

Mixed-Methods Triage: Coalescing Holistic Perspectives for a More Diverse and Inclusive Academy

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to identify an unspoken bias embedded within the academy, and to present a new paradigm for social science research that disrupts traditional graduate school indoctrination and knowledge mobilization practices in favor of a more inclusive academy. First, I tease apart the dogmatic camp-building perpetuated by those who have learned to socialize a value for their own philosophical paradigms by discrediting others. I then suggest that research from different philosophical paradigms, but on the same phenomenon, can be presented together; and, that sense-making of such findings need not reside in the academy, but instead, in the community of readers seeking to understand a complex phenomenon. Through my own story, I share a case of systemic dysfunction within traditional academic publication that acted as a barrier to my own knowledge mobilization. This inspired an alternative approach to dissemination that I call mixed methods triage: knowledge mobilization that juxtaposes different studies on a common phenomenon, regardless of philosophical alignment, and presents them to the reader as they are without converging or making sense of the findings as a whole. I identify three tenets for this approach, and propose triage as a potential platform for a more diverse and inclusive academy. Ultimately, mixed-methods triage aligns with and expands pragmatic, mixed-methods research and contributes to the emerging trend of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Keywords: arts-based research, mixed-methods, philosophy, triangulation, triage

1. Introduction

Research is not religion, yet so many scholars indoctrinate their students to the *right way* and the *wrong way* to conduct *real research* as though it is gospel truth. My work sometimes crosses epistemologies, as I investigate phenomena through a variety of lenses from inquiry through dance, drama and art to structural equation modeling and experimental design. As a researcher who uses arts-based methods and also psychometrics, I find myself on a crossroad between the poles of subjective and objective scholarship – each pole governed by gatekeeping guidelines for what is and is not “*good*” research. In my practice, the phenomena and questions dictate which method is most appropriate, as do the scholarly and practical communities with whom I intend to inform. In this way, I am an innovative pragmatist (Dewey, 1984; 2005; Pierce and Hetzel, 1878) in valuing a variety of research theories and methods, with a pragmatic stance that if the method is followed with rigor, and the work meaningfully contributes to theory and/or practice, then it is worthy to be shared with the community interested in the phenomenon investigated. In this, I shift my focus from epistemological alignment (criteria for most journals and conference tracks) to a focus on the phenomenon of interest (such as the effects of arts education in business school), and in doing so disrupt traditional dissemination by challenging the academy to rethink how and why new knowledge is shared.

As members of the academy, we have to ask: Are we only interested in preaching to the choir? In preaching to ourselves (by only sharing new knowledge with those who see things our way), are we really mobilizing knowledge to everyone? Further, in teaching to ourselves (by presenting our way as the *better* way to graduate students), are we perpetuating a system of discrimination, and indoctrinating a culture that is resistant to diversity and inclusion? We have to ask: Do we teach our students to be open-minded of other research paradigms? Do we *really* know and understand these other methods, from primary sources and texts, or were our opinions formed by someone else, perhaps our own professors and peers who may not be adequately knowledgeable on those topics?

The aim of this paper is to identify a systemic bias in the academy and present a potential solution that disrupts the status quo. First, I share a case that illustrates the dysfunction inherent in academic publication. Next, I suggest the duty of scholars is not to entrench ourselves within one paradigm, but instead is to appreciate multiple ways of arriving at new knowledge, including ways with different philosophical assumptions. I then present an alternative approach called *mixed-methods triage* including a discussion on potential pitfalls and proposition of tenets that promote a more inclusive academy.

It is possible that you are already screening this paper through the lens of your own philosophical orientation. I invite you to suspend your socialized rejection mechanisms and be open-minded to some new ideas about placing the power of meaning-making outside the academy in a way that promotes a more inclusive culture within. The ultimate purpose of this paper is not to get you to agree with the solution, but to at least see and acknowledge the problem and collectively ponder how we might resolve it together.

