

Multiple Methods in ASR

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In recent years, the *American Sociological Review (ASR)* has featured papers based exclusively on ethnographic research (e.g., Timmermans, 2005), interview data (e.g., Tyson et al., 2005), and sociological theory (e.g., Frickel and Gross, 2005). However, a series of papers that *combine* different types of data and approaches in the same study are especially noteworthy. One quarter of the papers I have accepted for publication in ASR since becoming editor in 2003 draw on more than one research method. This brief essay highlights some of the ways that authors have employed such multi-method¹ research to provide a more informative account of the social world.

Interviews and Surveys

Several authors of ASR papers have conducted interviews in order to refine the questions employed in a subsequent statistical analysis. In this approach, the qualitative investigation helps to clarify the nature of the issues under investigation, but the "real proof" is presented in the statistical analysis. For example, Benson and Saguy (2005) interviewed 150 journalists, politicians, activists, and academics in their study of the media coverage of social problems in the United States and France. However, the empirical heart of their article was a statistical analysis of 750 articles on immigration and 685 articles on sexual harassment in these two countries. Similarly, Uzzi and Lancaster (2004) conducted in-depth interviews with a small number of lawyers and clients before embarking on a study of social ties and pricing patterns in large U.S. law firms.

Qualitative data play a more central role in the research of Cherlin and his colleagues (2004) on abuse in families. After conducting a survey of more than 2,000 families, Cherlin et al. followed up on 256 of these families with a series of repeated, open-ended interviews over a period of 12-18 months. They found that reports of abuse surfaced increasingly as respondents came to know the researchers over this extended series of interviews. Thus, in this study, qualitative data played a key role in obtaining a more complete and accurate measurement of the phenomenon under investigation.

Qualitative data are also sometimes used to help clarify the meaning of the responses to survey questions and to better understand the social processes that might produce broad outcome patterns. For example, Edgell (forthcoming) and colleagues interviewed respondents in four cities to follow up their national survey of attitudes toward atheists. The qualitative data helped establish that attitudes toward atheists are not generally the result of face-to-face encounters but rather represent a symbolic affirmation of the

role of religion and skepticism about the moral standing of those who would reject a role for religion in their lives. Similarly, Giordano and colleagues (forthcoming) conducted a survey of more than 1,000 adolescents and then asked more detailed, open-ended questions of a subset of 100 respondents. They drew conclusions about gender differences in confidence, engagement, and power from both types of data.

Multiple Quantitative Approaches

Multi-method studies are not limited to the blending of qualitative and quantitative research but can also appear in the artful combination of different quantitative methods in the same study. Pager and Quillian (2005), for example, combined a social experiment with a follow-up survey in their study of racial discrimination in hiring practices. The first portion of their study uses an "audit" methodology, sending "testers" to apply for jobs at various employers who had advertised positions. This experiment is designed to compare the success of Black and White applicants who are portrayed (fictitiously) as having or not having criminal records. Pager and Quillian returned to the same employers six months later to conduct a survey of the employer's attitudes about hiring different types of employees. In addition to uncovering discrepancies between employers' deeds versus words, this follow-up survey allowed a comparison of the insights that can be gained from survey versus experiment.

In another case, You and Khagram (2005) combined aggregate national data (i.e., one data point per country) with a multi-level statistical analysis of survey data from 30 countries. They used the survey data to bolster their claim that countries with more inequality have more corruption because there is a higher normative acceptance of corruption in countries characterized by higher levels of inequality.

Historical Analyses

Historical studies often combine various types of data. For example, Somers and Block (2005) principally examined historical documents in their investigation of welfare reform in Great Britain in the 1830s and the United States in the 1990s. They supplement this qualitative analysis of political texts with a statistical portrait of welfare expenditures before and after reform in both countries. Similarly, Riley (2005) draws on archival, statistical, and spatial data in his study of the connection between civil society and the rise of fascism in Italy and Spain. Wilde's (2004) study of the success of the reform movement during Vatican II is primarily a qualitative analysis of archival documents, but her summary of the vote counts is an indispensable element in her story. Molnar's (2005) study of debates among Hungarian architects drew on interview data as well as historical documents and supporting statistics. The 1950s time period she studied is recent enough that participants were still alive and available for interviews.

Schwartz and Schuman's (2005) paper, "History, Commemoration and Belief," draws from an especially broad range of sources. They show that while the reputation of President Lincoln as a great leader has remained

strong, the basis for this belief has shifted from Lincoln as the “savior of the union” before the Civil Rights movement to Lincoln as the “great emancipator” since that time. They support this claim using data from surveys conducted over a 50-year period, as well as analyses of history textbooks, the writings of leading historians, and cultural symbols such as statues and memorials. Their theoretical point is that the study of commemoration as portrayed in statues and celebrated in parades should be accompanied by research on how these commemorative activities are received, as tapped by surveys and other measures of popular beliefs. Thus, in their view, a complete assessment of issues of collective memory requires multiple sources of data.

Obstacles

While multi-method research can be a fruitful research strategy, this approach is neither necessary nor sufficient for completing a high-quality study. Designing, collecting, and analyzing data from across diverse methodological styles is often only possible under the aegis of a large research project. Dissertation writers, for example, may wish to combine methods but may lack the time and money to complete each facet of the study effectively. Many seasoned investigators also face obstacles that put this strategy out of reach. Moreover, the presentation of different types of data in a single article presents its own challenges.

For example, space constraints may prevent the full presentation of qualitative findings. It can be difficult to achieve a substantive and stylistic balance between diverse genres of research. And sometimes different sorts of data speak to somewhat different issues. In short, multi-method papers present their own challenges and thus require at least as much skill and insight to be effective as do single-method studies.

Many sociologists view the social world as a multi-faceted and multi-layered reality that reveals itself only in part with any single method. While there are precedents for most if not all of the approaches described above, their use by so many scholars is striking. Multi-method research is more common in the context of journal articles than was the case a decade or two ago. It is also significant that so many sociologists are combining methods rather than trying to herald a single approach as the right way or the best way.

Notes

¹ I use “multiple-method research” to refer to studies that draw on data from more than one source and present more than one type of analysis. Such research often, but not always, combines quantitative and qualitative data. Hierarchical linear models typically draw on data from different sources but combine them in a single statistical analysis. Studies that exclusively rely on this very useful method would not qualify as multi-method. Of the 66 papers I have accepted for publication thus far, nearly 26 percent (17) fit my multi-method definition.

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