Spotlight on Methodology: Interview with Joseph Maxwell

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The purpose of these interviews is to invite methodologists around the world to share their views on methodological diversity. This time we have the pleasure to read about Dr. Maxwell and his views on methodological diversity.

Joseph Maxwell is a professor in the Research Methods program in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. His doctoral degree is in anthropology, but for the past 35 years his research and teaching has been mainly in education, with an increasing focus on methodology. He is the author of Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach (3rd edition, 2013) and A Realist Approach for Qualitative Research (2012), as well as articles on qualitative and mixed methods research, Native American societies, and medical education.

Mirka Koro-Ljungberg: How would you characterize methodological diversity?

Joseph Maxwell: My understanding of methodological diversity has been strongly shaped by my thinking about diversity in general. At one point when I was a graduate student in anthropology, I realized that one of my main goals in life, and an important reason for my going into anthropology, was, in the words of John F. Kennedy, to "make the world safe for diversity." So I'm an advocate for methodological diversity, and I understand this broadly, as not simply a matter of data collection and analysis methods, but as including a diversity of philosophical assumptions, "paradigms," and theoretical and ethical premises.

I see the main importance of methodological diversity, as I've conceptualized it, not simply as having available, or using, a variety of approaches, but as integrating different premises, theories, and methods in a single study. This includes the integration of different qualitative methods--for example, in data analysis, intentionally combining categorizing techniques, such as coding, with connecting techniques, often used in narrative analysis (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). It also includes the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Maxwell, Chmiel, & Rogers, 2015), what is generally termed "mixed methods research"; excellent descriptions and examples of this can be found in Greene (2007) and Weisner (2005).

I have also advocated for integrating different philosophical stances, seeing these, not as incompatible and competing "paradigms" for research, but as conceptual tools for doing research, ones that can be productively combined in a particular study (Maxwell, 2004, 2011). A key premise of this integrative goal is that compatibility is not mainly a matter of shared assumptions or strategies, but of the complementarity of diverse premises and methods, employing what Greene (2007) called a "dialectical" approach for mixed method research. She argued that "paradigm differences should be respectfully and intentionally used together to engage meaningfully with difference and, through the tensions created by juxtaposing different paradigms, to achieve dialectical discovery of enhanced, reframed, or new understandings" (p. 69).

In particular, I have argued for combining a realist ontology (there is a real world, including mental and cultural as well as physical phenomena that we seek to better understand) with a constructivist epistemology (our understanding of the phenomena we study is inevitably our own construction, rather than an "objective" perception of reality). This is a key feature of a number of contemporary realist approaches in philosophy and the social sciences (Maxwell, 2012). I see the dialectical integration of these two philosophical "tools" as having distinct advantages over a uniform realist/objectivist or a constructivist/relativist stance, as well as being more consistent with our practices in our everyday lives, and this integration has been used in a substantial number of studies across the social sciences (Carter & New, 2004; Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010).

Mirka: How do you theorize methodological diversity?

Joe: First, I want to explain what I mean by "theorize." I see "theory" as a construction, a conceptual tool, that gives us one way of making sense of the world and our practices, but one that is necessarily incomplete and fallible (Maxwell, 2008; 2010). This implies that we often need to use multiple theories to better understand and improve our methods, as well as to make sense of the phenomena we study (Maxwell, in press a). For example, the distinction in cognitive psychology between semantic memory and episodic memory can inform and improve our interviewing strategies, providing a different perspective from the theories typically employed in qualitative interviewing. Using these theories in combination enables researchers to develop methods to access both the semantic and episodic memory systems of interviewees (Flick, 2000; Maxwell, 2013, pp. 103-104), providing a better understanding of these participants' perspectives.

Unfortunately, many studies in education employ only one explicit theory, and often assume this theory's complete relevance in explaining the phenomena studied (Dressman, 2008, p. 92). Dressman argued that such uncritical use of a single theory not only threatens the credibility of the findings, but impairs the potential for the research to contribute to our general understanding of education.

More broadly, my commitment to diversity, described above, has led me to challenge the view, deeply embedded in Western social
thought, that diversity, whatever its benefits, is inherently a problem for community and solidarity, and one that must be overcome by finding or creating commonalities. In opposition to this view, I have tried to develop a theory of social order that sees diversity and complementarity as a potentially unifying force, separate from similarity. (For a detailed presentation of this theory, see Maxwell, Chapter 4, "Diversity is real.") I have also contributed to the critique, by a long line of prominent anthropologists (e.g., Wallace, 1970; Pelto & Pelto, 1975; Kronenfeld, 2008; Attran & Medin, 2008), of the view that culture, inherently and by definition, consists of shared beliefs, values, and practices, and I have emphasized, in my anthropological research and theoretical writing, the reality and importance of intracultural diversity (Maxwell, 1995; 1999; 2012, Chapters 2 & 10). Both qualitative and quantitative methods have often incorporated biases against recognizing the existence and importance of diversity in the phenomena we study (Maxwell, 2012, pp. 64-66; Rose, 2015).

This approach has a number of features in common with postmodernism (although postmodernism is so diverse that it's difficult to characterize). The most important of these are postmodernism's emphasis on the primacy of diversity and its "incredulity toward metanarratives" that attempt to impose a single overarching theory (Maxwell, 2012, pp. 66-67). It also has parallels with bricolage (Hammersley, 2008; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004) in its emphasis on adapting to the specific, local context of the research and using whatever theoretical and methodological tools are at hand to solve the research problems that arise, rather than relying on a predefined, generic strategy. However, I'm skeptical of some of the claims of both approaches, particularly where they seem to slight the importance of validity as an essential concept in research.