2. A Case of Dissemination Dysfunction

My graduate education put me on a positivist functionalist path, designing experiments concerned with statistical validity, reliability, generalizability, etc. With a background in arts education, I was interested in the effects of arts-based inquiry (experiences designed for participants to explore questions through the arts) in a variety of contexts. At the time, there were no quantitative studies on arts-based inquiry, likely because the very nature of arts-based work is constructivist – typically anti-positivist. As someone situated firmly in both positivist and constructivist schools of thought, my intuition told me that arts-based inquiry could lead to predictable, measurable outcomes. Thus, I designed a causal model of relationships based on years of personal experience facilitating arts-based inquiry. This required an innovative mixing of my deep knowledge of arts-based processes with my rigorous training in psychometrics.

In the resulting empirical study, I followed psychometric protocols and conducted quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews based on a structural equation model. At the same time, I had research assistants ethnographically observing the arts-based processes and visually analyzing secondary data in the form of video footage. While implementing the project, I observed participants as they grappled with big questions through the arts. As I gathered psychometric data, I simultaneously witnessed how arts-based processes uncovered new knowledge, making it visible through the art, co-creation, and performance (Giudici, Rinaldi, Krechevsky, Barchi, Barozzi, and Cagliari, 2001). I came to see that different forms of equally valuable knowledge can be found through very different methods while studying the same context, with the same participants, on the same phenomenon.

The psychometric and arts-based methods each provided unique perspectives beyond traditional triangulation because each method provided distinctive data that was not necessarily comparable or in relation to that gathered by the other (Thurmond, 2001). Thus, I was not triangulating. I was uncovering different perspectives of the same phenomenon, like the turn of a kaleidoscope, to see it from different angles. In doing this, I acquired a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon as a whole.

Unfortunately, the review process for a paper that included all of my findings was impossible. It became a game of roulette, where luck seemed to determine the dogma of the reviewers who evaluated my work. With each submission, I usually scored at least one reviewer who was super positive, and embraced the different methods and findings of the project. The others were philosophically entrenched, flat out rejecting the work, or demanding revisions that would make me choose positivism, constructivism, or something else entirely. In the end, after two years of attempts, I decided to publish the quantitative findings on their own, and that paper was accepted with accolades. The arts-based findings were split out to be published separately.

The accepted paper has its own merit, as it contributes rare quantitative findings on arts-based experiences (Martin & Calvert, 2018); but the findings were more robust with the insights of the interpretive visual analyses that honored the visuality of the experience. All of the findings belonged together – each a part of the whole puzzle – and not including some was like keeping a secret. I knew more than what was shared. In the systematic rejection of the combined findings, important new knowledge was immobilized, highlighting a dissemination dysfunction.

The status quo for publication is to follow the rules spelled out in guidelines on what is and is not acceptable for inclusion in a conference track or journal. This, of course, helps mobilize knowledge within a scholarly community, and fosters a collegiality amongst like-minded academics. However, it also isolates scholars from one another, and from each others' work in a form of academic sectarianism (Burrell and Morgan, 2017). Current dissemination models set up a scenario for scholars to preach amongst themselves, while no one outside the sanctioned congregation hears the message. There may even be overlap, like similar sermons in different churches a block apart, in a parallel discourse that is isolated by the very mechanisms of supposed mobilization. As members of the academy, we have to ask: Are we not troubled by this, knowing that a scholar

interested in the same phenomenon could be making discoveries very relevant to our work, and we will never know?

3. Mixed-Methods Triage

My experience with academic rejection caused me to reflect on the rejection mechanisms I encountered, the bias inherent within them, and the socialization processes that perpetuate them. In my case, a scholarly network of gatekeepers acted as a barrier to new knowledge reaching my readers. These gatekeepers were part of a peer-review system that is absolutely necessary to protect the rigor of academic research; and yet, that system failed to capture new knowledge uncovered through methodological rigor. That system failed me and let my readers down.

