Qualitative Research

Mixing methods in a qualitatively driven way
Jennifer Mason
Qualitative Research 2006 6: 9
DOI: 10.1177/1468794106058866

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://qrj.sagepub.com/content/6/1/9

Published by:
$SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

>> Version of Record - Jan 24, 2006

What is This?

Mixing methods in a qualitatively driven way

JENNIFER MASON
University of Manchester

ABSTRACT   This article makes an argument for a 'qualitatively driven' approach to mixing methods. It focuses on the value of mixed-methods approaches for researching questions about social experience and lived realities. It suggests that 'qualitative thinking' is a useful starting point for mixing methods, but that it is ultimately more helpful to think in terms of multi-dimensional research strategies that transcend or even subvert the so-called qualitative-quantitative divide. Mixing methods helps us to think creatively and 'outside the box', to theorize beyond the micro-macro divide, and to enhance and extend the logic of qualitative explanation. Mixed-methods approaches raise challenges in reconciling different epistemologies and ontologies, and in integrating different forms of data and knowledge. The article argues that we should think more in terms of 'meshing' or 'linking' than 'integrating' data and method. It goes on to argue for the development of 'multi-nodal' dialogic explanations that allow the distinctiveness of different methods and approaches to be held in creative tension. The article concludes with a discussion of qualitatively derived principles for mixing methods.

KEYWORDS: *lived realities, mixed methods, multi-dimensional methods, qualitative methods, social experience*

Introduction

Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods has come to be seen in some quarters as intrinsically a 'good thing' to do, although the reasoning or logic behind such assumptions is not always as readily expressed as is the sentiment itself. What is more, although mixing methods may be viewed as a worthy project, many researchers of either a qualitative or quantitative persuasion

remain content to allow others to be its standard bearers. Some go further and resist it on grounds of epistemological or ontological inconsistency. This is not yet, therefore, a burgeoning field of research practice. As for methodological debate, although there is an increasing number of texts and guides for those who might wish to mix or integrate methods, there is still fairly limited engagement with the methodological or theoretical underpinnings and implications of integrative research strategies.[1]

In this article I shall argue that mixing methods can be a very good thing indeed, but is not inevitably or by definition so (see also Bryman, 2004). The value of such approaches must be judged in relation to their theoretical logic, and the kinds of questions about the social world they enable us to ask and answer. I focus here on the value of mixed-methods approaches for researching questions about social experience and lived realities. I suggest that a 'qualitatively driven' approach to mixing methods offers enormous potential for generating new ways of understanding the complexities and contexts of social experience, and for enhancing our capacities for social explanation and generalization. Such an approach can draw on and extend some of the best principles of qualitative enquiry. In the process, it can benefit from ways in which qualitative researchers have sought to develop constructivist epistemologies, and to engage with thorny methodological issues especially around questions of interpretation and explanation.[2] But it also needs to recognize both the limitations of a purely qualitative paradigm, and also the worlds of experience and understanding that social scientists fail to see if they define research as purely qualitative and/or quantitative, as though those categories and that division encapsulate all we are capable of knowing.

What I am proposing therefore is to use 'qualitative thinking' more as a starting point than a definitive framework, and as a way of transcending boundaries rather than reinforcing them. Thus, although it is both accurate and useful in the current climate to conceptualize this kind of approach as qualitatively driven, I shall go on to suggest that it is ultimately more helpful to think in terms of multi-dimensional research strategies that transcend or even subvert the so-called qualitative-quantitative divide.[3]

Why mix methods?

There is a range of well-rehearsed arguments about the value of mixing methods, many of which centre on the concept of triangulation and its value in validating data or analysis, or in gaining a fuller picture of the phenomenon under study (Bryman, 1998, 2004; Fielding and Schreier, 2001; Kelle, 2001; Mason, 2002a). However, I want to put a rather different set of arguments for mixing methods. I start from two basic premises.

The first is that social experience and lived realities are multi-dimensional and that our understandings are impoverished and may be inadequate if we view these phenomena only along a single dimension. Let us consider an

example from my own sphere of research interest – family and interpersonal relationships – although any 'real life' example would work since the points I am making are about lived experience, not relationships per se. Viewed multi-dimensionally, these relationships are likely to involve elements and practices that are, in varying combination: emotional, sentient, imaginary, spiritual, habitual, routinized, accidental, sensory, temporal, spatial, locational, physical/bodily/corporeal, bio-genetic, kinaesthetic, virtual and probably more.

