



The merged methods and the dialogic research approach



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Abstract

The history of the merged methods started in 1949, more than seventy years ago (Gobo, Fielding, La Rocca, & van der Vaart, 2022). The introduction of the merged methods as the new group of methods in Social Science heralded a new era of research more than ten years ago. It is timely to ask why these methods should be of interest to the partisans of the dialogic approach and how the merged methods can be strengthened and developed by the existing tools from the arsenal of the dialogic approach.

Professor Mikhail Gradovski was born in Minsk, Belarus. After graduating from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim as *doctor rerum politicarum* in 2008 with a thesis devoted to the Norwegian Dialogue Pedagogy. Gradovski has participated in both national and international research projects on doctoral supervision, professional supervision, use of dialogue in education, and mental skill development. He has supervised both PhD candidates and graduate students to the completion of their theses. As a teaching practitioner, he uses a dialogical approach based on understanding both teacher and learner as partners with equal rights to make authorial judgments on what is relevant, important, and true. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3098-1447>



Why should the merged methods be of interest to the partisans of the dialogic approach?

Gobo, Fielding, La Rocca, & van der Vaart (2022) argue for the importance of the merged methods by pointing to the fact that their usage is preferable due to the methodological robustness of the methods. This is especially important because failures during the process of data gathering and interpretation are less likely to occur compared to the quantitative and qualitative methods due to the procedures employed. Another argument why the merged methods are preferable to the qualitative and quantitative methods is the fact that the phenomena in the research focus will no longer be successfully understood if one uses the research methods based on the old dichotomy of the difference between the qualitative and quantitative methods. Gobo, Fielding, La Rocca, & van der Vaart write the following:

"What is often missing or undervalued ...is the performativity of the method itself, its capacity for constructing the data. That is, methods have an inner force: the data they produce to account for the social world are strongly inflected by the researcher, the participants, the research setting, the organizational and institutional constraints and opportunities (Gobo, 2016). That is why data collected by survey interviews, discursive interviews, focus groups, ethnographies and so on, are often different, seldom overlap and often conflict (Graffigna & Gambetti, 2015). There is a strong (but non-deterministic) link between the type of data collected and the type of

method: what a certain method captures another does not (see Becker & Geer's (1957) comparison between participant observation and conversational interviews). For this reason, integration can be reached only at the level of specific methods (carefully considering and balancing their diversity), not at the (general) qualitative-quantitative level" (Gobo, Fielding, La Rocca, & van der Vaart, 2022, p. 46)

The research data that could allow us to understand our reality, if we are to believe Gobo et al. (2022), should better be based on the merged epistemology. This epistemology is described by the researchers mentioned above as the genuine third approach, the network of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that guide a specific research community in selecting research questions and methods. This third approach merges the main principles of the qualitative and quantitative approaches, so they are treated as reciprocally compatible and integrable in a unique epistemological stance. The merged methods should be of interest to the partisans of the dialogic research approach due to the common understandings in the area of epistemology and a researcher's methodological perspective.

It is important to point out that the epistemologies of the dialogic research approach (for an example of such epistemology, see pp. 265-285 in Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, & Gradovski, 2019) and the merged methods are not the same but overlap in several areas. These epistemological areas include the understanding of the social environment as not an external fixed entity but as a reality that is selectively and continuously created through people's capacities to interact with the world; the understanding of reality is meaningful only if we consider it in conjunction with people's sense-making, through which they impose order on the chaotic flow of information and experiences that come from environment; the understanding of cognition as situated and embodied; and the claim that the aim of any inquiry involves taking the actors' point of view, and the desire to avoid the determinism of predicting behaviour from socio-demographic features like class, gender, and race.

As for the methodological perspective of the merged method researcher, the understanding in the following areas overlap with the dialogical approach: data are always relational and interactional outcomes; all social actors under study are participants (not objects or subjects); participants' free expression and the researchers' active listening are essential aims behind the use of the merged methods; and the understanding that the results/findings are interpretations, which should be transparent, i.e., showing how they were derived, the assumptions that were made and their limits.