I see these arguments as having important implications for the use of diverse methods in understanding educational and other social phenomena. Such use almost inherently involves a recognition of the limitations of any one method, and that multiple methods can critique as well as support the results of a single method. Greene (2007, pp. 43-44) has argued that the use of different methods for triangulation, to confirm the findings of a single method, has been overemphasized, and that divergence of the results of different methods can ultimately be more productive, forcing the researcher to rethink and expand her conclusions to provide a deeper understanding (e.g., Trend, 1979). The philosopher Richard Bernstein (1992, p. 225) has argued that, although there is no way to reconcile the theories of Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, together their theories provide a "forcefield" that helps us to understand the phenomena of modernity and postmodernity.

**Mirka:** How do you experiment with methodological diversity?

**Joe:** Basically, in two ways. First, by theoretical analysis, looking for the conceptual assumptions of a given approach and how these are supported or challenged by other approaches. Second, by trying out different methodologies and seeing how they work—what do they reveal that other approaches miss, and how do these contribute to a broader understanding of the phenomena studied? The writing teacher Peter Elbow (1986, 2006) has argued for the importance of being able to play both the “believing game” and the “doubting game” with any new idea or approach, trying to understand the insights and advantages of the approach, as well as its distortions and blind spots. Elbow’s 2006 paper is one of the first readings I assign in my course on mixed methods research, because I want my students (many of whom have a strong preference for either quantitative or qualitative research) to see both the strengths and limitations of each approach.

**Mirka:** From your perspective, what are some of the most innovative and creative methodologies you use or have encountered in your work?

**Joe:** The diversity of innovative research approaches, even within qualitative research, is greater than I can adequately assess; I have focused on ones that I find particularly relevant to my own work, and can't say much about all the others. The Handbook of Emergent Methods (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008) is a good starting point for exploring some of these methodologies. Ones that I have found intriguing and useful include the voice-centered relational research methods developed by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues (Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008; for a discussion of how these combines diverse approaches, see Maxwell & Miller, 2008), Uwe Flick's strategies for episodic interviewing (2000), the increasing awareness of the widespread misunderstanding and misuse of p values in quantitative research (e.g., Nuzzo, 2014), Ray Pawson's realist approach to program evaluation (Pawson, 2006; Pawson & Tilley, 1997), and Nancy Cartwright's critique and recommendations for causal policy analysis (Cartwright, 2007; Cartwright & Hardie, 2012).

However, "innovative and creative" isn't the same as "important and valid." (One dissertation that I read described using a dowsing pendulum to communicate with plants, which is certainly creative, but of questionable validity.) It is now widely accepted, by methodologists in quantitative research, qualitative research, and measurement, that validity is not a property of any method or instrument, but of the conclusions drawn by using that method or instrument in a particular situation for a particular purpose (Maxwell, in press b). Thus, the validity of the results of using a single methodology needs to be assessed in relation to a range of potential validity threats and alternative interpretations of the results, which may be specific to that context and purpose. Using a diversity of methods can provide an important strategy for doing this, because the results of different methods can reveal misinterpretations and limitations that result from using a single method.

**Mirka:** From your perspective, what are some of the emerging research approaches for the 21st century research?

**Joe:** As the great jazz musician Charlie Parker said, when asked where jazz was going, "If I knew where jazz was going, I'd be there." For me, the approach that at present seems to have the most significant potential is mixed method research, although by now this is well enough established that it can hardly be called "emerging." While the integration of qualitative and quantitative concepts and methods in a single study has a long history (Maxwell, 2016), only in the last 30 years has it been seen as a distinct approach, and explicit attempts made to systematically understand how to do this and to improve our practices in this area. Although I think some of these attempts (such as the development of elaborate typologies of mixed methods designs)
are off the mark, there is now a great deal of thought being devoted to how better to combine qualitative and quantitative concepts and methods. I've mentioned other "emerging" approaches above, but I really can't judge how these will play out in the 21st century.

**Mirka:** How has methodological diversity changed your work and research practices?

**Joe:** Methodological diversity hasn't so much changed my research practices as it has played a formative role in developing these practices. As an undergraduate anthropology major, I internalized, largely unconsciously, the view that "fieldwork" included both qualitative and quantitative methods (Pelto, 2016), and this became more conscious and explicit as my career developed. As a graduate student, I was hired as a research assistant for a purely quantitative/experimental study of the effect of physicians' participation in hospital peer review committees on their medical knowledge and performance. I suggested to the project directors that they might want to consider taking observational notes on the committee meetings, and interviewing physicians about their experiences in these meetings and how these influenced their knowledge and performance. They agreed, and as the study developed, the qualitative methods turned out to be essential in understanding the actual effects of committee participation (which the initial assumptions that informed the study had misunderstood). We eventually published a paper on combining ethnographic and experimental methods in this study (Maxwell, Sandlow, & Bashook, 1986).

My experiences in this study redirected my career goals, to make methodology a central part of my scholarly agenda, and led to faculty positions teaching research methods. I have tried to read widely and eclectically to discover approaches that can contribute to my methodological thinking; as a result, some of my work—for example, my interactive approach to research design (Maxwell, 2013)—has been "outside the box" of traditional methods, and I have tried to be provocative as well as helpful to both beginning and established researchers.

**Mirka:** Finally, what ideas/theories/thoughts/practices would you pass along/recommend to those interested in methodological diversity?

**Joe:** I think I've touched on most of these above: being able to play both the believing and doubting games; understanding that any theory or method is only one partial and fallible lens for understanding the world, and thus that multiple theories and methods are an important check on the limitations of any single method; looking for complementarity rather than similarity in selecting multiple methods; and not limiting your vision to a single narrow field of research, but seeing the value of theories and methods from diverse fields. As Matt Miles and Michael Huberman (1984) said in their influential book *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods* (I can't find the exact reference), "Let a hundred flowers bloom—but test, test, test!"

**References**


