Divergence and Mixed Methods

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Donna M. Mertens, Gallaudet University

Is mixed methods research in its infancy, adolescence, or maturity? Should mixed methods researchers be searching for convergence on such topics as a definition of mixed methods, paradigmatic assumptions that guide mixed methods researchers, approaches in the conduct of mixed methods, or teaching of this subject area? Or, is mixed methods research at a stage in which too much convergence might result in premature closure in the sense that many issues related to mixed methods remain unaddressed, unresolved, or even unknown.

The first three years of the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* under the leadership of Abbas Tashakkori and John Creswell provided an important forum to create an international, interdisciplinary community with ''self-identity and self-recognition'' (Tashakkorri, 2009, p. 3). This community is buttressed by the annual Mixed Methods Conference that has been held in the UK for the last four years; it will be held in a new venue in 2010, Baltimore Maryland, but will still be under the steady hand of the conference convener, Tessa Muncy. The publication of mixed methods research texts is making it possible for readers to have multiple perspectives on some of the pressing issues in mixed methods research, as well as to have fundamental instruction on the possible paradigms, theories, and methods associated with this approach to research (Bergman, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Greene, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Mertens, 2009; 2010; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In addition, the second edition of the *Handbook of Mixed Methods Research* (Tashakkori & Teddlie, in press) is expected to be published in 2010.

This level of cohesion in the mixed methods community sets the stage for an interesting period of exploration and extension of ideas relevant to this approach to systematic inquiry. A priority at this point, from our editorial perspective, is to keep the spirit of divergence alive and well. The first three years of the articles in JMMR address many important topics, including paradigms, design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, quality of mixed methods, teaching mixed methods, and empirical examples of mixed methods studies. Each of these topics offers room for growth in understandings from philosophical as well as empirical perspectives.

For example, paradigms in JMMR have been addressed by several authors. Morgan (2007) argued that paradigms are not the proper concept to describe the system of shared beliefs amongst a community of scholars. He proposes the terminology be changed from paradigm to approach, and he continues his discussion by outlining the pragmatic approach that purports to function because scholars agree on the important questions and the methods for investigating those questions. Morgan bases his argument on the supposition that research questions are the determinants of methods choices thus making metaphysical assumptions associated with paradigms unnecessary. Following the work of Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007), Denscombe (2008) offers a slightly different take on the concept of paradigm, suggesting that the research world is composed of three paradigms: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, each of which is grounded in a philosophical belief system, i.e., positivism, constructivism, and pragmatism, respectively.

Feilzer's article in the current issue extends the discussion of paradigms and mixed methods. She addresses not only the philosophical beliefs associated with the pragmatic paradigm, but also provides an example of an empirical study as a way of illustrating the implications for

researchers who position themselves within that paradigm. Clearly, the topic of philosophical assumptions and paradigms is one that is not ready to be brought to closure; the discussion is just getting interesting.

Greene (2007; 2008) provides an overview of the contributions of various paradigmatic perspectives to providing guidance, recognizing pragmatism and transformative paradigms as actively promoting the use of mixed methods with contextual and theoretical groundings. Greene argues that the value of the multi-paradigmatic stances provides a unique opportunity for discussions and debates that she characterizes as a dialectical stance. Mertens (2007) agrees with Greene in that paradigms do provide a framework for thinking about research and describes a set of philosophical assumptions that constitute the transformative paradigm. This paradigm rests on the assumption that researchers have a responsibility to address issues of human rights and social justice and that this value can be used to derive implications for ontological and epistemological beliefs and consequent methodological decisions.

Such a belief system brings to the fore questions about who is represented in the mixed methods field and how mixed methods can be used to address human rights and social justice issues. JMMR's editors (Donna and Max) are working with communities in Africa, New Zealand, and Australia to support the development of mixed methods research with a goal of bringing as yet unheard voices into the mixed methods conversations. The nature of the research that is being conducted by our colleagues in challenging contexts with oppressed populations provides opportunities to learn more about mixed methods' potential to address social issues and inclusion of marginalized peoples. How can mixed methods be used in a cyclical manner (as opposed to a one-off study) in order to identify community needs and address them in appropriate manners? How can mixed methods contribute to the understanding of how to identify and respond to cultural and power differences in research? What insights do we gain by informing mixed methods approaches with theoretical perspectives, such as feminist, indigenous, critical race, queer, and disability rights theories?

Another important topic for mixed methods researchers is that of establishing the quality of their work. Given that different sets of criteria have been proposed by researchers who work within the positivist, post-positivist, and constructivist paradigms (Mertens, 2010), how can a researcher be responsive to criteria which might be seen as being contradictory? For example, should the researcher be distant from the sample from whom the data are collected to reduce bias, or actively engaged with the people in the sample to reduce bias? Most articles published in JMMR address the question of quality or rigor within the specific context of the study; however, there is a need to look explicitly at the meaning of quality in mixed methods research. Dellinger and Leach (2007) took on the difficult task of proposing a framework for judging the quality of mixed methods research. In the current issue, Leech, Dellinger, Brannagan, and Tanaka extended their contribution by a presenting a refined set of criteria for judging the quality of mixed methods research (primarily from a pragmatic standpoint). They then illustrate the application of the framework with three studies from different disciplines and they address implications for teaching mixed methods.

Hence, Leech et al. use the topic of quality in mixed methods research as one element needed to further effective teaching about mixed methods. As Tashakkori (2009) noted in his final editorial, much is needed in terms of better understanding strategies for teaching mixed methods. Do students need a thorough grounding in quantitative and qualitative methods before they can be introduced to mixed methods? What strategies are being used? How effective are they? What types of pedagogical techniques facilitate students learning about mixed methods? How do teachers of mixed methods account for ethical issues that arise in mixed methods studies? What is the relationship between ethics and quality in a mixed methods study? How can rigor

in methods be demonstrated as a means to provide justifiable conclusions and strengthen connections between research and use of findings? These represent additional areas in need of attention.

Specific components of the research process have received a fair amount of attention in JMMR's first three years, with articles about design, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. In the current issue, Townsend, Floersch, and Findling's and Onwegbuzie, Bustamante, and Nelson's articles both address measurement issues in terms of the contribution of mixed methods to the development of data collection instruments. What is interesting about these articles is that they demonstrate ways that the use of mixed methods can improve the quality of instruments used for data collection. This opens up many possibilities in terms of how mixed methods can improve not only data collection, but other parts of the research process and products. For example, the President of the United States, Barak Obama, issued a directive that calls for more rigorous evaluation of federally funded programs in the areas of education, health, and social services (Orszag, 2009). In the directive, the following question is raised: ''What study design would be used, and why is it the most rigorous, cost-effective methodology appropriate to answering the questions outlined?'' As a community of mixed methods researchers, how can we read such a question and not be filled with hope that mixed methods will part of the solution? How can we influence public policy in order to have a place at the decision making table in terms of methodology?

The new editors look forward to working with members of the JMMR Advisory Board, Associate Editors, and the wider mixed methods community as we continue the journey to explore this exciting new territory.

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