

A comment to Gobo: the next challenge – from mixed to merged methods

A comment
to Gobo

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to further the discussion on points made by Giampietro Gobo, provide additional information on the place of qualitative research in management, and question the space of merged methods.

Design/methodology/approach – Use a conversational approach as well as a review of qualitative vs quantitative research in three top tier journals for the years 2013-2016 (by a simple count).

Findings – Quantitative methods remain very much mainstream in management research, yet one finds that for one of the journals, space is evenly shared between qualitative and quantitative methods.

Research limitations/implications – This is a viewpoint and does not offer a systematic review of all top tier management journals.

Originality/value – It is hope that with this viewpoint debate as to the space of qualitative research, and merged methods can be stimulated.

Keywords Management research, Qualitative methods, Quantitative methods, Merged methods

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

As I read Gobo's viewpoint, two elements drew my attention: the statement about quantitative methods no longer being mainstream, and the proposal for merged methods as potential future avenue for *QROM*. I find both of interest as the first challenges the dominance of quantitative methods; and the other proposes expanding the focus of *QROM* in areas that could be of high potential. Thus I choose here to respond and offer some reflections on the two. I will start with an exploration of the place of qualitative methods in management research, and then question the concept of merged vs mixed methods, and the potential it offers in answering issues Gobo identified.

“Quantitative methods are no longer mainstream” (Gobo, 2015, p. 330)

The trend identified by Payne *et al.* (2004) as concerns the dominance of qualitative papers in mainstream British journals is still an issue, one that is not perceived as positive; a fact noted by Gobo.

Since *QROM* is also on management, I broadened the search specifically to management journals and looked at three A* management publications listed in Fortune 45 and did a simple count of qualitative vs quantitative research published in these journals for the years 2013-2016. I looked at top management journals (*Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Strategic Management Journal*). The goal here is not to provide a systematic review of methods used in Fortune 45 journals; rather I aimed to explore the state of qualitative vs quantitative research published in three well regarded management journals so as to open the space for debate.

Quickly, it becomes rather evident that results depend on the journals searched; qualitative research far from dominate in the *Academy of Management Journal* (33 qualitative, 145 quantitative), and in the *Strategic Management Journal*



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(34 qualitative, 250 quantitative), yet at first, it appears as if it does in the *Journal of Management Studies* (64 qualitative, 49 quantitative). This finding being interesting, I then looked at the distribution and quickly found that for the later journal there were two special issues with more papers per issue, and most of the papers in these issues were qualitative. As paper per issue had an effect on results, I removed them from the count. Removing these indicates a balanced perspective in methods used in the *Journal of Management Studies* (50 qualitative, 49 quantitative). All three publications are from organizations based in the USA; thus this divide does not reflect geographical location.

Results here indicate that quantitative research as mainstream is very much alive, and remains the dominant choice in research published in top management publications. In fact, mature research fields are stated as relying mostly on quantitative methods whereas those fields where qualitative methods dominate are more nascent immature fields (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Thus, it is premature to say “quantitative methods are no longer mainstream” (Gobo, 2015, p. 330). I argue that quantitative methods will no longer be mainstream when there will be an equal balance of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in fields of research that are considered mature; such as can be found in the *Journal of Management*; and when mature fields dominated by qualitative methods will be just as frequent as those dominated by quantitative methods; and none will question the fields maturity. Of course, we are far from this.

While result from the *Journal of Management Studies* are encouraging; the qualitative turn being described as a “quantitative deficit in British sociology” (Williams *et al.*, 2016, p. 436) further highlight the fact that quantitative research remains mainstream; since when it is not dominant, this is termed as a deficit. Would a field dominated by quantitative methods bring such worry for a deficit of qualitative methods?

Of more concern are some of the elements that Gobo identified from previous research. First that junior faculty showed more interest in qualitative research (Payne *et al.*, 2004), and that students in sociology are moving away from quantitative research in part due to anxiety (Williams *et al.*, 2008). The more students that choose to favor qualitative methods because they fear quantitative methods, the more qualitative methods will, and one could argue should, come under criticism. Qualitative research methodologies and methods are valid and sound approaches to research, but we must be critical of it being perceived as the choice of anxious students. One could argue that a point made in Gobo’s article about how qualitative and quantitative methods could bring conflicting results is sufficient reason why students should be familiar in both approaches; and should not feel anxious when thinking about the use of quantitative methods. Here what could be of interest is Gobo’s proposal of merged methods.

Merged vs mixed, how does this answer the issues identified?

I was drawn to the notion of merged methods, and how this would differ from mixed methods; for I used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods in my research. Yet I wanted more on this and how it is relevant in light of issues identified by Gobo in his viewpoint:

- (1) an increase in qualitative methods that appear to be based not only on choice as best method, but also as choice because of anxiety toward quantitative methods; and

- (2) problems with using multiple methods in one research and how this can lead to conflicting results (beyond being costly and time consuming).

It appears that what is proposed is the development of tools or instruments that combine methods. This brings forward the need to carefully consider the place of these merged methods in research methodologies. Precaution must be taken when inviting *QROM* to be “a visionary laboratory” (Gobo, 2015, p. 331) for merged methods, or tools; making it important to note that this laboratory needs to be one that would test the tools developed for methodologies that justify the use of mixed/merged methods. *QROM* should of course advance qualitative research, thus the research methodologies proposed in articles that would then include merged methods, would need to favor and advance primarily qualitative research. The *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* focusses precisely on the use of multiple methods in the same research; one could argue that the space for merged methods is not as distinctive as it is made to appear. The *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* publishes research with “merged methods” such as Delphi, or combined survey tools that include conversational style questions, thus arguing that *QROM* should be a space for merged methods might lack precision, and the potential for differentiation that is implied is reduced.

It could be argued that what *QROM* should focus on when it comes to mixed or merged methods are those where qualitative methods and methodologies are dominant; making it clear that merged survey methods that include a few qualitative questions are not prioritized in *QROM*.

Of more importance is how does this suggestion offer an answer to the issues identified? Gobo states “methods (partially) constructs its results” (p. 331). So, if results are the constructions of the methods used, and knowledge builds upon previously socially constructed knowledge, then how does the proposed turn toward merged methods bring a solution to issues 1 and 2 (anxiety toward quantitative methods, and conflicting results between methods used) and why would this bring “more consistent findings” (p. 331)? I do not disagree with the fact that construction of knowledge occurs through data collected through methods, and thus in part methods construct knowledge, yet it is not clear where or how merged methods provide improvement in light of issues identified. For sure, using the same instrument to collect varied data at the same time would bring more probability of finding comparable results between qualitative and quantitative data collected; but this would likely be an effect of the tool, not consistent findings; for methods constructs its results.

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About the author

Dr Chantal Hervieux is the Director of the Centre for Leadership Excellence. Dr Hervieux also has close to 20 years experience in retail business management given that prior to her university studies, she worked for several companies including United Colors of Benetton. Previous to joining Saint Mary's University (summer 2014). Dr Hervieux received numerous awards, scholarship, published and presented her work on social entrepreneurship and strategy at numerous conferences and published articles in specialized literature and academic journals. Since 2004 she has been involved at the Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development Research Chair where her work included the drafting and presentation of numerous reports bearing on Quebec's sustainable development law as well as commentaries pertaining to sustainable development strategies and GES emissions, both provincial and federal. Dr Chantal Hervieux can be contacted at: chantal.hervieux@smu.ca

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