A Mixed-Method Approach to Interpersonal Trust Research

Maria del Pilar Puerta Francos

Affiliation: PhD student Anthropology and Sociology, University of Western Australia

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Abstract

The increased use of quantitative and qualitative research methods in social sciences has open the possibility of effectively using a mixed-method design in a PhD thesis on trust in the context of a multiethnic society. Recent studies on trust in ethnically diverse societies rely solely on quantitative data (Nannestad, Svendsen, & Svendsen, 2008; Putnam, 2007; Stolle, Soroka, & Johnston, 2008), missing out on the methodological and conceptual value that personal narratives and participant observation have by providing new insights and meaningful information on the complexities of trust and ethnic diversity.

This paper will examine if, by applying the most suitable parts of both the quantitative approach (based on survey measures of interpersonal trust), and the qualitative approach (built on the lived experiences of second-generation migrants extracted from interviews and participant observation), we would be able to develop a more comprehensive and explanatory narrative of trust in a multiethnic society. Many disciplines in the social sciences have successfully employed mixed-method research in their research designs, data collection and interpretation. These include studies on quality of life (Dunning, Williams, Abonyi, & Crooks, 2008), population geography (Graham, 1999), neighbourhood constructs (Nicotera, 2008), family (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003) and ethnography (Fry, Chantavanich, & Chantavanich, 1981).

The researchers implementing these types of research projects need to take into account the challenges derived from integrating different methods of data collection and analysis. They are studies that generally require more time and resources than single method studies, and they may also raise problems at the time of analysing and interpreting the data.
Keywords

Introduction

The methodological debate within the social sciences might broadly be defined as between a positivist paradigm versus constructivist paradigm, and their different views on the nature of knowledge (Hedrick, 1994). While the positivist paradigm is based on research methods that are focused on obtaining information on objective and measurable social reality, the constructivist paradigm is based on research methods that allow a broad analysis of subjective and unmeasurable social reality (Datta, 1994). Many critics of the quantitative approach point to its superficiality and lack of depth, while those who critique the qualitative approach do so based on its presumed unreliability and subjectivity (see Fry et al., 1981; Reichardt & Rallis, 1994). Whichever way, the general argument, fed to some extent by the significant specialisation within the social sciences, is that one of the methods is superior to the other one. This antagonism has prevented the acknowledgement of the potential benefits to be gained from combining both research techniques within a single study (Sieber, 1973).

Pérez-Díaz (2003) emphasises the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative methods in social research. Responses of individuals to survey questionnaires, Pérez-Díaz argues, might only reflect generalised opinions. In order to obtain a richer understanding of a phenomenon the researcher should also consider the observation of people’s behaviour, their values and norms, and the use of interviews where people’s deep attitudes towards such a phenomenon are recorded and later narrated.
A similar view is shared by Aguilar (1984), who suggests that while quantitative research results are useful in the study of social behaviour by providing the researcher with important information, they are not enough. The findings from surveys will act as pointers that need further and finer research in order to know more about determinants, functions, processes and deeper meanings of the phenomenon under study.

**Interpersonal Trust and Ethnic Diversity Research**

Trust is an interdisciplinary topic of research that can be difficult to define and assess because there are numerous phenomena (social, economic, political, cultural, religious, etc.) that influence the way people objectively and subjectively perceive, conceptualise and interpret trust, its meanings, its forms and the functions it can perform. Thus, there is no single definition or understanding of trust that fits all societies, cultures or contexts. However, there is broad acknowledgement that trust is essential in any kind of social exchange, as it helps deal with uncertainty by stimulating expectations of reciprocity, solidarity and collective action needed to develop social bonds. In Keating’s (2001:219) words, “...[trust] allows people to overcome the problem of non-simultaneous reciprocity”. Thus, trust enables us to get on with one another, get socially organised, cooperate and achieve our goals (O’Hara, 2004). On the other hand, without trust (or with very little of it) we would feel threatened and life would be difficult if not impossible.

To understand how trust develops and grows within social action we need to explore both those phenomena and the particular characteristics of the social subjects involved. Briefly, “...the extent of our trust depends on who or what we are trusting and why” (O’Hara, 2004:11).
It is not possible to explore all aspects of trust in one research project, so the goal of this paper is to examine the possibility of using a mixed-method framework in research on interpersonal trust in the context of a multiethnic society.

Recent studies have explored the association between interpersonal trust and ethnic diversity, most of them relying on quantitative data of interpersonal trust. Nannestad et al. (2008:614-615) used a combination of telephone and face-to-face interviews from a representative sample of immigrants and refugees in Denmark to collect their data. Respondents were asked if they thought “one could usually trust members of your own ethnic group, or if one could not be too careful in dealing with them”, and the same question with respect to four other groups of immigrants, refugees and native Danes. Other questions in the survey dealt with friendship (if the respondents had native Danish friends and how many) and participation in voluntary associations. Their analysis aimed to “…compare the respondents’ trust in their own group and in various out-groups, the density of friendship ties with Danes and with other immigrants and refugees, and the density of membership in intra-and inter-ethnic voluntary associations” (Nannestad et al., 2008:616). Their data on trust reveals two main conclusions: firstly, that those who express trust in members of their own ethnic group also express trust in members of other groups; secondly, that levels of intergroup trust are low and that might have affected levels of trust in outsiders.