So, for example, my relationship with my mother may be characterized for me by the kinaesthetic and physical actions of manoeuvring her in her wheel-chair, of her bodily presence and scent when we hug, of the touch and grasp of those once capable and grown-up hands that comforted me through child-hood sicknesses, smacked my legs and 'knew better' than I did. Our relation-ship may be infused with the scent of her house – my childhood home, with a child's remembered secret places now transformed by the presence of mechan-ically utilitarian and aesthetically vile disability apparatus which my mother finds impossible to operate, and the growing untidiness and dustiness which she finds difficult to endure and which no-one but she would be able to put right. I may be haunted by the enduring sense of missing her when we are apart so that I telephone her daily or feel bad when I do not, and worry about her for hours at a time at work or during the night when I should be sleeping, yet I also experience the difficult tensions when we are physically together or when we speak on the phone, and our struggle to negotiate her increasing dependence. Everything between us may feel like it is shaped by the spatial and geographical distance between us and for me the complex, time-consuming, tiring and costly transport connections I must negotiate to visit her with all that time spent on the train, trying to work, failing to concentrate. Or the differ-ent socio-cultural world into which I feel transported when I visit her in her leafy home counties neighbourhood that feels simultaneously so much the past I have left behind yet the present that we are now creating, and of the shared regret and sometimes denial that she will never again be capable of visiting my distant home and experiencing its noise and chaos, its smells and secrets. My time with her may be dominated by my profound sense of homesickness for my own place and people, for their hugs and closeness and daily gripes and pre-occupations. My mother and I may be frustrated by the tensions and disagree-ments between us about how lives should be lived, how food should be prepared and eaten, about religious faith, about what will happen to her things, keep-sakes and treasures, her home, when she dies.

My example is hypothetical (for the most part!) and could be developed and extended along many dimensions. My point is that, to understand how relationships work and are done, what they mean, how and why they endure or do not, how they are remembered, emulated or reacted against and in general what matters in and about them, we need a methodology and methods that open our perspective to the multi-dimensionality of lived experience. To

do that, I want to argue that we need to think creatively and multi-dimensionally about methods, and about our research questions themselves. In the example I have given, simply to measure the frequency of visits between mothers and daughters, or even what they do together and their views of the quality of their shared time, will not capture the 'heart and soul' – the essence or the multi-dimensional reality – of what is taking place.

The second basic premise that I start from is that social (and multi-dimensional) lives are lived, experienced and enacted simultaneously on macro and micro scales. The idea of micro-macro is of course a social scientific construction, and to a greater or lesser (and always contested) extent it may be seen to mirror other social scientific dualisms, including public versus private, socio-cultural or collective versus individual, structure-agency, object-subject, structure-field-habitus, and even quantitative-qualitative (see Bourdieu, 1990; Finch and Mason, 1993; Mouzelis, 1995; 2000; Ribbens-McCarthy and Edwards, 2002; Sheller and Urry, 2003). For the moment, I am less concerned with theoretical wrangles about how we should conceptualize these domains and dualisms than with the point that lived experience transcends or traverses them and, therefore, so should our methods. In my earlier example, the 'macro' organization of transport systems, the 'socio-cultural' regulation of disability and impairment, and 'cultural' or 'public' narratives or collective organization of kinship and of dependence and independence, of region, class and identity, are all part of the frame along with the more apparently 'micro', 'subjective', 'individual', 'relational' or 'interpersonal' elements. Lived experience is about connections between these multi-dimensional domains.

Although my example relates to family and interpersonal relationships, it is important to note that these points about multi-dimensionality in experience and the transcendence of micro-macro divides are not confined to those substantive spheres. In her fascinating study of car culture and 'automotive emotions', Mimi Sheller puts a similar argument when she says that:

> Cars elicit a wide range of feelings: the pleasures of driving, the outburst of 'road rage', the thrill of speed, the security engendered by driving a 'safe' car and so on. They also generate intensely emotional politics in which some people passionately mobilize to 'stop the traffic' and 'reclaim the streets', while others vociferously defend their right to cheap petrol. . . . Car consumption is never simply about rational economic choices, but is as much about aesthetic, emotional and sensory responses to driving, as well as patterns of kinship, sociability, habitation and work. Insofar as there are 'car cultures' vested in an 'intimate relationship between cars and people' [Miller, 2001: 17], we can ask how feelings for, of and within cars occur as embodied sensibilities that are socially and culturally embedded in familial and sociable practices of car use, and the circulations and displacements performed by cars, roads and driver. (Sheller, 2004: 221–2)

Social science research methods need to match up to this complexity of multi-dimensional experience, and I want to suggest that there are three sets of reasons why mixing methods can help. My three reasons are inspired by a

qualitative logic, but seek to push the boundaries of qualitative thinking and in some senses therefore to transcend the qualitative/quantitative divide.

1. MIXING METHODS ENCOURAGES US TO THINK 'OUTSIDE THE BOX'

I fully endorse the view that research strategies should be driven by the research questions we seek to answer, and part of this must involve choosing methods that are appropriate to the questions being addressed. Research questions themselves give expression to, but are also bounded by, the particular ontological and epistemological perspectives that frame the research. I have argued elsewhere that these theoretical or methodological orientations should be recognized and articulated. This is partly so that research questions, methods and analyses are appropriately informed by them and are consistent with each other. It is also so that researchers are aware that their way of conceptualizing the issues is one among potential others, and that 'ways of seeing' as well as the substance of 'what is seen' may be subject to challenge (Mason, 2002a, 2002b).

