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Elichaoﬀ, Frauke, Rodriguez, Deborah and Murphy, Anthony ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0093-6178> (2014) More than just a method: doctoral students' perspectives on the place of qualitatively driven mixed methods. *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin*, 17. pp. 17-22. ISSN 2044-0820

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More than just a method: Doctoral students' perspectives on the place of qualitatively driven mixed methods

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Although the debate on mixed methods continues, it is felt that there is a new generation of researchers that take a pragmatic approach to research. We present the viewpoint of three doctoral students at different stages of our PhD research, whereby we advocate for the recognition and place of qualitatively driven mixed methods and take a pragmatist stance towards method/ology. We recognise the value and prominence of such a position, and describe our individual experiences that have been influenced and transformed by such 'paradigm wars,' and demonstrate our persistence in attempting to transcend these wars to ensure that our research is primarily informed by the research question, followed by the choosing of the most suitable method, and not the contrary.

The literature on mixed-methods research and the place of qualitative methods therein, is ample and diverse (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Bryman, 2006). For some, the 'paradigm wars' are long over (Bryman, 2006a), and we can move forwards without being hindered and dragged down by methodological and philosophical conundrums, whereas others see the dichotomy as alive and kicking, and the question of whether we can ever find a consensus remains unanswered (Feilzer, 2010). Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) go as far as stating that proponents of monomethods hinder progress within the social sciences and raise the argument that the research community can only expect acceptance of their findings if the dichotomous gap between quantitative and qualitative methods is closed. However, Hesse-Biber (2013) claims that the use of mixed methods research is steadily growing and that the problem lies more within the practical issue of how to integrate findings. She suggests that solutions can be found in teaching approaches for new generation researchers, and in a move towards a team-based research, where researchers bring their expertise and knowledge of different methods together.

We are a group of PhD students who share a pragmatic approach to using mixed methods research. Our personal journeys from undergraduate dissertations (where the choice of method was very much influenced by the teaching style we experienced as well as issues of time constraints), to developing the research methods for our individual PhD research (where the research question became much more central in determining and shaping our choice of mixed methods) reflect many of the issues raised by proponents as well as opponents of mixed methods research.

Although interested in methodology, we feel at ease in moving between methods. We all have a keen interest in quantitative methods, whilst at the same time being involved in either pluralistic qualitative research, or qualitatively driven mixed methods research. Method choice was very much driven by the research question, without being hampered by methodological constraints.

We see the paradigm wars as dogmatic and as assuming an objective truth in their insistence that co-existence of methodologies is not possible, whereas we, as pragmatists, acknowledge and embrace the subjectivity of mixed methods as an asset, both in creating a complementary picture of the research question, as well as in facing criticism regarding individual methods within the mixed-methods approach. Coming from a pragmatist, qualitative standpoint, this feels natural and 'easy', because we feel comfortable in allowing subjectivity, and in allowing working in a pragmatic or pluralistic approach that does not suffer from findings that may contradict or complement each other. On the contrary, our approach benefits by accepting the co-existence of contradictory findings.

Our position is in line with Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005), in that we believe that whilst a good understanding of the methodological and philosophical associated with different methods/mixing methods is crucial, it can lead to a paralysis that hampers progress in research, and therefore benefits neither the researcher, nor society. We welcome and enjoy the debates about methodological issues, both historical and current, and they too, play their part in fostering a healthy and lively research culture. However, when qualitative researchers align themselves to one philosophy or methodology to the exclusion of others, this in itself is a positivist standpoint, and is therefore at odds with an anti-positivist methodology.

Mason (2006) and Hesse-Biber (2010) have argued that qualitatively-driven mixed-methods offer a unique advantage in developing constructivist-interpretive research methods that allow for enriching findings rather than detracting from the validity of findings. Pragmatism and qualitatively driven mixed method ultimately align well, because the search for meaning is underlying all research, even the most quantitatively driven method. Combining a qualitatively driven approach to mixed methods with a healthy dose of pragmatism allows putting the research questions in a central position. The choice of method is solely driven by the aim of finding the tools with the most explanatory power. Feilzer (2010) uses one of her own studies as an example, which demonstrates how the implementation of qualitatively driven pragmatism allows for a considerably deeper account of the data than if the researcher had privileged a quantitatively driven track of analysing survey data. Frost and Nolas (2013) make a similar argument, stating that because our life experiences are complex in their nature, mixing methods allows for research findings that provide a far more complex picture that could not otherwise be achieved.

