

# Chapter 58

## The Use of Mixed Methods in Organizational Communication Research

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### ABSTRACT

*Most organizational research employs either quantitative or qualitative methods. Furthermore, users of one methodology often dismiss those who use another. The purpose of this report was to describe how researchers could use mixed methods, especially online. Researchers often begin investigations with paradigmatic assumptions or multiple constructs that should lead to mixed methods. However, quantitative methodological assumptions may seem to contradict qualitative methodological assumptions, and scholars have found it easier and quicker to deliver results adopting only one methodology. Additionally, researchers may be resistant because making high quality inferences from mixed methods might seem too demanding. This chapter describes how one researcher grappled with these challenges when using mixed methods off-line. Online technologies contribute to resolving some difficulties more easily.*

### INTRODUCTION

Although organizational researchers have always used a variety of research methods, a single type of methodology appeared to influence the research published during any given era. For example, quantitative methods dominated organizational communication research by the 1970's (Salem, 1999). Although a few communication scholars had been employing qualitative methods in the 1970's (e.g., Browning, 1978), there is little doubt that the special issue of the *Western Journal Speech*

*Communication* in Spring, 1982 (volume 46, no. 2) stimulated the greater use of such methods. Today, organizational communication researchers have a greater choice of methods, but most choose methods consistent with one methodology. Generally, organizational research is mono method, either quantitative or qualitative.

From the earliest times, it appears that those who use one methodology have sought to discredit the other. One researcher noted the following in 1969:

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*Even though case studies have a richness of detail, they have at least four drawbacks: they are (a) situation specific, (b) ahistorical, (c) tacitly prescriptive, and (4) one-sided. (p. 18)*

And then he made the following argument:

*The experimental method, whether applied in field experiments... controlled naturalistic observation... contrived laboratory experiments... or simulated environments... is the principal tactic by which more durable data and useful data can be obtained. (p. 21)*

Ironically, the same researcher wrote the following in 1979:

*... there is not an underlying "reality" waiting to be discovered. Rather, organizations are viewed as the inventions superimposed on flows of experience and momentarily imposing some order on those streams. (pp. 11-12)*

And later in the same the work, he explained how researchers make sense of data.

*In the process of embellishing, reworking and contemplating each prior example, we begin to identify some elements associated with organizing. In each example, some portions of the stream of experience was bracketed, and efforts were made to turn the stream into information and then to do something about the information that had been constructed. (p. 12)*

These are striking differences between Karl Weick's comments about research methods in the first edition of *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (1969), when he espoused quantitative methods, and his comments in the second edition (1979), when he advocated qualitative methods.

From the 1960's to the present, academicians and consultants developed an alternative body of methodological literature (Tashakkori & Teddlie,

1998). Researchers documented the systematic and planned use of quantitative and qualitative methods in the same study. This led to the development of mixed models of phenomena that included both quantitative and qualitative methodological assumptions. Today, there are several approaches that include both methods and represent a separate methodology (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003a).

The purpose of this essay is to explain the use of mixed methods in organizational research. By reporting on the use of mixed methods, this chapter may provide a deeper appreciation of both methodologies and an understanding of the strengths and challenges of using mixed methods. Online technology may make it more likely to employ mixed designs.

## **FROM MULTIPLE METHODS TO MIXED MODELS**

### **Developing Alternatives**

Methods are only one level of knowing, and they are tied to broader concerns such as methodologies and paradigms. For purposes of this essay, *paradigms* are sets of assumptions scholars employ to highlight features of phenomena and to suggest ways of developing and demonstrating theory. A *research method* is a particular and specific approach to developing and demonstrating theory, and a *methodology* is a system of methods, a collection of methods along with rules for their use. Behavioral science researchers generally value alignment of these levels of knowing with specific paradigms suggesting specific methodologies and methods but also excluding others.

There have been noteworthy calls to employ several methods *within* a methodology. Campbell often argued for a multi-trait multi-method approach to improve the veracity of theoretical claims (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Cook and Campbell (1979) contended that when researchers measured a construct using only one method, it would be

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