It is important to point out that the merged methods are not the methods that are suitable for everything that the partisans of the dialogic approach are interested in, and thus, the use of the classical qualitative and quantitative methodology and methods should not be entirely abandoned. The choice of any methodology and method for data collection should always start in the sphere of the researcher's authorial subjectivity and be based on the research questions that should be answered. Thus, there will be cases where the merged methods will not surface the goals of dialogic research. However, the common ground and understanding that both the dialogic approach and the merged methods methodology share calls for at least consideration of the use of the merged methods in a research project based on the dialogic approach.

How can the merged methods be strengthened and developed by the existing tools from the arsenal of the dialogic approach?

In my opinion, there are two methods among the merged methods that can be strengthened and developed thanks to the present-day insights of the dialogic approach. These two methods are the inter-way and the Delphi method.

The inter-way came as a result of merging a questionnaire and an interview. The classical inter-way is a method of collecting data when a researcher asks questions and registers answers during the course of the conversation between the researcher and the research subject(s). This method is an appropriate tool for data collection when one has to get data that is mostly quantitative in nature, as it is expected that the majority of the answers' options will be known beforehand. The inter-way approach is preferable to a self-filled questionnaire as the way the data is collected allows room for far fewer mistakes than a self-filled questionnaire. It is important to understand that though the data collection process for the inter-way is mostly qualitative, as the answers are known beforehand, there is still room for respondents to express their own authorial judgments and for the researcher to investigate the meaning-making process. The possibilities for the former and the latter always exist as the researcher may and should register a respondent's answers that were not available beforehand. The contribution of the dialogical approach to the development of this merged method can happen in the area of communication between the researcher and the research subject, and, in my opinion, should, first and foremost, target the way the follow-up questions are formulated to ensure the recognition of the research subject as an authorial subject and not as a research object which possesses the information needed.

The eldest merged method, the Delphi method, was developed in 1953 in the USA by Norman Dalkey of the RAND Air Force Corporation and Olaf Helmer from the Institute for the Future (Boberg & Morris-Khoo, 1992). Jeremy Jones and Duncan Hunter (1995) define the Delphi method as a formal consensus method and a systematic means for measuring and developing consensus among stakeholders. It was developed as a systematic method to structure group communication to increase the accuracy of forecasts for gathering and organizing a panel of expert opinions about a complex issue or problem. Most researchers (Dawson & Brucker, 2001; Humphrey-Murto & de Wit, 2018; Patton, 1986; Vázquez-Ramos et al., 2007) define the following stages of the Delphi method: 1) identification of a research problem, 2) selection of participants (also referred to as panelists), 3) development of a questionnaire of items or statements, 4) completion of anonymous iterative rounds to collect individual and group feedback, 5) determination if consensus has been reached, and 6) summarization of the findings. The dialogue in the Delphi method takes place on three levels: between the researchers in the team in the first, second, and sixth stages; between panelists in the third, fourth, and fifth stages; and between a team of researchers and panelists in the stages three through five. Concerning the Delphi method, the dialogic approach can contribute to the insights on how to discern the presence of authorial interest and openness to the otherness among the prospective panelists concerning the theme that will be researched and thus better the quality of the selection results in the second stage.

Another important contribution from the dialogical approach can be made in the fifth stage, determining if one has reached the consensus. The determination of the consensus can include an analysis of the meaning-making process in the feedback rounds from the fourth stage. This analysis can be made based on the tools and insights developed by the partisans of the dialogic approach that allows the authorial judgments of both the panelists and the team of researchers.

Conclusion

The introduction of the merged methods as the new group of methods in Social Sciences provides the partisans of the dialogic approach an opportunity to ask research questions that require the collection of data in more ways than before. More importantly, the dialogic research approach can enrich the merged methods methodology, particularly the Delphi method, with insights that could lead to the findings and allow room for authorial judgments of both participants and the team of researchers.

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