The Politics, Fashions, and Conventions of Research Methods

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Abstract

The results of an empirical study of any set of phenomena, whether investigating structures, processes, or combinations thereof, are influenced by the theoretical framework as well as the research methods employed. This text examines the influence of research methods on how phenomena under investigation are conceptualized, defined, measured, and interpreted. It will be argued that qualitative, quantitative, and, by extension, mixed methods research influence how phenomena are studies, and how these methods are concurrently subject to politics, fashions, and conventions. Inconsistent and impoverished research may be the consequence, particularly for mixed methods research.

Keywords: paradigm wars, epistemology, quality, mixed methods

Research methods are sometimes selected based on their appropriateness in relation to research question and theoretical framework, although many professional researchers select a research question that is suitable to a favored theory and methods framework. Regardless of the order, in the social and related sciences, nothing can be studied empirically in the absence of theory and research methods. Even mere definitions of constructs such as income, education level, employment status, satisfaction, identity, and so on require theorization, and their empirical study requires some form of data collection and analysis (the latter two are also steeped in theory).

However, data collection and analysis methods have a strong influence on what part of a phenomenon is studied and, thus, have a channeling effect on research results. Accordingly, research methods structure theories and phenomena into particular and, in practice, often rather peculiar landscapes of meaning.

Theory and Practice of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

When attempting to differentiate qualitative and quantitative methods, most textbook authors employ either specific characteristics or elements from the philosophy of science (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2007; Silverman, 2006). With regard to definitional characteristics, contemporary authors often argue that researchers engaging in qualitative research employ small samples, are nonreductionist about their subject

matter, are interested in subjective experiences, work inductively, and study phenomena in their natural setting. Observations themselves are supposedly always situated in the context of the moment of observation and are concurrently always linked to the observers' gender, class, sexuality, and so on. In contrast, researchers engaged in quantitative research are said to employ large and random samples, reduce complex phenomena to a few variables, test hypotheses and thus work deductively, generalize, aim for objectivity and causal inference, and so on.

Employing a rather unsystematic interpretation of the philosophy of science, many authors differentiate qualitative from quantitative research in relation to ontology, that is, especially the nature of reality, as well as epistemology, that is, especially the relationship between the researcher and the research subject.

Contrary to these propositions, qualitative and quantitative research practices do not necessarily follow these rules. Qualitative research in gender, management, education, or developmental studies, for instance, often embraces a strong realist–materialist perspective, where observations or interview data and their analyses are not conducted from within a constructivist or interpretive perspective. In contrast, quantitative researchers often work with small and nonrandom data sets, and sometimes with nonnumerical data. Frequently, they conduct inductive, exploratory, and nongeneralizing data analyses. There is probably no rule posited in the textbooks about the differences between qualitative and quantitative methods that has not been put into question by its disregard in a successful research application.

How can this be? How is it possible that the highly respected and widely cited literature on research methods postulates clear rules—clearly summarized in tables and bulleted lists—that are routinely (and successfully) broken by professional researchers? Is it not possible to theoretically argue or even empirically demonstrate that a misapplication of a rule (e.g., that quantitative researcher must work with large and randomly selected samples, or that qualitative researchers must believe in multiple or co-constructed realities) will fail to make a contribution to the social and related sciences? Of course not, but what lies behind this discrepancy?

First, most disciplines have their own histories, which have shaped and thus determine the culture of science in the discipline. While many experimental psychologists tend not to worry about the randomness of their samples, quantitatively oriented sociologists can become quite obsessed with sampling and weighting, although both may aim at generalizing their findings beyond the limits of their sample. Second, particular readings of methods frameworks are often governed and censured by gatekeepers and stakeholders, including heads of departments, professorial chairs, science foundations, governing boards, publishers, editors and editorial boards, reviewers, and so on. For example, some ethnography lecturers are teaching their students to describe particular phenomena in as much "objective" detail as possible, whereas others have embraced a postmodern or poststructural perspective. As no objective criteria can be brought to bear on the decision as to what phenomena are worthy of inquiry and how these phenomena should be theoretically framed and empirically studied, the deciding factor is usually the researchers' context with regard to politics, fashions, and conventions.

Theory and Practice of Mixed Methods Research

Most textbooks on mixed methods research replicated the rules that have been presented in other textbooks on research methods (e.g., Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2010). This was probably necessary at a time when mixed methods research design issues were formalized in the 1990s. Presumably, it was challenging in itself to take on the then dominant discourse on the "incompatibility thesis" and the "paradigm wars." What may have been a shortcut in the initial stages of formalization has now become a liability. A superficial recourse to pragmatism does not hide the fact that the two so-called paradigms as presented in the mixed methods literature remain incompatible: If the qualitative part of a mixed methods research design is steeped in constructivism, while the quantitative part is steeped in (post-) positivism, then, under most circumstances, the two components cannot be logically combined within one single, coherent, and consistent research design. The ensconced social mores in the established mono-methods literature are less obstructive there because, first, there are enough counterexamples and "rule breaking" in both the methods literature and research practice so these do not overly impinge on professional research and, second, a belief in a particular more may be quite functional, depending on the beliefs of peers and mentors within a research context. Researchers engaged in mixed methods design have greater problems because especially "rule-abiding" researchers may find that these mores often result in inconsistencies and incompatibilities.

Fortunately, like their experienced mono-method colleagues, professional mixed methods researchers do not invest unduly in clarifying theoretical inconsistencies as outlined in the literature. Mixed methods research works in practice in the sense that it produces usable results that transcend the limits of mono-method research. However, less experienced researchers are in more trouble. It is undeniable that mixed methods research is in vogue. A surprising number of doctoral students are tempted by this design (although, in contrast to experienced researchers, the main reason for this is often an overly vague or ambitious research topic) and, in the absence of enough practical examples or articles in the literature, their main guides are the first-generation textbooks on mixed methods. In other words, they are forced to work closely with textbooks that may lead them into a rather vague and superficial understanding of each research component of a mixed methods design. In contrast to this, less experienced mono-method researchers can easily find heterogeneous and contradictory counterexamples in textbooks, scientific journals, as well as the work of their research-active peers and mentors. The possibilities and limits of qualitative and quantitative methods lead novice mixed methods researchers to oversimplify the different components of mixed methods research. As a consequence, too many mixed methods projects and their output are of poor quality, and the theoretical debates on mixed methods research tends to stagnate unnecessarily.

It is time to challenge the received wisdom about the possibilities and limits of qualitative and quantitative methods. There exist enough successful applications of research methods that do not follow the contemporary ideologies and conventions. The counter examples may help formulate a better understanding about these groups of methods—if they still can be grouped in this way. With this, it is time to bring in a second generation of theoretical considerations about the shape and reasons for mixed methods research.

This second generation of mixed methods ideas is likely to maintain its fashionable character, and it is likely to draw significantly from the existing mixed methods literature. But a new formulation of mixed methods based on wider monomethod practices may be able to challenge the political and conventional ways of thinking about research and its components. Whether engaging in mono or mixed methods research, wisely and carefully dissociating data collection and analysis methods from unnecessary mores driven by politics, fashions, and conventions will allow researchers to discover a greater range of possibilities in research and meanings. New methods may become possible while old methods may reveal their as yet undiscovered potential.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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