Yet, although it is fairly widely accepted that our theoretical orientations inform our methodological practice, it is perhaps less readily recognized that this process works in reverse too (Skeggs, 2001). Our ways of seeing, and of framing questions, are strongly influenced by the methods we have at our disposal, because the way we see shapes what we can see, and what we think we can ask. In that sense, researchers can fail to appreciate how methods-driven are their questions. Of course, as a consequence of the way researchers are trained and tend to operate in disciplinary settings, very few individuals are conversant or competent with a wide palette of interdisciplinary methods, or those spanning quantitative and qualitative demarcations. This means that research questions may tend towards conservatism, and social scientists may repeatedly miss whole dimensions of social experience because their methodological repertoire or tradition limits their view.

Mixing methods therefore offers enormous potential for exploring new dimensions of experience in social life, and intersections between these. It can encourage researchers to see differently, or to think 'outside the box', if they are willing to approach research problems with an innovative and creative palette of methods of data generation. This palette could certainly include, for example, the 'qualitative standards' of semi-structured interviewing, observation and textual analysis, and the 'quantitative standards' of social surveys, demographic or economic data collection and analysis. However, if we are to think outside the box, then methodological creativity should extend into other dimensions – for example, with visual or sensory methods which are grounded in and interested in dimensions other than talk or text (visual, aesthetic, material, aural, bodily, kinaesthetic), experimental as well as naturalistic methods, psycho-dynamic methods, bio-genetic methods, participatory methods, and so on. Of course, many of these

methods are not easily or usefully defined as either quantitative or qualitative.

In proposing a palette of methods, I am not making an argument for eclecticism or for non-strategic proliferation of techniques, as though more is always better or variety is an inherently good thing. On the contrary, in this model, the logic for choosing which methods to select from the palette should as always continue to be governed by the questions that drive the research. However, what is different is that the relationship between the questions and the palette of methods is fully acknowledged to be an iterative one, and there is a will to think creatively and multi-dimensionally.

2. MIXING METHODS CAN ENHANCE OUR CAPACITY FOR THEORIZING BEYOND THE MACRO AND MICRO

Social theory and empirical research have what is sometimes an uneasy relationship, with some of the most significant strands of theorizing in recent times – for example, in relation to de-traditionalization, globalization, risk and postmodernity – drawing on little if any empirical 'evidence' (for example, Bauman, 1998; Giddens, 1999). On the other hand, there is a wealth of theoretically informed empirical research, particularly of a qualitative nature, that speaks to (and sometimes refutes) these 'big' theories, without necessarily crafting new theories on the same scale. As Gillies and Edwards point out:

> Qualitative, empirical research tends to expose the contradictory, tangled complexity of real life experience, which often stands in stark contrast to neatly packaged theoretical accounts of social change. (Gillies and Edwards, 2005: 13)

Partly, the problem may be that although these macro-scale theories make claims about far-reaching, sometimes global phenomena, these are manifested in the everyday lives and cultures of people and populations. In this sense, they are wanting to be macro and micro, global and local, socio-cultural and individual, all at the same time, and it is something of a challenge to conceptualize what form of empirical 'evidence' might be required to support this.[4] However, it can be argued that theories that are not well founded empirically, ultimately may have limited explanatory capacity (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

Some qualitative researchers have engaged effectively with the micro/macro question, starting apparently at the other end from the 'big' theorists. There is for example a long qualitative tradition that sees everyday or interpersonal interactions, life experiences, narratives, histories, and so on, as informing us not only about personal or 'micro' experience, but crucially also about the changing social and economic conditions, cultures and institutional frameworks through which ordinary lives are lived. In this sense, the macro is known through the lens of the micro – social change is charted in how it is lived and experienced in the everyday (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Crow, 2002; Lawler, 2002).

In one sense, the 'macro' theorist who draws (albeit eclectically and unsystematically) on everyday realities to make his/her points come alive, and the qualitative researcher who seeks to read something of socio-cultural processes through 'micro' interactions and experiences are not so far apart because they both see micro and macro as closely connected. If the 'macro' cannot be fully explained without speaking *through* (not simply in opposition to) the 'micro', then micro and macro cannot stand in direct opposition to each other.

