Mixed Methods by Sam Ladner

EPIC2023 Learning & Networking Week

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Session:

Mixed Methods: A Short Guide to Applied Mixed Methods Research by Sam Ladner

Time: Tuesday 19 September, SFO-PDT 8am/ UK 4pm/ India 8:30pm/ EU-CEST 5pm

Facilitators: Sam Ladner + Melanie T. Uy

Description:

‘Mixed methods” is one of the biggest buzz words out there…and it means a lot more than adding interviews to a survey, or gathering two different types of data. If Sam Ladner’s essential book Mixed Methods has been on your reading list forever, or if you’ve read it but want to deepen your understanding in conversation with a bunch of brilliant researchers, this is the session for you! Book Group sessions take on must-read books by EPIC members.

This session is not a Q&A with the author but an active learning session about you and your experience. To get the most of this session, we offer a few prompts to spark your (human) intelligence:

- Think about a time when the data or findings you generated for a research study did not drive the outcome you were looking for. Consider starting with chapter 3, specifically Figure 2 and reflecting on what kind of data you collected.
- Think about a time when you added qual and quant data together but it seemed to create more problems instead of making a solution. Consider starting with p. 53 on “data dominance.”

We invite you to add your own questions in this session’s Google Doc.

For Participants:

We want you to reflect on your research practice and share with the group what went wrong and how it could be solved using the different chapters from the guide. Please feel free to add prompts and suggested sections from the guide.

Prompt 1: For those of you interested in a deeper self-guided reflection, consider Figure 2 (below). What kinds of assumptions did you or your stakeholders have about the type of data you were collecting? Were you speaking the same language? Where was the mismatch?

Prompt 2: Consider this question: think about a time when you put qual and quant data together. What kinds of unanticipated challenges did you face? Did this combination create new problems for you? Consider this quote from page 55:

> *"Whatever dominance you choose, be clear about what this means for your results. In an inductive-dominant approach, you are focusing first on that luxurious understanding of your subject matter. You are stepping back and then diving into The Encounter. You may not have a great grasp on scale or causation, but you will have deep understanding. If you choose a deductive[1]dominant approach, you will focus first scale and causation of what causes what. You may come up short in your pursuit to luxuriate in the customer, and you might not have the deepest understanding of your context. But you will be able to count the incidence of a thing and test what affects what. In either case, prepare your stakeholders—and yourself—for what you will and will not have."*

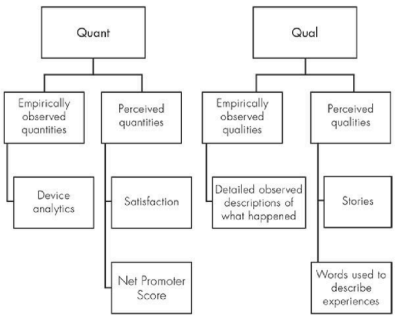
WHAT ARE MIXED METHODS: MIXING OBJECTIVISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

Surprisingly, there is no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a "mixed method" study. Some researchers use the term to indicate that they are using formal mathematical procedures on their data, whatever their form. Others use the word "qualitative" simply to indicate that it is a small sample size alone (Small, 2011). Mixing usually connotes using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and data. Quant data are numbers and qual data are qualities, or descriptions, of a thing. As Small notes, this is not universally understood by researchers and non-researchers alike.

In a rather confusing Twitter exchange I had recently, I encountered a designer who used the word "qualitative" to indicate anything that was not verifiably observed using objective observation. After much back-and-forthing, I discovered this designer believed that anything describing subjective perceptions or beliefs was qualitative, even if it is clearly using numbers! In fact, this designer was conflating the word "empirical," or the act of observing something, with the word "quantitative," or numerical data. The word empirical simply refers to direct observation, so quant data can be subjective or empirical, and qual data can be either subjective or empirical.

Ethnographers are typically known for their empirical rigor, by reporting exactly what happens with the eye of both a camera (Crabtree, Rodden, Tolmie, & Button, 2009) and an informed human instrument (Ader, 2011). The difference between empirical and subjective or perceived qualities and quantities are laid out in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Empirical and Perception-based Qualitative and Quantitative Research



Thinking about your example now, which “dominance” did you choose, if you chose at all?

Please feel free to add your own questions or prompts!

Prompt 3:

Prompt 4:

Prompt 5:

Questions by Participants for the Group:

While Sam Ladner will be with us, we want the other practitioners and experts in the group to share their experiences and techniques from their practice.

1. Which methods could you see being used successfully by journalists? On the flip side: Which methods do you think are most easily communicated by ethnographers to the public (i.e.; when discussing their research to the media)?
2. When you mix qual and quant, do you tend to do one before the other or does it depend on the research objective?
3. I understand qual before quant, can you explain quant before qual a bit more with an example?
4. How much do you need to explain the methods to your XFN partners at the beginning? Rather than just jumping right into what you discovered…
5. In my experience (government, hybrid researcher and service designer roles, lots of limitations around access to participants and bureacracy) mixed method research is incredibly resilient, and problems can be solved iteratively while research is in progress. I would love to hear others’ experiences turning problems around. What are the limits and risks of the resilience?