

Dialectical Pluralism and Mixed Research

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R. Burke Johnson¹

This special issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* provides a cross-section of cutting-edge articles on the third methodological and philosophical movement commonly known as “mixed methods” or “mixed methods research” (MMR), and our research community is fortunate that the issue contains articles written by many of the leading scholars in the field. The issue should provide a rich resource of the latest thinking about MMR as a broad methodology and the use of MMR across multiple disciplines.

Readers can obtain a fuller overview of the special issue by quickly reading the abstracts, but let me provide a one-sentence description here for each article. The issue begins with Greene’s article, which calls on researchers to apply MMR to critical issues; this requires an awareness of self-in-inquiry and the complex and value-laden nature of MMR in contemporary social inquiry. In the second article, Teddlie and Tashakkori identify nine contemporary “core” characteristics of MMR; one underlying or implicit characteristic is that MMR respects, appreciates, and relies on learning from differences and producing combinations that help multiple stakeholders. In the third article, Brannen and Moss explain and provide empirical examples of how to improve traditional policy research through the use of MMR; of critical importance is the careful listening to macro- and microlevel data and perspectives. In the fourth article, Mertens articulates an important values stance, the transformative approach, for promoting social justice through the use of MMR. In the fifth article, Bazely explains how to deal with one of the practical but tricky issues in MMR, that of “integration”; she specifically shows how to integrate different data types and analytic approaches, and she implores scholars to think about integrative strategies at each stage of the research process. In the sixth article, Pearce writes about the important history of MMR from the perspective of the discipline of sociology, and she especially focuses on combining survey and ethnographic research. In the seventh article, Collins, Onwuegbuzie, and Johnson continue their discussion of the issue of research quality

¹University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL, USA

Corresponding Author:

R. Burke Johnson, 2108 West Charingwood Drive Mobile, AL 36695 USA

Email: BJOHNSON@usouthal.edu

or what they call *legitimation*; despite some critics' claims that MMR operates without recognition of philosophy, these authors dispel this notion. In the last article, Nancy L. Leech reviews the current research on how to write mixed research reports; she offers multiple useful writing strategies and calls for us to be creative in our approaches.

I will now make two additional comments in this editorial for readers' consideration. One regards the label used for this sort of research, and the second is about a metaparadigm. First, many readers have likely now heard of MMR. However, even though the term *mixed methods research* has become popular and somewhat reified today, it is important to understand that the movement or "methodological paradigm" is about far more than just methods.¹ From my perspective, MMR can be and often is about multiple forms of "mixing." One might, for example, mix or combine methods, data, methodologies, disciplines, values or ethical principles, theories, modes of inquiry, paradigms, perspectives, philosophies, and levels of analysis (e.g., micro, meso, macro, and meta). Ultimately, I hope MMR will help us to better connect theory and practice, help us to find win-win solutions to the problems we face, and provide a way that we all can work in our many different ways toward social betterment and social justice in our world. Although I and several of my colleagues prefer the label *mixed research*, the authors have generally relied on the popular label of MMR.

Second, I want to briefly mention and "add to the discussion" a philosophy labeled *dialectical pluralism* (DP).² My version of this philosophy results from my attempt to find a way to interact with both differences and similarities (of goals, values, philosophical stances, methodologies) using the dialectical approach to MMR long advocated by Jennifer Greene. Briefly, DP takes a pluralist stance ontologically (there are many kinds of reality that are important, such as subjective, objective, intersubjective, disciplinary, paradigmatic) and relies on a dialectical (and dialogical and hermeneutical) approach to learning from difference.

At the level of paradigms, DP is a metaparadigm because it carefully listens to multiple paradigms and provides a metaparadigmatic standpoint. The idea of DP for research is to (a) dialectically listen, carefully and thoughtfully, to different paradigms, disciplines, theories, and stakeholder and citizen perspectives; (b) combine important ideas from competing paradigms and values into a new workable whole for each research study or program evaluation; (c) explicitly state and "pack" the approach with stakeholders' and researchers' epistemological and social-political values to guide the research (including the *valued ends* one hopes for and the *valued means* for getting there); (d) conduct the research ethically; (e) facilitate dissemination and use of research findings (locally and more broadly); and (f) continually, formatively evaluate and improve the outcomes of the research-and-use process (e.g., Is the research having the desired societal impact?). In short, DP is a change theory, and it requires listening, understanding, learning, and acting.

One can engage DP as both an intellectual process (where one dialogues with ideas, values, concepts, and differences) and a group process (where one, working in a heterogeneous group, strives to produce win-win, or at least complementary, results). When enacted with traditional differences in the social and behavioral sciences, DP

can help provide a meta-ontological perspective, a meta-epistemological perspective, and a meta-ethical perspective that combines or produces an agreeable “package of goals and values” that serves multiple important groups and perspectives. In agreement with Mertens’ transformative approach, it is especially important that we “give voice” to those with the least power. Last but not least, DP fits very well with MMR when it is narrowly defined (mixing methods) and when it is widely defined (mixing or combining philosophies, values, disciplines).

The authors in this special issue address many tensions that we are intellectually, ethically, and practically obliged to address in our research and practice. Readers will come away with a respect for complexity and many strategies for dealing with complexity through empirical research and multiple philosophies. Mixed research is not always appropriate, but it adds a new metaperspective to traditional quantitative and qualitative research methodologies and paradigms. There is a prerequisite, however, for conducting high-quality mixed research. The quantitative components must meet quality standards for quantitative research, the qualitative components must meet quality standards for qualitative research, and the study as a whole must also meet quality standards for mixed research. In the Collins et al. article, and in previous research by these authors (e.g., Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2006), this requirement is known as *multiple validities legitimation*. I urge all researchers conducting mixed research to strive for this kind of legitimation.

I want to thank all of the authors who together produced this special issue. They are the ones who have summarized and generated the knowledge contained in this issue. I especially thank Tony Onwuegbuzie, who initially got me started on this project several years ago, and Jennifer Greene, who emphasized that we all attempt to address critical issues facing our society and world. Last, I thank *ABS* for devoting a special issue to the latest thinking in mixed research.

Notes

1. Along with several colleagues, I have referred to mixed methods research as a methodological or research paradigm. For an explanation and justification of this use, and a comparison of other uses of the word *paradigm*, see Johnson (2011b). This article was a point-counterpoint article in reply to an article by Maxwell (2011).
2. I believe the term *dialectical pluralism* was coined by literary critic and scholar W. J. T. Mitchell in 1982, the editor of the journal *Critical Inquiry*. For more information about how my usage is similar to and different from Mitchell’s and other uses in the literature, see Johnson (2011a). Starting later this year, I will refer to my version as “dialectical pluralism 2.0” to distinguish it from other versions.

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