However, despite this, there is a tendency for social scientists to locate their research activities and orientations on one side or the other of a micro-macro (or similar) boundary, and this is not always helpful. For the 'big' theorists, their interest in primarily macro explanation and commentary appears to give licence to an unsystematic and idiosyncratic use of micro examples. For micro qualitative researchers, there is a bigger picture that their methods may not always enable them to see. So, for example, it is argued by theorists from different perspectives that, although the macro is refracted through the micro, there are elements of it that are not fully within the comprehension or experience of individuals, so it cannot be fully known or expressed at an individual level (see for example Mason, 2002a, 2002b; Mouzelis, 1995; Smith, 1987, 2002). An example is Smith's distinctive form of 'institutional ethnography' where she argues that:

> Institutions, as objectifying forms of concerting people's activities are distinctive in that they construct forms of consciousness – knowledge, information, facts, administrative and legal rules, and so on and so on – that override individuals' perspectives. (Smith, 2002: 22)

The micro/macro boundary, insofar as it encourages people to situate their social science activity on one side of it or other, arguably therefore hinders the development of meaningful social theory and explanation. Mixed-method research has a major contribution to make here, because it can help us to move beyond what is a rather unhelpful micro/macro impasse, using theoretically driven empirical research. This is particularly the case if we view mixed methods multi-dimensionally, rather than simply in qualitative-plus-quantitative terms, which risk mimicking and reinforcing the micro/macro distinction.

Instead, using mixed-method and multi-dimensional approaches, we can frame questions whose aim is precisely to focus on how different dimensions and scales of social existence intersect or relate. We can explore, rather than feel inconvenienced by, how it is that what we might think of as primarily micro or macro domains are shifting and fluid categories, and are in perpetual interplay. This allows the focus of the research (rather than its by-product or background) to be upon how social experience and 'real lives' are simultaneously or connectedly 'big and little', global and local, public and private, and so on. Using creatively mixed methods we can begin to assemble data and argument that can be woven into meaningful and empirically well-founded social theory.

3. MIXING METHODS CAN ENHANCE AND EXTEND THE LOGIC OF QUALITATIVE EXPLANATION

The particular strengths of qualitative research lie in the knowledge it provides of the dynamics of social processes, change and social context, and in its ability to answer 'how' and 'why' questions in these domains. Although different qualitative approaches have their own analytical and explanatory conventions and processes, I am drawing loosely here on a broadly inductive logic that informs a great deal of qualitative thinking. This involves exploring as fully as possible the situational contours and contexts of social processes, and then making strategic and theoretically driven comparisons with similar processes in other contexts, or similar contexts where different processes occur, to generate explanations. Conversely, quantitative research charts and sometimes aims to predict wide patterns and changes in social phenomena, and can say a great deal about trends, commonalities and averages. However, its emphasis on variable analysis and correlation mean that, although it can identify associations between variables, its capacity to explain what these mean and to understand the mechanics of the processes of association, is ultimately more limited.

In my view, qualitative research has the explanatory edge precisely because it is concerned with *explanation* in a wider sense than measurement or causation. There are two core elements in the logic of qualitative explanation that are particularly important, and that can be extended and enhanced in mixed-methods work.

(a) A qualitative logic of comparison The first of these is a qualitative approach to *comparison*, be it between cases, situations, contexts, over time and so on. Instead of seeking to compare by using standardized measures or comparators applied to all the cases, a qualitative comparative logic works by seeking to understand the distinctive dynamics, mechanics and particularity of each case *holistically*, and then to make comparisons at the level of analysis (Platt, 1988).[5] As a consequence, qualitative research is not fixated on how to standardize units of measurement for cross-sectional analysis. This is important because, although standardization may be useful for some comparative purposes, it can have a stultifying effect on our capacity for understanding and interpreting social change. This becomes very clear in quantitative longitudinal surveys, where a concern for standardizing measures and comparators over long time frames and over sequential sweeps of a survey, can result in a failure to spot changes that fall outside the measurement criteria.[6] Similarly, in some quantitative cross-national comparative research, an approach that compares using the 'lowest common denominator' set of variables can miss crucial culturally specific explanatory factors (Ackers, 1999; Hantrais, 1999). Part of the problem, of course, is that change does not occur in standardized or predictable ways, so we need fluid and flexible ways of understanding it. That issue is compounded if we see social existence as multi-dimensional, with

change occurring potentially on a range of dimensions that cannot be compared 'like with like'.

A qualitative logic of making comparisons at the level of analysis should therefore be at the core of a mixed-methods, multi-dimensional approach to explanation. Within that broad approach, it is possible and may be beneficial to incorporate some forms of comparison based on standardized measures, and indeed qualitative and multi-dimensional approaches can contribute creatively to the development of such measures. A truly mixed-methods approach is likely to draw on more than one form of comparison, albeit there is a convincing case for seeing qualitative explanation as the overall driving logic. I shall return later to the question of what that might mean for the kinds of explanations that mixed-methods research can produce.

