

Chapter 12

Tacit Cultural Knowledge: An Instrumental Qualitative Case Study of Mixed Methods Research in South Africa

Debra Rena Miller

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA

ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding the expansion of mixed methods, research methods and findings are culturally situated. Unfortunately, studies conducted outside the Global North often embrace canonical methodologies not aimed at understanding tacit concepts. Learning about the needs of South African researchers and participants enlightens taken-for-granted assumptions in Anglo-American mixed methods. Hence, this study explores aspects of tacit cultural knowledge that contextualize mixed methods in South Africa. In-person interviews among South African professors are analyzed narratively. Findings indicate that economically based knowledge facilitates methodologies as political identities. Research questions require contextual sensitivity and methodology requires relational ethics of communicative approaches. Because South African participants identify with non-Western numeric literacies and storytelling knowledge, qualitatively dominant mixed methods allows minimally structured talk. Recommendations include flexible plans and accounting for cultural expression of doubt.

INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding the expansion of mixed methods research (Zhou & Creswell, 2012), research methodologies are culturally situated (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). What then goes unrecognized in the production of knowledge (Grenfell & James, 2004)? Defining *culture* as a set of taken-for-granted beliefs that comes from our bones (Eagleton, 2000), researchers “take [their] own culture for granted” without realizing that “what [they] do is cultural” (Lapan et al., 2012, p. 164). Culture may be in tacit or implicit form.

Two types of knowledge include explicit and implicit or tacit (Davies, 2015). Explicit knowledge is easy to articulate. Implicit or tacit knowledge involves the application of explicit knowledge, such as skills that are transferable from one job to another. Tacit knowledge is gained from personal experience and is more difficult to express.

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Tacit Cultural Knowledge

This study focuses on tacit knowledge. Theoretically, *tacit knowledge* involves two rules. First, because no one explicitly knows all rules, each person develops and applies tacit understanding in ways they deem appropriate (Collins, 2010). Second, what is obvious in one situation is not in another. Therefore, tacit knowledge is transferred personally without instructive interaction. *Tacit cultural knowledge* is knowledge of culture that remains outside awareness, goes undiscussed, and lacks vocabulary (Spradley & McCurdy, 2012), but which must be understood in order to understand cultures (Narramore & Duvall, 1986).

Though some domains cannot be known through scientific method (Harris, 1979), globally northern¹ inquirers expect globally southern studies to use canonical methodologies from 19th or 20th century Euro-America (Alatas, 1996). Unfortunately, methodologies remain colonized (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) and fail to account for the range of participant experiences. The need is urgent and widespread for western academic research to become ideologically plural (Stanfield II, 2008).

South Africa's (SA) polycultural reality provides a rare *in vivo* laboratory for studying tacit cultural contexts of mixed methods research (MMR) relative to apartheid's oppressive racial segregation. Learning about the needs of South African researchers and participants informs taken-for-granted assumptions in Anglo-American MMR and enables globally northern researchers to better understand discontinuities of extreme cultural diversity. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore how tacit cultural knowledge contextualizes MMR in SA. The intent is to benefit audiences conducting or consuming MMR in SA or around the globe by providing insight into the influence of culture on MMR and broader methodologies.

BACKGROUND

To qualitatively study the case of mixed methods research (MMR) in South Africa (SA), Jennifer Greene's (2007) definition of MMR as mixing mental models and beliefs as well as incorporating multiple philosophies, values, understandings, and methodologies for gathering and analyzing information allows flexible adaptation across cultures and language. Several writers have promoted mixed methods (MM) as suitable for addressing cultural issues, including the intersection of psychology and context, complexity of cultural constructs, cultural competence, and meaning in cultural comparisons (Bartholomew & Brown, 2012; Nastasi & Hitchcock, 2016; Ortiz et al., 2012). MMR may account for cultural contexts by requiring researchers to confront contradiction (Coyle & Williams, 2000). Plano Clark and Ivankova (2016) also stressed the importance of accounting for contexts of mixed methods research. Moreover, by offering "dialogic opportunities" for understanding social phenomena (Greene, 2012, p. 755), MMR enables avoiding "methodological ethnocentricity" (Ayalew, 2012, p. 133). However, to capitalize on cultural explanations and avoid prematurely normalizing across cultural boundaries, Green and Preston (2005) advised against unknowingly using formulaic approaches to mix methods.

Readers may find it helpful to understand my relationship to South Africa. I am white. At 10 months of age, I moved with my American parents from a rural United States (US) home to eSwatini (then Swaziland) in southeast Africa. When I was 13, my family moved to Johannesburg, SA. Black people could not live next door to us. Life seemed bizarre, given that millions of people lived in distant ghetto townships but with whom I was not able to attend school or converse on the streets. For 18 months after the 1976 riots began, my missionary father was the only non-policing white person to regularly enter the Soweto townships. Lived experiences provided glimpses of insight beyond what I would have been privy to had I been the daughter of white South African parents. I also acquired siSwati and Afrikaans by immersion.

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