Putnam’s research (2007) is based in the United States, using very sophisticated research design and statistical analysis of data from three very large samples. Respondents were asked “how much he or she trusted whites, blacks, Asian-Americans and Hispanics” (Putnam, 2007:147). Briefly, Putnam suggests that ethnic diversity as a product of immigration has a very negative effect on social trust. People who live in communities that are ethnically diverse suffer from very low trust toward their neighbours, no matter if they are from their own race or from any other race. However, he emphasises that this negative impact is only in
the short and medium run, because once communities settle and strong ties are formed, then
ethnic diversity has very positive consequences for any society. Putnam also points out that
his findings do not establish any links between ethnic diversity and conflicts or racial
tensions, but with withdrawal and isolation from one’s own group and from the broader
community.

Stolle, Soroka and Johnston (2008:62) focus their research in interpersonal trust
measurements in the United States and Canada, using a battery of questions about a specific
trust situation (“if you lost your wallet or purse with two hundred dollars, how likely is it to
be returned with the money in it if it was found by: (1) strangers, (2) neighbors, (3) police”).
Note that their study includes both the respondents’ visible minority status and the proportion
of visible minorities in their neighbourhood. Their findings suggest that the creation of
interpersonal trust is substantially affected by ethnic and socio-economic diversity. They also
argue that social interaction is very important to explain the effect of ethnicity on people’s
attitudes. If people who live in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods keep a regular contact with
their neighbours, they are less likely to feel negatively influenced or threatened by the ethnic
background of those living around them than people who have little or no social contact with
their neighbours. In this context, the development or depletion of interpersonal trust is
influenced by the knowledge, understanding and acceptance of the ‘other’.

These studies have made valuable contributions to the identification and understanding of
sociological indicators of interpersonal trust in the context of ethnically diverse societies. In
my propose research I wish to test the hypothesis that these analyses are constrained by the
nature of the data used (statistical). As a consequence, their conceptual and methodological
frameworks do not account for the personal narratives that can broaden and enrich the
conceptualisation of interpersonal trust, nor recognise the subjective views and the
experiences of the subjects (migrants and non-migrants). Putnam (2007) has acknowledged
that his research is just a first step in the study of interpersonal trust in the context of multiethnic societies and that there is a need to go further and explore ethnic diversity and general trust using qualitative methods. Future research focusing on the complexities and multiple facets of trust in diverse contexts would be of great methodological and conceptual interest, as it can have important implications for the way we design and conduct research. It is in this context that mixed-method research and its approach towards data may be very useful analytical and interpretative tools for exploring interpersonal trust and ethnic diversity in greater depth.

**Mixed Methods Research**

A different approach in social sciences methodology is that where the research design is not exclusively supported nor legitimised by positivist validation or by comparative ethnography but by the construction of interpretative narratives that integrate both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This approach is in line with the so called ‘mixed-method research’ (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), also known as ‘multimethod’ research (Brewer & Hunter, 1989) and ‘triangulation’ (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003). I will use the term mixed-method research in this paper. Green, Caracelli and Graham (1989:256) defined mixed-method designs as “those that include at least one quantitative method (designed to collect numbers) and one qualitative method (designed to collect words), where neither type of method is inherently linked to any particular inquiry paradigm”. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998:17-18) defined mixed-method studies as those “that combine the qualitative and quantitative approaches into the research methodology of a single study or multiphased study”.

The use of mixed-method studies in social sciences research appear to be a necessary step, not only for “overcoming the quantitative-qualitative methodological divide” (Dunning et al.,
2008:48), but also for developing new and more comprehensive and explanatory models of assessment and interpretation of data. By doing so, the new strategies will increase the confidence in the data and the findings, help review existing theories, and broaden the knowledge of the phenomena under analysis (Dunning et al., 2008). In House’s view “...even though the methods are distinct, the findings from them blend into one another in the content” (1994:17). Qualitative results can provide new dimensions of the explored concepts that are not found in quantitative measures/analyses of the concepts, and vice-versa, thus advancing the understanding of the concepts themselves and allowing us to create more accurate measures (Nicotera, 2008). As Reichardt and Rallis (1994:10) suggest, “To the extent their limitations differ, two methods can be better than one”.