(b) Cross-contextual and contextural explanations The second core element in the logic of qualitative explanation, and one that has already been implied, is the significance of *context*. A distinctive strength of qualitative research lies in its intimate and habitual concern with context, with 'the particular', and with understanding the situatedness of social experience, processes and change (Gillies and Edwards, 2005). These situated and contextual understandings are at the centre of qualitative explanation and argument. Indeed, sometimes qualitative explanations are dismissed because they are seen as 'too local' or 'too contextual' to be able to underpin generalization or theorization. Some qualitative researchers themselves are a little faint-hearted about claiming that their analyses have any resonance wider than the immediate confines of the context in question. Yet this is unfortunate, because understanding how social processes and phenomena are contingent upon or embedded within specific contexts is a vital part of meaningful social explanation. Going on to understand how they are played out across a range of different contexts makes possible the development of cross-contextual generalizations.[7]

If we examine how social lives are lived in different contexts, and understand the relationship of the specifics of contexts to processes and practices, then we can begin to move between different contexts to develop the principles for cross-contextual explanation of the particular issues and concerns under scrutiny. There are two elements to this process. The first involves 'contextural' (from 'contexture', the process of weaving together) explanation, where the emphasis is upon explicating how different dimensions of context weave together in relation to the processes or questions driving the study – in other words, what particular constellations and groupings of (multi-dimensional) relevancies have meaning for a specific research problem or process under scrutiny? The second involves using a comparative logic to move across different contexts or settings, to enhance the scope and generalizability of the explanation. The logic of this approach, which draws on elements of case study and comparative case analysis, is that it factors contexts into explanation, rather than attempting to control for them or edit them out (Platt, 1988; Ragin, 1987).

These points connect with my earlier arguments about theorizing beyond the macro and the micro. Contexts should be conceptualized multi-dimensionally and not simply as either/or macro or micro. Some qualitative approaches, such as ethnomethodology, focus almost entirely on the 'micro' interpersonal elements of context – for example, the interactions in an interview – but this is a more limited view than I wish to advocate. By drawing upon but also extending the logic of qualitative explanation, mixed-methods approaches put us in an unique position to understand and theorize contexts.

To start this process, we need sensitive and dynamic ways of understanding contexts, and creative thinking about what the relevant contexts might actually be. Depending upon the focus of the enquiry, contexts might for example be: places or spaces; localities; physical environments; virtual environments; visual environments; bodily environments; sets of experiences; sets of processes; sets of relationships; commitments; networks; legal and administrative forms of organization and practice; transport infrastructures; 'public' or 'wider' patterns of behaviour; family, local, global or virtual cultures; traditions; values; imaginaries; memories; fears; conflicts and animosities; affections and desires; time; history. We need an extensive repertoire of creative and mixed methods to be able to explore these elements.

The list of possible forms of context, of course, is endless, but context is not about lists or eclectic strings of ideas and concepts. Context means *associated surroundings* and the concept of 'association' is crucial here. The analysis needs to be able to show how these elements are connected to the issues and concerns of the study, and hence in what way they are *contextual* rather than coincidental. Mixed methods can help us to explore these relationships, and being able to do that can significantly increase the power of our explanations.

What we identify the relevant context to be depends upon the focus and nature of our enquiry, what processes or puzzles we are trying to explain, and of course our theoretical orientation. However, often, when context is invoked in a research report (either quantitatively or qualitatively) it is not even clear that there is a connection with the issues being researched, let alone an examination of how that connection operates. As Holstein and Gubrium have pointed out:

> Those empirical manifestations (of context) that one chooses to consider must be demonstrated if context is to be brought on board in service to analysis. Too often analysts make overtures to social context – often as an independent variable – with no empirical warrant whatsoever. . . . Context is better understood as an occasioned phenomenon, built up (or down) across the real-time, situational circumstances in question. (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 308–9)

There cannot be one singular, universally applicable and unvarying 'context' whose salience can be known through a definitive specification of, for example, local area statistics and demographics, distributions of socio-economic characteristics (seen as variables), or attitudinal or behavioural patterns. Moreover,

different social science disciplines and sub-groupings, and different research philosophies and methodologies, paint context in different ways across a micro-macro canvas. There will be paradigm differences because context is a theoretical concept, and a disputed one, and how it is seen will speak of the researcher's theoretical orientation. It connects with longstanding social science debates about, for example, structure-agency, structure-process, discourse-practice, norms-interactions-negotiations and, of course, micro-macro. It is often, although not invariably, seen as the 'big' or 'background' element in these debates – for example, as structure rather than process. But divisions are not so neat and clear, nor so fixed and static, and exploring context in the sense of 'associated surroundings' means mediating between and conceptualizing beyond aggregate or individual, micro or macro. It also means allowing some fluidity between theoretical approaches. Given the multi-dimensionality of social experience, we would do well, up against this challenge, to be interested in and to draw upon different theoretically informed approaches to conceptualizing context, rather than insisting upon the primacy of only one world view.

The case I am putting here is for a research practice informed by a multi-dimensional vision of context, with creative, mixed-method, unblinkered, interdisciplinary thinking about what forms it might take, how we might research it and how we demonstrate our arguments about it. Placing explanation at the centre of enquiry reflects an interest in the complexities of how and why things change and work as they do in certain contexts and circumstances (rather than, for example, what causes what). My argument is that, if we are going to improve our capacity to explain and to ask and answer rigorous and useful questions in our complex social environment, we need to understand how contexts relate to social life, and factor this understanding into our explanations.

