthorship of publications. The studies we have presented thus far remind us that research methods exist in a given historical moment and it is important to track the integration of any given methods practice through careful empirical documentation.

**Upending Methodological Approaches and Mixed Methods Practices**

Mixed methods practices are also linked to specific methodological approaches. Sharlene Hesse-Biber’s article, “Qualitative Approaches to Mixed Methods Research,” analyzes how methodological practices can influence, shape, and often limit how mixed methods is framed. She describes the current “methodological orthodoxy” contained within the field of mixed methods research that often favors a quantitatively driven methodology. She notes that the predominant mixed methods practice positions qualitative methods as secondary and quantitative methods as primary, with an overall mixed methods design that is in the service of testing out quantitatively generated theories about the social world. Her article centers qualitative approaches to mixed methods practice that seek to empower individuals’ stories with the goal of understanding how they make meaning within their social world. She demonstrates, through in-depth case studies, the value of a qualitatively driven mixed methods framework and the types of research questions and practices that emanate from this approach.

The application of a mixed methods approach that employs both a qualitative and quantitative component is particularly suited to a transformative approach. Donna Mertens’ article, “Transformative Mixed Methods Research,” carefully delineates the specifics of a transformative methodology and highlights the social justice and human rights research initiatives that can be carried out using mixed methods designs. Additionally, Mertens looks at how mixed-method designs begin to transform in their practice when they serve a social justice mission.

**Mixed Methods Practice Issues**

The next set of articles discusses a range of controversies in the specific practice of mixed methods. Joseph Maxwell’s article, “Using Numbers in Qualitative Research,” challenges the binary that is often set up between qualitative and quantitative data. Maxwell focuses on issues of data transformation in a mixed methods context, the practice of which challenges the idea that numbers distinguish qualitative data from quantitative data. He notes, “I want to address both the potential advantages of integrating quantitative information in qualitative data collection, analysis, and reporting, and the potential problems created by such uses and how these can be dealt with (this issue, p. 475).” In doing this, Maxwell upends the qualitative–quantitative divide and demonstrates how valuable the use of numbers is for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research. He states, “In summary, the use of numbers is a legitimate and valuable strategy for qualitative researchers when it is used as a complement to an overall process orientation to the research (this issue, p. 480).”

Janice Morse’s article, “Simultaneous and Sequential Qualitative Mixed Method Designs,” provides a range of new ways of thinking about combining methods in general. She notes that as currently defined, mixed methods designs are said to combine qualitative and quantitative methods. She notes, however, that other combinations of methods have been neglected in the field of mixed methods; especially in qualitatively driven research. “However, experts in qualitative inquiry have relatively ignored the issues that occur while describing qualitative simultaneous and sequential designs in which both components are qualitative.” (this issue, p. 483).” She presents the issues with mixing two methods within the same methodological tradition, focusing on qualitative approaches. She provides a range of new mixed methods designs that center a qualitatively driven methodology. She presents a hypothetical project dealing with the communication of bad news using a QUAL-qual design (this issue, p. 488).

**A Call to Dialogue**

This special issue reminds us that we are just beginning to understand the range of methodological perspectives and practices currently and yet to be imagined in mixed methods practice. In fact, there are hints within these articles that the terminology of mixed methods itself needs to be interrogated. Multimethods and a range of emergent methods (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008) must also take their place at the table of mixed methods dialogue. Much literature exists on the “how to’s” of mixed methods practice, but there is a paucity of understanding of the empirical underpinnings of mixed methods practice within and between the disciplines. We have also not yet begun to explore the range of mixed methods practices contained within interdisciplinary settings.

It is too early to close off mixed methods inquiry by labeling it a “methodological paradigm,” or by stating that a “pragmatic approach” will solve the “paradigm wars.” This type of rhetoric shuts down dialogue. Mixed methods dialoguing is not about winning but promoting conditions for dialogue, which will require several ingredients: (a) Good communication: It is important to bring all stakeholders with an interest in this field to the dialogue table; (b) we must also confront our methodological and methods assumptions; (c) suspend immediate judgments; (d) embrace our
differences; and (5) practice reflexivity by listening across our differences as a means toward building a new set of shared assumptions, and if not, at least a willingness to remain open to different points of view.

Dialoguing is a difficult process to accomplish, for we are required to deal with the politics of knowledge building. This entails an examination of issues of power—its distribution and ownership within the field of mixed methods research. The process of questioning a paradigm begins as others come to the mixed methods dialoguing table. We hope that this special issue will encourage and promote our commitment to sustaining a dialogue across the broad mixed methods research community.

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