I pondered on how readers access scholarly work and realized that, in this day and age, scholarly work is easily accessible through an internet search. Readers may encounter papers from a variety of peer-reviewed sources, representing a multitude of research paradigms ... and then it is up to the readers to make sense of the information and choose what resonates with their views. Based on my experience, I propose this process can also happen *within* the same paper, where multiple methods can be used to study a particular phenomenon – even methods from opposing research paradigms – to juxtapose the findings in one paper. In line with mixed methods approaches, this takes mixing one step further to allow for methods from different ontological and epistemological orientations, such as psychology, phenomenology, and action research all in one paper. In such a paper, the focus is the phenomenon under investigation, and the target is a community of readers interested in that phenomenon. For example, a paper on the effects of arts education in business school could present psychometric findings on student efficacy, discourse analysis on focus group transcripts, and thematic coding of student art work. With such an array of methodology, it would be up to the readers to determine which findings are meaningful to them. In that way, the readers go through a process of taking in and interpreting data, similar to triage.

In this analogy, the readers are like nurses in a hospital emergency room, and the scholars are the patients presenting information to be triaged. The sense-making is performed by the ones being presented to – not by the presenters (although each presenter holds important knowledge with much to say about it). Extending sense-making beyond scholars means a shift of power from the academy to the community interested in a particular phenomenon. According to Torrance (2012), if the power for interpretation rests solely with the researcher ... it raises questions of accurate representation and ethics. In this, Torrance echoes other scholars in a call for more authentic connection with community in research interpretation (Chilisa, 2012; Mertens and Hesse-Biber, 2012). Thus, we arrive at a potential solution to the problem I encountered when trying to publish a paper with mixed epistemology: a new way to disseminate knowledge that I call *mixed-methods triage*.

I define mixed-methods triage as knowledge mobilization that juxtaposes different studies on a common phenomenon, regardless of philosophical alignment, and presents them to the reader as they are without converging or making sense of the findings as a whole. The word “trriage” is a play on the word triangulation, in honor of its mixed-methods cousin, rooted in the idea that findings are richer with a multiplicity of data (Denzin, 2012; Fielding, 2012). “From its classic sources, triangulation refers to the designed use of multiple methods, with offsetting or counteracting biases, in investigations of the same phenomenon in order to strengthen the validity of inquiry results,” (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, 1989). The word triage is a twist on triangulation because it moves away from the purposeful design of mixing methods for convergence and validity, to instead, presenting a variety of information on the same phenomenon, whether or not findings converge. The phenomenon determines the methods used, the methods determine design, and the findings are what they are. This contradicts traditional mixed methods practice of requiring different approaches, “by epistemological necessity ... to be employed complementarily,” (Salomon, 1991, pp. 10). Further, unlike triangulation, triage need not be pre-designed. Scholars may even find one another after their independent studies are completed. In mixed-methods triage, the duty of the scholar is not to entrench oneself within one paradigm, but to appreciate multiple ways of arriving at new knowledge on the same phenomenon.

4. Potential Pitfalls

Triage, like triangulation, will have its skeptics in line with those concerned about the incompatibility of merging different kinds of data and conflicting results (Mitchell, 1986; Scandura and Williams, 2000; Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba, 2007; Tobin, 2004). I suggest that, in the case of mixed-methods triage, it is not appropriate

for the scholar to try to make sense of incompatible data; rather, it is the role of the scholar to display the findings, as they were rigorously acquired, and leave the sense-making between the studies to the reader. This is a clear distinction from all forms of triangulation that focus on an overall interpretation of the findings as a unit (Thurmond, 2001). Alternately, with triage, three separate studies on the same phenomenon can each stand on their own, and it is up to the reader to make sense of the different perspectives presented. These different studies may be conducted by the same scholar, as is my practice, or by different scholars who choose to put their findings into one paper. Findings may be congruous, or incongruous, and the latter does not deem any one finding more or less legitimate than the other. It simply means that another perspective on the phenomenon was uncovered through a different method.