We believe that people's experiences and lived realities are multidimensional. If phenomena have different layers, then by choosing to view these phenomena from the perspective of a single dimension may mean that our understanding is inadequate and incomplete (Mason, 2006). Drawing on qualitatively driven mixed methods offers the opportunity to generate multidimensional material (Gabb, 2009) and permits a more holistic insight into experiences that can be understood from a combination of epistemological and ontological stances (Frost and Nolas, 2011). The use of several paradigms may incur tension, but such tension is a positive matter, whereby the discourse between contrasting ideas can provide a space for new insights and understandings (Creswell, 2009). Gabb (2009) puts forward the notion of 'messiness' of research in analysis and representations of phenomena, rather than the tidying away of experiential loose ends that illustrate lived lives. The retention of messiness in the representation of findings does not intimate that analytical rigour is at risk, but reflects the complexity of experiences that may otherwise be lost, helping to further illustrate how the richness of multidimensionality can be understood through the use of qualitative mixed methods approach.

To demonstrate our individual experiences and research journeys, we have showcased them in three individual cases:

Frauke's case:

As a mature undergraduate student, my choice of final year dissertation was very much driven by the aim of achieving the best possible outcome whilst juggling other commitments and time constraints. My experience of how I was taught research methods left me with a good knowledge of quantitative methods, and an interest in qualitative methods. Mixed methods did not make much of an appearance in the teaching of either. My approach then for my undergraduate dissertation was to choose my method first (quantitative, because that was 'quicker' and 'easier'), then come up with a subject and experiment. I actively chose a subject I had some interest in, but that I was not passionate about. This choice paid off. After graduation, I became more involved with qualitative methods, and as I began to feel my way towards my PhD research, I experienced a slow process (involving many discussions with my supervisor) out of which the research question emerged. During this process, the question(s) changed shape and form many times, and with that my choice of methods. Whereas initially I had assumed a mixed methods approach involving both quantitative and qualitative methods, I am now at a point where I feel comfortable with a pragmatic, qualitatively driven choice of methods.

Deborah's case:

As an undergraduate, my learning of research methods was for the vast majority geared towards quantitative methods, with an almost 'bolt-on' of qualitative methods at the end of the module. Therefore, qualitative methods was almost alien to me, and without consciously making the decision, I had in mind that I would be carrying out a quantitatively driven dissertation. However, there was a particular supervisor that I was keen to work with, but she was a qualitative researcher. My eagerness to work with said supervisor outweighed the choice of method, and so I embarked on a qualitative final year project, which developed into a curiosity of ensuring good knowledge of both quantitative and qualitative methods, and a resolve not be camped as either as a quantitative or qualitative researcher, as I viewed these methods more as tools, where some would be more appropriate than others in answering particular research questions. Embarking on the PhD, it became clear to me that the most important issue at hand was refining my research question first, and then considering which method(s) would serve best in exploring this, but I was then faced with the limited option of undertaking either a quantitative or a qualitative research module. Determined not to be

labelled as a particular type of researcher, I decided to complete both modules. Although there is resulted in extra workload, I feel as though engaging with both fields of methodologies and methods will enable me to work as a pragmatic researcher.

Anthony's case:

My experiences at undergraduate level were much like that of my colleagues; it was common for academics to categorise themselves as quantitative or qualitative researchers as a primary identity or expertise. This concerned me, as I viewed it as filtering students based on epistemological dogma as opposed to reasoning. Having always assumed the guiding principle in research ought to be the questions, I couldn't help but query this approach. This escalated when I started teaching research methods, where colleagues aligned themselves with one camp or the other. An example of this might be the lecture slide illustrating qualitative methods 'versus' quantitative methods, as though some academic rivalry exists between the two.

At this time I was beginning my doctoral studies and wrestling with approaching my research, balancing my interests with a desire for acceptance as a scientific researcher. Rather than identify myself mono-methodologically, I hoped to transcend boundaries in my research and teaching, and reveal this blinkered approach. Akin to a plumber who only works on jobs that require the use of a single wrench, having a tool-box with many tools allows one to consider the questions as a primary focus, as opposed to a preconceived understanding of what the answer ought to look like. While epistemology is inevitably of importance, I find it at odds with research aims to be bound by it.

In conclusion, as early career researchers in psychology, we emphasise research question(s) at the forefront of our consideration and believe that creating a discipline that does not tolerate methodological dogma and promotes multi-skilled researchers who identify themselves as pragmatic rather than bound by the shackles of epistemology, may be able to transcend these barriers. This, it is anticipated, will contribute to a shift to more pragmatically driven research approaches focused on questions and viewing methods as merely tools rather than as researcher identity. The recent shifts in embracing mixed methods research, and professing the utility of qualitatively driven mixed methods research, represent a significant shift in this direction – a direction that appears to be brimming with exciting opportunities for exploring

and understanding phenomena and its complexities; a direction that will hopefully impact upon the manner in which researchers (re)consider their positions and identities as researchers.

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