Dialogic explanations and creative tensions

My argument so far has focused on why mixing methods might help to improve and extend our understandings of complex social worlds. Although the approach I have outlined is inspired by qualitative thinking, it advocates moving beyond a purely qualitative perspective. I have emphasized the importance of a qualitatively informed logic of explanation for theoretically driven mixed-methods research.

However, the construction of explanations based on mixed and multi-dimensional methods research poses its own challenges. How is it possible to reconcile different epistemologies and ontologies, which may result in vastly differing world views and may depend upon contrasting explanatory logics? How can we integrate different forms of data and knowledge?

There are different possible answers to these questions depending upon what we are hoping to achieve in mixing methods. If we are seeking to used mixed methods to triangulate, or to corroborate each other, then this suggests an

integrated framework, where we use each method and form of data to tell us about a specific part of 'the picture', or to provide views of 'the picture' from specified angles. The overall logic here would be that these parts or views can be consolidated, or integrated, to produce a fuller or more valid or robust picture. This model for integrating methods and data requires one overarching theory, or set of questions, and one coherent 'world view' of how it is possible to conceptualize 'the picture', so that the pieces can be assembled. However, while this is a perfectly reasonable model in some ways, it produces tensions insofar as different methods do not necessarily or easily build from or into one world view. Differences between approaches, and more importantly their distinctive strengths, may need to be underplayed if this form of integration is to be coherently established and that, I want to suggest, is a pity.

My arguments about 'thinking outside the box', theorizing beyond the micro and macro, and enhancing and extending the logic of qualitative explanation, have a common theme, which is that we need to factor into rather than out of our mixed-method approaches the capacity to see and think about things differently and creatively. This suggests that, instead of seeking to 'integrate' methods and data, we should think in terms of looser formulations like 'linking data' (Fielding and Fielding, 1986), or 'meshing' methods?[8] But how can this be done without sinking into a relativist mire, where we have many different and fragmented descriptions of social experience, but no real explanation of anything? On the face of it, mixed-methods approaches are trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea.

I think the answer lies in how we construct our explanations and what we expect them to do. Explanations do not have to be internally consensual and neatly consistent to have meaning and to have the capacity to explain. Indeed, if the social world is multi-dimensional, then surely our explanations need to be likewise? I want to suggest that we should develop 'dialogic' explanations which are 'multi-nodal'. By 'multi-nodal' I mean that the explaining that is done involves different axes and dimensions of social experience. By 'dialogic' I mean that the ways in which these axes and dimensions are conceptualized and seen to relate or intersect can be explained in more than one way, depending upon the questions that are being asked and the theoretical orientations underlying those questions. As Hammersley has argued, explanations 'are always framed by particular concerns . . . we need to be explicit about the relevancies that frame our explanations' (Hammersley, 2004: 3). My point is that for 'multi-nodal' and 'dialogic' explanations, multiple relevancies and questions can be held together in creative tension and dynamic relation within the explanation itself. This involves factoring the different ways of asking questions, as well as the 'answers' into the explanatory process. Of course, this position develops from a constructivist epistemology (because it recognizes that explanations themselves are constructions, and that more than one version is possible) and hence represents a qualitatively driven approach to mixed-method explanation. But it moves beyond a qualitative solution to the problem.

The practice of dialogic explanation is particularly well suited to interdisciplinary collaborative or team-based mixed-methods research. Such teams can be peopled by participants with different sets of research skills and proclivities, and different epistemological and ontological dispositions. These can be brought together in creative dialogue, focusing, for example, on where questions and explanations differ and what can be learned from those differences. This dialogic process, and the capacity of the team and its willingness to engage in ongoing constructive dialogue, are likely to be highly influential in the quality and scope of the explanations developed.[9]

Conclusion: some qualitatively derived principles for mixing methods

Finally, I want to suggest that there are a number of principles that inform the qualitatively driven approach to mixing methods that I have put forward, and that can usefully guide practice. Each of these derives from qualitative thinking, but also each suggests a need to push against the boundaries of a purely qualitative paradigm.

1. A QUESTIONING, REFLEXIVE AND NON-ACCEPTING APPROACH TO RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

I have argued for an approach that helps us to see and theorize in new ways, and to think outside the box. Qualitative researchers have traditionally worked in reflexive ways, with a readiness to question traditional (especially positivist) assumptions about the social world, data and knowledge (Mason, 2002a). Adopting such an approach, but also extending it by questioning and being reflexive about the qualitative paradigm itself, is an important principle for mixed-method working.

2. RECOGNIZING THE VALIDITY OF MORE THAN ONE APPROACH

A qualitative constructivist tradition ensures that most qualitative researchers are sympathetic to the notion that there is a range of legitimate methodological approaches. In mixed-method work, this can be extended creatively into an interest in and openness to what different approaches can yield in practical, epistemological and ontological terms.