Thus, mixed-methods triage has potential to disrupt contemporary channels of knowledge dissemination, and aligns with the movement toward interdisciplinary research teams, conferences, and journals. It unites experts at the level of phenomenon rather than discipline or research paradigm, and calls for a more collaborative spirit within the academy to accept difference. Of course, not all research can or should be disseminated through mixed-methods triage. It is merely one, new way to share research in a format traditionally considered unconventional. In my world, it creates a bridge between the intuitive arts-based scholars and the empirical psychometricians, in positioning both ways of knowing as equally valuable.

As a mixed-methods triagist, I embrace an innovative pragmatic approach beyond traditional pragmatism, through my comfort with coalescing the assumptions of positivist and anti-positivist epistemologies (Burrell and Morgan, 2017; Cresswell and Poth, 2017; Denzin, 2012). Triage places these differing assumptions side by side, and lays them bare for the reader. Importantly, in triage the different philosophical assumptions are not obviated, nor are they washed into one pragmatic bundle of mixed assumptions. They stand on their own, each identified with the method used, and self-contained within each sub-study of the overall paper.

To play devil's advocate, I've considered potential pitfalls, or reasons why mixed-methods triage might be rejected by some in the academy, and pose these as questions to which I respond. The first reason is the most obvious: *If all methods are acceptable, then will the academy lose its high standard for rigor?* My response to this is that different methods within one paper does not mean lower standards. Remember, mixed-methods triage requires rigorous, authentic expert, peer-review just like any other scholarly publication. The difference is that it allows for mixed methods from different philosophical assumptions to be presented in the same paper, without being pre-designed for convergence. However, through triage and incremental diffusion of ideas, there may be an iterative shift in dissemination away from paradigmatic fundamentalism.

The second reason mixed-methods triage might not be accepted is entrenched in the culture of the ivory tower: *If readers are not methodologically trained, will they know whether or not the research is correct or even appropriate?* My response to this is that it is likely driven by an unspoken fear about our worth as experts and our own methods becoming vulnerable to extinction. This protectionist resistance also seems to stem from fear of other methods for which we are not trained. However, in mixed-methods triage, the sense making is by the reader, and if two of the three studies do not fit with the reader's epistemology, so be it. Yet, through triage, readers and scholars will be exposed to a variety of methods and findings they might, otherwise, not have encountered, and academic training is no more required of the reader than is already the case.

The third reason mixed-methods triage might be rejected is more of a question about logistics: *If a mixed-methods mindset must now include all philosophical paradigms in social science, how do we adequately train graduate students and ourselves to know them all?* My response to this is, we don't. There is still only so much one person can be an expert in, and in our post-graduate careers, our specializations tend to get more and more narrow in scope, rather than broad. The required change for mixed-methods triage will need to take place in graduate studies. It is small, yet transformational, as it requires students to be more aware of the other philosophies and methods, taught not as the wrong ways but as the other ways, infusing a value for multiple perspectives. In this, I call out the status quo of contrived collegiality (Hargreaves and Dawe, 1990) in the academy where professors smile at colleagues who use opposing research paradigms, then discredit each other's work behind the classroom door. A value for multiple perspectives signals a value for diversity.

5. Tenets of Mixed-Methods Triage

Embracing mixed-methods triage requires the suspension of philosophical assumptions specific to one paradigm, and the adoption of tenets that supersede any one paradigm in favor of a more open, inclusive scholarship that respects and honors the knowledge, training, and wisdom of all scholars. Rigor matters, and peer-review is just as important in triage as in triangulation or any other scholarly work (Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba, 2007). Greene and Caracelli (1997, pp.5) caution that "...using multiple and diverse methods is a good idea, but is not automatically good science." Peer review keeps the standards of academic research in check. However, rigor must be assessed by someone qualified to assess it, and if reviewers are not knowledgeable on the assumptions or methods being used, it is inappropriate for them to pass judgement. Thus, the first tenet of mixed-methods triage is:

1. **Authentic Expert Review:** Scholarly expertise must guide evaluation of a study's merit through peer review, but only for that which the scholar is qualified and credentialed as an expert to assess.

