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Publishing Mixed Methods Research



Donna M. Mertens¹

Max Bergman and I have completed our first year serving as editors for the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research (JMMR)*. During that time, we have reviewed a considerable number of manuscripts and other publications in the field of mixed methods research. Each manuscript submitted to *JMMR* is reviewed by three anonymous reviewers, sometimes an associate editor, and both editors. This sequence of reviewing provides us with a rich base for recognizing what is desirable and what is undesirable in manuscripts submitted to *JMMR*. We use this editorial as an opportunity to provide insights that add to those provided by Creswell and Tashakkori (2007) after their first year as editors. We draw from several other sources as well, including several chapters in the *Sage Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research* (2nd ed.; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) and selected articles that appeared in *JMMR* across its 5 years of publication.

JMMR continues to publish two kinds of articles: empirical and theoretical/methodological. Empirical articles (10,000-word limit) report the methods used in mixed methods studies with a focus on how the use of mixed methods advances our thinking about this approach. Theoretical and methodological articles each have an 8,000-word limit. Theoretical/methodological articles explore theoretical concepts, philosophical assumptions, and other relevant concepts such as ethics and quality in mixed methods research. Methodological articles explain particular methodological approaches that contribute to the understanding of mixed methods research.

The major reason that manuscripts are rejected by the editors is that they do not address the contribution that is made to advancing understandings of mixed methods research. Sometimes manuscripts include only quantitative or only qualitative approaches; sometimes they include both quantitative and qualitative approaches, but there is no integration of the methods, analysis, or reporting of findings. Sometimes, authors do not make reference to other literature in the field of mixed methods research, despite the ever-increasing number of resources that are emerging. Reference to these resources is necessary to support the argument that the submitted study contributes to advancing the field of mixed methods research.

Making sure that a manuscript includes both quantitative and qualitative components and that there is an integration of these components is necessary, but not sufficient, to successfully publish a mixed methods article in *JMMR*. Additional criteria need attention to ensure that the quality of submitted manuscripts is worthy of publication.

In terms of empirical mixed methods studies, Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2010) remind researchers that a quality manuscript is enhanced by planning and conducting a high-quality study. Thus, they recognize that the development of a quality mixed methods manuscript begins with

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the formulation stage in the research process in which the researchers are clear about their assumptions (i.e., their philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks) and an appropriate literature review is conducted that leads to mixed methods research questions. Attention to quality is needed throughout the remainder of the research planning stage that includes development of sampling plans and research design selection and ends with the implementation of the research strategies and reporting.

Of course, researchers who use one method or another already know they need to move through these stages; however, what is unique about these stages in a mixed methods study? At each of these stages, researchers need to be cognizant of mixed methods implications. For example, in the literature review, researchers should be aware of the methods that were used in the cited studies. Did they use one method or mixed methods? What are the implications of the methods used in the cited studies in terms of mixed methods approaches? For the development of research questions, researchers should be aware of the different types of questions that can be answered with quantitative data and those more appropriate for qualitative data. They should include both types of questions in their plans. They should also provide a rationale for the use of mixed methods in their study.

Multiple examples of research that achieve this high level of quality can be found in the first 5 years of *JMMR*. One particular example by Edmeades et al. (2010) uses the literature review section to explain that the majority of prior studies of abortion in developing countries have been limited to quantitative approaches that focus on incidence and prevalence of abortions. Qualitative studies have been conducted, but they are small scale and tend to focus on the experiences of women who have abortions at registered facilities. This leads to an underestimation of the extent of abortions and marginalizes the experiences of many poor women in rural areas who do not have access to legal abortions. They chose a mixed methods approach to address these specific weaknesses in prior research.

In the planning stage, researchers should be explicit about the sampling strategies that were used for each approach. How were the participants selected for the quantitative portion? For the qualitative portion? Nastasi, Hitchcock, and Brown (2010) provide a review of the many different design options that have been presented in the mixed methods literature. Researchers should be explicit about where in the design the mixing of methods occurs. Standard designs in mixed methods research such as concurrent or sequential designs can be elaborated on by the researchers to depict exactly what was done in their study. Edmeades et al. (2010) used a sequential design in that they began with qualitative data collection to provide guidance in the construction of a large-scale survey.

Data collection and analysis sections also need to be explicit about what types of data were collected and how they were analyzed. In addition, mixed methods researchers need to provide supportive documentation of the process and outcomes of integrating quantitative and qualitative data. Edmeades et al. (2010) began their study with focus groups and individual interviews. They used the data from this part of the study to construct a survey. Their survey was a hybrid quantitative and qualitative instrument that allowed for collection of data using not only pre-coded response categories but also a narrative approach when discussing sensitive issues related to abortion. Their data analysis examined the added value of having a broader population base to compare extant prevalence data with the data they collected. In addition, they reported the qualitative data to provide a picture of the experiences of women who underwent abortions. Their mixed methods approach allowed them to not only understand more fully the extent of abortions but also the circumstances under which the women obtained the abortions.

Researchers are aware of the criteria for quality typically associated with quantitative data, such as reliability and validity; they are also aware of the criteria for quality associated with qualitative data, such as credibility and trustworthiness. Researchers should be prepared to describe

how they addressed both types of criteria. In addition, they should be aware of criteria that are unique to mixed methods studies. O’Cathain (2010) provides a framework for judging the quality of mixed methods research. She builds on the framework developed by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2008) that included criteria related to the quality of inferences that could be derived based on the design and interpretive rigor that forms the basis of support for the study conclusions. A critical component of quality of inferences rests on the rationale provided for the study design as a mixed methods design and its congruence with the research questions and data collection and analysis strategies. Inferences should be supported by clear indication of the respective data sources on which they are based.

Dahlberg, Wittink, and Gallo (2010) describe the process of developing a mixed methods manuscript for publication. They acknowledge that the majority of the steps are similar whether a mono or mixed methods study is being reported. However, mixed methods researchers reach a point of decision about organization of the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study. Should they be reported as separate studies and brought together in the conclusions? Should they be integrated throughout the writing process? Should the results be reported separately and then add a section in which they are integrated? The answers to these questions are not straightforward. Each researcher needs to decide based on the data collection and analysis strategies that were used. If quantitative data were transformed into qualitative data or vice versa, it might make sense to provide the original form of the data followed by the transformation of the data. If one type of data was used as a basis for decisions about the collection of another type of data, then it makes sense to report them in chronological order. What is important is to explain clearly how the results were integrated and the contribution to improved understanding that was achieved based on that integration.

Theoretical and methodological articles also need to clearly state the relevance of the topic for the mixed methods research community and build on the extant literature about mixed methods in terms of philosophy, theory, and methodology. With this type of manuscript, we often see weaknesses in terms of the clarity of focus or insufficient supportive arguments for positions taken. This area is represented by articles such as Leech, Dellinger, Brannagan, and Tanaka’s (2010) presentation of the validation framework that can be used to evaluate the quality of mixed methods studies; Alise and Teddlie’s (2010) discussion of the role of paradigms in mixed methods research; and Wolf’s (2010) contribution to understanding the meaning of triangulation in mixed methods research.

JMMR provides a venue for exploring theoretical, methodological, and empirical implications of mixed methods research. As an interdisciplinary journal, we welcome manuscripts across many disciplines. However, the key to publishing in *JMMR* is to be clear about the contribution the manuscript makes to furthering understanding of mixed methods research. Authors can publish their work in discipline-based journals if their focus is to inform that community about developments in their field. *JMMR* is the appropriate choice when the focus of the writing is on the theory or methodology of mixed methods research.

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