3. A FLEXIBLE, CREATIVE APPROACH

Qualitative researchers are accustomed to working in flexible and fluid ways – for example, in research design, in choice of method, in sampling and in decisions about what are appropriate units of analysis, in research practice, and in data analysis. However, there is often scope for more creativity (for example, more innovative methods) and for flexibility to be extended to embrace less obviously qualitative forms of method and analysis.

4. CELEBRATING RICHNESS, DEPTH, COMPLEXITY AND NUANCE

Qualitative research tends to expect, indeed to celebrate, richness and nuance in data and understanding, rather than seeing these as a nuisance or in need of standardization. Qualitative research aims to understand and communicate its subjects' experiences, interpretations and meanings, and consequently qualitative data and argument can be highly compelling, with a distinctive 'real life' immediacy and resonance. This is vital for a mixed-method approach, where it is possible to draw on a range of data types and sources, including, for example, verbatim quotations, observational insights, video and audio material, photographs, images, objects, physical environments, 'real world' texts and so on. It is important, however, to ensure that this real life immediacy is employed in the service of explanation, not simply as a rhetorical device (Platt, 1988) and also to accept that rich and dialogic explanations can usefully include 'quantitative' understandings.

5. A REFLEXIVE APPROACH TO WHAT IT IS THAT DATA REPRESENT AND HOW THEY CONSTITUTE KNOWLEDGE

A constructivist approach involves a great deal of reflection on questions like where the social phenomena or processes being investigated are located and on what basis the methods being used can provide knowledge about them (Mason, 2002b). For example, are they to be found in people's behaviours, practices, imaginations, in physical or visual environments, in norms or discourses and so on? This means that qualitative researchers are used to asking questions like 'where do we find culture, or identity, or experience, or agency?', as well as exploring the basis on which we think particular types or levels of data can tell us about these phenomena. This reflexivity needs to be at the core of the kind of mixed-methods approach I have identified but, again, it should be extended beyond the limits of purely qualitative thinking.

In conclusion, the case I have made here for mixing methods in a qualitatively driven way says that such approaches should involve theoretically driven empirical research, and should push beyond the boundaries of a qualitative paradigm while retaining some key qualities and principles of qualitative approaches. Underpinning my discussion is a commitment to moving beyond paradigm wars and theoretical stalemates to find 'effective ways of proceeding' and of facilitating creative and innovatory research that transforms our ways of seeing, and enhances our capacities for asking compelling questions about the social world.

NOTES

1. Notable exceptions include Layder (1993) and Ragin (1987).
2. As Fielding and Schreier point out, qualitative researchers may be more enthusiastic than quantitative researchers about mixing methods, not least because

'accepting the case for interrelating data from different sources is to accept a relativist epistemology, one that justifies the value of knowledge from many sources, rather than to elevate one source of knowledge' (Fielding and Schreier, 2001: 50).

3. A mixed-methods approach involving some of these ideas formed the basis of a University of Leeds funded research project called 'Meshing Methodologies in Family Research', at the Leeds Social Sciences Institute. The research team included Dr Vanessa May, Dr Jennifer Mason, Dr Lynda Clark (London School of Hygeine and Tropical Medicine), Professor Jo Green (University of York), Dr Brian Heaphy, Dr Sarah Irwin, Professor Carol Smart. I am particularly grateful to Vanessa May and Lynda Clarke for discussion of some of the themes that are developed in this article. Also a 'multidimensional' approach is a core theme in the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Node 'Multi-dimensional Methods for Real Lives Research', 2005–2007 (RES-576–25–5017).

4. There are some notable studies that aim to operate at the 'big' theory level, using qualitative or mixed-methods data – for example, Irwin (2005) and Savage et al. (2005).

5. Of course there have been many debates about differing approaches to comparative analysis and their claims to validity. In particular, there have been tensions between 'universalist' approaches, which seek to perform 'context-free' or 'lowest common denominator' comparisons based on a common set of variables (usually quantitative approaches), and 'culturalist' approaches (often qualitative or mixed method), which have often been seen as so 'context-bound' and descriptive that it is impossible to make comparisons with other cases (see Hantrais, 1999). I am referring here, however, to an analytical and inductive rather than descriptive logic of qualitative comparison. Research questions and methods are thus focused upon *explaining* the mechanics and processes at work in specific cases and contexts rather than simply aiming to describe a case's particularities, so that analytical comparisons can be drawn with mechanics and processes of other cases and in other contexts.

6. For example, in Britain, many of the longitudinal quantitative studies have been slow to identify significant forms of interpersonal relationship, such as cohabitation (heterosexual and gay/lesbian), LAT relationships (living apart together), kinship networks between households, children's relationships.

7. These are to be distinguished from the 'context-free' 'univeralist' approaches that Hantrais (1999) refers to above.

8. The Leeds Social Sciences Institute team chose the term 'meshing methods' for its project because it was felt to be more flexible and therefore potentially would allow a range of strategies to flourish.

9. It requires that team members respect each other's positions and epistemologies – whether or not they agree with them – and there must be a willingness to listen and engage in constructive dialogue. This may not be an easy process!