This first tenet means that, for mixed-methods triage, a revised review process is required. It would be rare for a single reviewer to know about or even understand every method, and it becomes an editorial responsibility to identify appropriate reviewers for the different methods coalesced in one paper. It is also up to the editor to identify reviewers with a mindset for triage, that is open and accepting of difference and even contradiction between findings. In other words, it is not appropriate to discount the paper on reasons of personal philosophical opposition. As members of the academy, why do we perpetuate this culture of discrediting what we do not fully understand or agree with? Does it matter if findings do not make sense to us, if they were acquired through accepted protocols of a research community? As an advocate for diversity and inclusion, I propose our society is moving beyond this antiquated way of seeing the world. Thus, the second tenet of mixed-methods triage is:

2. **Sense-Making by the Reader:** Contradictory findings acquired through different, rigorously and accurately applied methods are equally valuable, and sense-making of discrepancies should be left to the reader.

Leaving the sense-making of differences and discrepancies up to the reader is the keystone to mixed-methods triage. It removes the power of selective reporting, held so tightly in academia, and shifts that power into community. To reiterate, sense-making by the reader is not the same as evaluation by peers, and peer review is still a necessary checkpoint of quality assurance. I freely acknowledge that this is one of the challenges of triage, as the complexity of expertise required for one paper is complicated; yet, just because something is difficult, does not mean it isn't right. For those of us who know the benefits of crossing paradigmatic barriers, we can attest to the richness of knowledge that can only be acquired through a more holistic approach. Thus, the third tenet of mixed-methods triage is:

3. **Value for Multiple Perspectives:** Studying one phenomenon through a variety of methods, theories, and research paradigms can lead to a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon as a whole.

These three tenets are required for scholars who present research through mixed-methods triage, as well as for peer-reviewers of it. Indeed, I suggest these three tenets could be pillars for a more inclusive academy that respects the differences in colleagues' work, all who have graduate degrees, and have passed the academic checkpoints identifying them as experts in their field. To question that expertise simply because it is different from one's own only creates unnecessary barriers.

6. Conclusion

Mixed-methods triage recognizes and possibly reconciles issues of elitism embedded within academic culture, while calling out the dogmatic camp-building within disciplines. As with all innovations, triage must go through conceptual development, prototyping, and iterative design. As with all transformation, triage will have its challenges that will improve over time with feedback, trial and error. It is a new idea, and it is not perfect, but neither is the current system, and triage provides a starting place for academics to be more inclusive and open-minded about the extraordinary expertise all around them. In this, the intention of this paper is not to provide the rules of mixed-methods triage, like a new set of commandments. It is to open a conversation

about systemic bias in academia and to put forth a charge to collectively reconsider our practices that enable it.

The stated aim of this paper is to present a new potential paradigm for social science research that disrupts the status quo. Through a case on my own experience, I demonstrated how an intuitive researcher was able to mix philosophically divergent methods in a way that provided a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon and illustrated how current knowledge mobilization practices acted as a barrier to disseminating new knowledge fully. Through this, I showed how presenting philosophically diverse research on the same phenomenon could lead to a richer understanding of our world, and presented mixed-methods triage is a way to accomplish this.

By accepting multiple perspectives as equally valuable, placing the power of sense-making in the hands of the reader, and ensuring that different methods receive authentic expert review, mixed-methods triage addresses the need within the academy to be more open to the different theories, methods, and philosophies of peers. In this, it puts out a call for authentic collegiality and places responsibility on academics to listen to and learn from one another, regardless of epistemology. In doing so, we will begin to dismantle a system of academic bias so engrained in graduate school that it is almost invisible; and at the same time we will move forward into a new era of cross-disciplinary discourse that unites us in true solidarity.

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