

# What Comes First? The Paradigm or the Approach?

Journal of Mixed Methods Research  
6(4) 255–257  
© The Author(s) 2012  
Reprints and permission:  
[sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav)  
DOI: 10.1177/155868912461574  
<http://jmmr.sagepub.com>  


Donna M. Mertens<sup>1</sup>

The mixed methods community is awash in discussions about philosophical frameworks or paradigms that provide guidance for mixed methods approaches (B. Johnson & Gray, 2010). Part of the reason for the multiplicity of viewpoints about the role of paradigms in mixed methods research emanates from the different uses of the term *paradigm*. When Thomas Kuhn (1962) brought this term into the academic community through his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he gave it a particular meaning that characterized a paradigm as a world-view that embodied the beliefs of scientists. He added that different scientists who held different worldviews would be unable to communicate with each other because of the fundamental differences in their definitions of reality and methodology. He argued that the scientific community experienced paradigm shifts when a phenomenon could no longer be understood using past methods and new methods would emerge. Guba and Lincoln's (1989, 2005) adaptation of the idea of paradigms to the social sciences retained the idea of paradigms as worldviews that reflect researchers' assumptions about reality and methodology, and they added two other categories of assumptions that constitute a paradigm: assumptions about ethics and epistemology. However, they rejected the idea that researchers would replace one dominating method from the past with a new approach. Rather, they described paradigms in terms of assumptions related to ethics, reality (ontology), and epistemology that lead to different assumptions about the nature of systematic inquiry (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Hence, Guba and Lincoln set the stage for recognition of different paradigms that start with different philosophical assumptions and that lead to different methodological assumptions and methods choices.

This concept of paradigms contrasts with the idea that there are three paradigms: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Biesta, 2010; Freshwater & Cahill, 2012; Greene & Hall, 2010). In this editorial, I argue against the school of thought that paradigms can be methodological in their foundations. I am in agreement with Greene and Hall (2010) who wrote,

To use the qualitative and quantitative [and mixed methods] labels for paradigms is to reify and essentialize them and thereby disregard their constructed nature and discount the diverse histories and social locations of different kinds of qualitative and quantitative inquiry. (p. 125)

As Biesta (2010) notes, the terms *quantitative* and *qualitative* denote kinds of data, not the epistemologies, methodologies, designs, and ontological assumptions that are associated with different research frameworks.

---

<sup>1</sup>Gallaudet University, Washington DC, USA

**Corresponding Author:**

Donna M. Mertens, Department of Education, Gallaudet University, 800 Florida Avenue, NE, Washington, DC 20002, USA

Email: donna.mertens@gallaudet.edu

In the mixed methods world, three paradigmatic stances that are rooted in contrasting philosophical assumptions have been developed: dialectical pluralism that stands at the nexus of the constructivist and postpositivist paradigms (Greene & Hall, 2010), the pragmatic paradigm (Biesta, 2010),<sup>1</sup> and the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2009; Mertens, Bledsoe, Sullivan, & Wilson, 2010). These three paradigmatic stances answer the arguments about incommensurability of paradigms through their characterization of mixed methods as a methodological approach that is compatible with different sets of philosophical assumptions.

Greene and Hall (2010) describe a dialectic stance as follows:

A dialectic stance actively welcomes more than one paradigmatic tradition and mental model, along with more than one methodology and type of method, into the same inquiry space and engages them in respectful dialogue one with the other throughout the inquiry. (p. 124)

This stance allows the researcher to adhere to the beliefs of the postpositivist paradigm in conducting quantitative-oriented data collection and the constructivist in qualitative-oriented data collection and then to put the two in conversation with each other throughout the study to allow for deeper understandings based on the convergence and dissonance found in the approaches.

The pragmatic paradigm has been put forth as a philosophical framework that supports the use of mixed methods based on the assumption that there is not one set of methods that is appropriate; rather, the criteria for choosing methods include the following: What fits with the research question in this study (R. B. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004)? Biesta (2010), Greene and Hall (2010), and Denzin (2012) warn against an overly simplistic application of the pragmatic philosophy to research, as in: If the method fits the question, then use it. Biesta outlines the basic principles of pragmatism as a philosophy that can inform mixed methods researchers because Dewey held that no knowledge claim can be documented as providing the “truth.” Rather, different knowledge claims result from different ways of engaging with the social world.

The transformative paradigm has also been offered as a way of thinking about research that could lead to decisions to use mixed methods, if the use of those methods would support the enhancement of human rights and social justice (Mertens, 2009; Mertens et al., 2010; Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The philosophical assumptions associated with the transformative paradigm emanate from an ethical stance that emphasizes the pursuit of social justice and the furtherance of human rights. Based on this axiological assumption, the researcher is able to derive implications for the nature of reality, knowledge, and systematic inquiry that are commensurate with this ethical stance. Hence, the nature of reality is looked upon as being multifaceted and reflective of different power positionalities in society. Consequences of accepting different versions of reality over another are evaluated in terms of their ability to challenge oppressive systems, thus leading to an epistemological assumption that includes involvement in communities in culturally respectful ways. Typically, mixed methods designs will be associated with the transformative paradigm because of the need to capture experiences in both qualitative and quantitative ways in order to represent the complexity of the social issues and solutions to ongoing problems.

In conclusion, I argue that the use of paradigms as philosophical frameworks that delineate assumptions about ethics, reality, knowledge, and systematic inquiry helps clarify the basis of disagreements amongst members of the mixed methods research community. One paradigmatic position is not correct and the others wrong. However, continued debate about these frameworks provides fertile ground for expanding our understandings of the value and challenges associated with mixed methods research.

**Note**

1. To be fair, Biesta (2010) argues that the principles of pragmatism as a philosophy are useful to mixed methods researchers, while at the same time describing the concept of paradigm as an unhelpful concept because the broad categories of paradigms used in the mixed methods literature tend to combine heterogeneous assumptions and do not allow for conversations across assumptions.

**References**

- Biesta, G. (2010). Pragmatism and the philosophical foundations of mixed methods research. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Sage handbook of mixed methods in social & behavioral research* (2nd ed., pp. 95-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. (2012). Triangulation 2.0. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2), 80-88.
- Freshwater, D., & Cahill, J. (2012). Why write? *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(3), 151-153.
- Greene, J., & Hall, J. (2010). Dialectics and pragmatism: Being of consequence. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Sage handbook of mixed methods in social & behavioral research* (2nd ed., pp. 119-143). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth paradigm evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluence. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 191-215). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Johnson, B., & Gray, R. (2010). A history of philosophical and theoretical issues for mixed methods research. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Sage handbook of mixed methods in social & behavioral research* (2nd ed., pp. 69-94). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Research*, 33(7), 14-26.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mertens, D. M. (2009). *Transformative research and evaluation*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Mertens, D. M., Bledsoe, K. L., Sullivan, M., & Wilson, A. (2010). Utilization of mixed methods for transformative purposes. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Sage handbook of mixed methods in social & behavioral research* (2nd ed., pp. 193-214). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mertens, D. M., & Wilson, A. (2012). *Program evaluation theory and practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.