REFERENCES

Ackers, L. (1999) 'Context, Culture and Values in Migration Research on Children with the European Union', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 2(2): 171–81.

Bauman, Z. (1998) *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bryman, A. (1998) 'Quantitative and Qualitative Research Strategies in Knowing the Social World', in T. May and M. Williams (eds) *Knowing the Social World*, pp. 138–57. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Bryman, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods* (2nd edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J. and Wengraf, T. (2000) *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science*. London: Routledge.

Coffey, A. and Atkinson, P. (1996) *Making Sense of Qualitative Data: Complementary Research Strategies*. London: Sage.

Crow, G. (2002) *Social Solidarities: Theories, Identities and Social Change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Fielding, N. and Fielding, J.L. (1986) *Linking Data*. London: Sage.

Fielding, N. and Schreier, M. (2001) 'Introduction: On the Compatibility between Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum Qualitative Social Research* (On-Line Journal) 2(1), URL (consulted 17 October 2005): http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1–01/1–01hrsg-e.htm

Finch, J. and Mason, J. (1993) *Negotiating Family Responsibilities*. London: Routledge.

Giddens, A. (1999) *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*. London: Profile.

Gillies, V. and Edwards, R. (2005) 'Secondary Analysis in Exploring Family and Social Change: Addressing the Issue of Context', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum Qualitative Social Research* 6(1), URL (consulted 17 October 2005): http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1–05/05–1-44-e.htm

Hammersley, M. (2004) 'Causality as Conundrum', Paper presented to ESRC Methods Programme Methods Festival, University of Oxford. URL (consulted 17 October 2005): http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/festival/programme/Fri/am/D/documents/hammersley.doc

Hantrais, L. (1999) 'Contextualisation in Cross-National Comparative Research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 2(2): 93–108.

Holstein, J.A. and Gubrium, J.F. (2004) 'Context: Working It Up, Down and Across', in C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium and D. Silverman (eds) *Qualitative Research Practice,* pp. 297–311. London: Sage.

Irwin, S. (2005) *Reshaping Social Life*. London: Routledge.

Kelle, U. (2001) 'Sociological Explanations Between Micro and Macro and the Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum Qualitative Social Research* 2(1), URL (consulted 17 October 2005): http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1–01/1–01 kelle-e.htm

Lawler, S. (2002) 'Narrative in Social Research', in T. May (ed.) *Qualitative Research In Action*, pp. 242–58. London: Sage.

Layder, D. (1993) *New Strategies in Social Research*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mason, J. (2002a) *Qualitative Researching* (2nd edition). London: Sage.

Mason, J. (2002b) 'Qualitative Interviewing: Asking, Listening and Interpreting', in T. May (ed.) *Qualitative Research in Action*, pp. 225–41. London: Sage.

Miller, D. (2001) ''Driven Societies', in D. Miller (ed.) *Car Cultures*, pp. 1–33. Oxford: Berg.

Mouzelis, N. (1995) *Sociological Theory: What Went Wrong?* London: Routledge.

Mouzelis, N. (2000) 'The Subjectivist-Objectivist Divide: Against Transcendence', *Sociology* 34(4): 741–62.

Platt, J. (1988) 'What Can Case Studies Do?', in R.G. Burgess (ed.) *Studies in Qualitative Methodology,* Vol. 1, pp. 1–23. Greenwood, CT: JAI Press.

Ragin, C.C. (1987) *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*. Berkeley, CA, and London: University of California Press.

Ribbens-McCarthy, J. and Edwards, R. (2002) 'The Individual in Public and Private: The Significance of Mothers and Children', in A. Carling, S. Duncan and R. Edwards (eds) *Analysing Families: Morality and Rationality in Policy and Practice*, p. 257. London: Routledge.

Savage, M., Bagnall, G. and Longhurst, B. (2005) *Globalization and Belonging*. London: Sage.

Sheller, M. (2004) 'Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21(4/5): 221–42.

Sheller, M. and Urry, J. (2003) 'Mobile Transformations of "Public" and "Private" Life', *Theory, Culture & Society* 20(3): 107–25.

Skeggs, B. (2001) 'Feminist Ethnography', in P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland (eds) *Handbook of Ethnography*, pp. 426–42. London: Sage.

Smith, D.E. (1987) *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Boston, MA: North Eastern University Press.

Smith, D.E. (2002) 'Institutional Ethnography', in T. May (ed.) *Qualitative Research in Action*, pp. 17–52. London: Sage.

JENNIFER MASON is Director of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Node, 'Real Life Methods' which is based jointly at the Universities of Manchester and Leeds (http://www.ncrm.ac.uk). She is Co-Director (with Professor Carol Smart) of the Morgan Centre for the study of Relationships and Personal Life at the University of Manchester.

Address: Sociology, School of Social Sciences, Roscoe Building, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, UK. [email: jennifer.mason@manchester.ac.uk]