The number of studies in social sciences that have successfully employed mixed-method research in their data gathering and interpretation are on the rise. These include quality of life research (Dunning et al., 2008), population geography studies (Graham, 1999), measurement of neighbourhood constructs (Nicotera, 2008), family studies (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003) and ethnographic analysis (Fry et al., 1981). It is now several decades since the first calls for applying mixed-method research, not only to the measurement and interpretation of data but to all phases of the research process (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Creswell, 1994). As pointed out by Reichardt and Rallis (1994:10):

“The qualitative and quantitative research traditions can also inform each other in ways that go beyond the combination of research methods... [The] narrative style of the qualitative tradition, which is usually more readable and comprehensible than the technical reports of the quantitative tradition, can reveal ways to make the work of quantitative researchers more interesting and influential”.
Purpose of Mixed-Method Design on a Trust and Ethnic Diversity Research

The primary purpose of the mixed-method design on a trust and ethnic diversity research project would be to use both quantitative and qualitative methods in a way that they complement each other by facilitating a more refined assessment, conceptualisation and comprehension of the particular research components and phenomena. This primary purpose fits within the ‘complementarity’ mixed-method design, “characterised with the analogy of peeling the layers of an onion” (Greene et al., 1989:258).

The ‘complementarity’ mixed-method design does not necessarily involve integration of data but the analysis of distinct understandings of a given phenomenon (results from different methods) in order to elaborate a more complex and more meaningful picture of the research problem. For example, qualitative research (fieldwork) results can provide insights and information very valuable to develop or expand a quantitative (survey) research, particularly in relation to the profile of the potential sample and the identification of new ideas (Sieber, 1973). Following Madey (1982) and Sieber (1973:1345), other significant contributions of qualitative data to quantitative research in the same study are: the derivation of theoretical guidelines for the analysis and interpretation of survey data; the validation/invalidation of survey indices and findings by using information from fieldwork; the refinement of the interpretation of statistical relationships between variables by applying results from field observations; the construction of survey indices as result of both information from interviews and field observations; the use of field reports and case studies to illustrate certain models and statistical types; finally, the clarification of ambiguous responses to survey questions.

On the other hand, quantitative research contributes equally to the successful development of the qualitative phase of the study, particularly with the selection of the sample and the design of the research (Madey, 1982; Sieber, 1973). If the quantitative phase of the research
precedes the fieldwork, the research would benefit from valuable leads to be developed later during the in depth interviews. Survey results can also support the generalisability and validation of fieldwork data, and clarify or suggest new interpretations of such data (Sieber, 1973). In the case of research on trust and ethnic diversity, existing quantitative studies are very valuable by providing information about variables that can be further explored during the fieldwork phase, such as levels of intergroup and out-group trust, levels of tolerance, friendship ties, participation in voluntary associations, economic diversity, happiness, confidence in local institutions, ethnic conflicts, social isolation, social identity and generational differences in reactions to diversity, taking into account the specific socio-political contexts of the community studied (Nannestad et al., 2008; Putnam, 2007; Stolle et al., 2008).

Complementarity designs benefit from parallel or simultaneous implementation, that is, from the researcher conducting both the qualitative and the quantitative phases simultaneously (Greene et al., 1989). However, the quantitative and qualitative phases can also be conducted sequentially (first the qualitative followed by the quantitative, or vice-versa), depending on their purpose. In Sieber’s (1973:1357) opinion, “An optimal research schedule...would entail an interweaving of field observations and survey work over the duration of the project, regardless of the primary method of data collection”.

Challenges

Data collection and data analysis are the most challenging aspects of any mixed-research method design, and using several methods of data collection and analysis may be problematic, costly and time consuming. (Dunning et al., 2008; Madey, 1982).

The critical part of defining an analysis strategy is the integration of different types of data during the analysis process. There can be operational and statistical problems if the chosen
design establishes that qualitative data needs to be quantified, as in order to compare the data obtained from the quantitative analysis with the data obtained from the qualitative analysis both data will need to be integrated and transformed for the statistical analysis (statistical confirmation) of both data types together (Dunning et al., 2008). However, “the problems of integrating survey and fieldwork are reduced when studying a small number of formally organized collectives...since the respondents are clustered within settings having definite boundaries” (Sieber, 1973). Many researchers choose to apply two or more research techniques separately, giving more weight to one type of research over the other and obtaining only fragmented results. To avoid such fragmentation, it is important to formulate a strategy for conducting mixed-method research that allows interlocking those methods. To do so we need to clearly establish the research purpose(s) and question(s), how knowledge might be acquired, and detail the relationship between chosen methods, data and research questions in the research.

Although some sort of integration is desirable, it does not have to necessarily be of a statistical nature, particularly if quantitative data is going to be incorporated in the qualitative analysis, and not the other way around. There is also a possibility of obtaining contradictory and dissonant information from the different data. Although this can be seen as a negative outcome, as it can be interpreted as an error and therefore reduce the validity of the data, it can be also interpreted as a positive result if we are able to generate new theories and further research from it (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003). In Perlesz and Lindsay’s view, in order to make some sense of dissonant results it is important to keep in mind the ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher, together with the contexts of the study (particularly data gathering) and the subjects.
Conclusion

Traditional research methods (quantitative and qualitative) can successfully be combined within a single project to produce a different style of research known as mixed-method research. At present there are no examples of this kind of design applied to the study of interpersonal trust in multiethnic societies, although there are calls for it. This paper has provided some arguments for the future use of such methodology in social research.

References


