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Q4(a)

What do you understand by 'mixed method'? Discuss its strengths and limitations in social research

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology as Science

Sociology as Science: Science, scientific method and critique; Major theoretical strands of research methodology; Positivism and its critique; Fact value and objectivity; Non-positivist methodologies.

Core demand of the question

- Define mixed method as a designed combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies in one study
- **Discuss strengths:** triangulation, complementarity, explanation of mechanisms
- **Discuss limitations:** cost, skill, poor integration and paradigmatic tension
- Give a sociological research illustration

Revision summary

Mixed method is a designed combination of numerical and interpretive strategies.

Sequence, weight and integration are part of the design, not an afterthought.

Strengths include triangulation, complementarity and better measurement.

Limitations include cost, dual skill, sampling clash and failed integration.

Pragmatism defends mixing; purists on both sides resist it.

Indian survey-plus-fieldwork studies show the promise and the ritual risk.

Introduction

A mixed method design uses both numerical measurement and interpretive inquiry in a planned way in one study. It is not a casual extra interview after a survey, and it is not a few percentages dropped into an ethnography. Alan Bryman, John Creswell and others have treated mixing as a research strategy with its own choices of sequence, weight and integration. The question asks for that meaning, then for strengths and limits in social research.

Body

What mixed method means

Quantitative work counts, scales and tests associations. Qualitative work interprets meanings, cases and processes. Mixing may be sequential: a survey to map a field, then interviews to explain a surprising cell in a table. It may be concurrent: ethnography and a small census in the same neighbourhood. It may give equal weight or let one method lead. The point is integration at the level of question, sampling and inference. Durkheim's Suicide was not mixed in the modern sense, but later community studies often were. The Indian NFHS can be followed by village fieldwork. A study of gig work may combine platform data, time-use

numbers and worker narratives.

Philosophically, mixing sits between positivist and interpretive camps. Pragmatist writers argue that the research problem, not a school loyalty, should choose tools. Purists on both sides dislike this.

Strengths

- **The first strength is triangulation:** one method can check another. A claim about women's labour force participation is stronger if PLFS tables and factory ethnography point the same way. The second is complementarity. Numbers show extent. Stories show mechanism. Why a scheme fails in one block can be heard in interviews after a large sample has shown that it fails. The third is development of instruments. Qualitative work can improve questionnaire wording on caste, stigma or unpaid care, which official categories often mishandle. Mixed designs also help in evaluation research for the state, where both coverage and lived experience are required.

Limitations

Mixing is costly in time, money and skill. One person may not be good at both regression and long fieldwork. Teams can split into two unjoined reports. That is the most common failure: data are collected twice and never truly integrated. Paradigmatic tension remains. A p-value and a life history do not automatically answer the same question. Sampling logics clash: probability samples versus theoretical cases. Ethics multiply, because images, interviews and large data sets sit under different risks. In Indian official research, mixed method can become a ritual chapter of "case studies" that do not disturb the tables.

Mixed method is therefore powerful when the design states what each strand is for. It is weak as a slogan that more methods mean more truth.

A worked sociological use

Take a study of school dropout among adolescent girls. A quantitative strand can estimate the association with household wealth, distance to school and caste category, using a probability sample. A qualitative strand can then follow a smaller set of households through the year, watching harvest labour, early marriage talk and the school's hidden curriculum. Integration happens when a cell in the table, such as high dropout among a particular OBC group in one district, is explained by a mechanism heard in the field, and when that mechanism is then checked against other districts. If the interviews only decorate the report, the design was mixed in name. If the survey categories cannot be revised after fieldwork, the mixing was one-way. Strength and limitation both appear in that test of integration.

Flow diagram

Mixed method -> Quantitative mapping
Mixed method -> Qualitative meaning
Quantitative mapping -> Integrated inference
Qualitative meaning -> Integrated inference
Unjoined reports -> Mixed method

Conclusion

Mixed method is a planned joining of quantitative and qualitative strategies. Its strengths are check, complementarity and better instruments. Its limits are cost, skill and the frequent failure to integrate. In social research it should be chosen for a clear inferential job, not as decoration.

Facts & figures

Triangulation

Using more than one method to check whether a finding is an artefact of a single instrument.

Sequential design

One strand first, the other later, for example survey then interviews to explain a pattern.

Integration failure

The common limit in which two data sets are reported side by side and never made to answer one question.

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