

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2010). *Mixed Methods Research: Merging Theory with Practice*. New York, NY: Guilford. 242 pages.

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As evaluators, we are tasked with assessing interventions that, as a rule, are intended to affect complex phenomena, and that are themselves subject to a wide range of interconnected factors. As a result, the multiple dimensions we seek to understand are unlikely to be comprehended through a single methodological lens. In this context, an introductory textbook to help us understand when, how, and why to use mixed methods is a welcome tool. Hesse-Biber advocates for an overt link between theory and research, favouring a qualitative-centric perspective.

The author outlines four main objectives of the book, entailing a reconceptualized comprehensive approach to mixed methods research linking theory and research; a focus on qualitative approaches; fostering a detailed understanding of qualitative mixed methods and practices; and creating dialogue for greater synergy and innovation across mixed methods approaches and practices. Hesse-Biber contends that the focus on qualitative approaches is intended to enhance understanding of the social world, with emphasis on lived experiences. She is careful to indicate, however, that qualitative approaches are not monolithic, and she therefore selects three approaches—interpretative, feminist, and postmodern—for further discussion.

The author presents an overview of the current demand for mixed methods research designs, with recourse to the emergence of the approach within social research and to external demand across sectors and disciplines. She further provides a working definition of mixed methods research, and identifies specific reasons to justify the need for the mixed methods research design. Hesse-Biber uses situational examples that require a mixed methods approach, as well as extracts from interviews with social researchers, to further illustrate the practical applicability and need for mixed methods research.

Chapter 2 examines the research question to create a link between it and the research method. It emphasizes the need for reflection

on research assumptions to inform the development of the research question. The author emphasizes that, as research is not conducted in a vacuum, the development of the research question should be preceded by a review of the literature on the research topic, to enhance the researcher's understanding. She further submits that the reflection on stakeholder interests can be used to shape the research question, as well as to select suitable research methods.

Chapter 3 builds a case for the use of a qualitative approach in the mixed methods research process. The author contends that a quantitative approach assumes an auxiliary role in the mixed methods framework, whereas a qualitative approach supports learning exchanges between the researcher and the researched, thereby contributing to a greater understanding of social phenomena. Hesse-Biber further outlines guidelines to inform the analysis and interpretation of data collected.

A brief overview of specific qualitatively centred methodologies is provided, in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 respectively, of interpretive, feminist, and postmodernist approaches, which offer the reader an overview of the methodological stances that characterize them, as well as concrete examples of the use of mixed methods to illuminate the types of research questions such methodologies raise. The author thereby contends that different questions, arising from different epistemological stances, require the use of different methodologies and can be elucidated through various combinations of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Chapter 7 offers a template for a practical application of the mixed methods research design based on a qualitative approach, through a case study illustrating the requisite steps for mixed methods project design and analysis, incorporating the guidelines explored in the earlier chapters. Of note is the discourse on research praxis, connoting a set of reflective questions, guidelines, and checklists to guide the development of the research project from inception through to the final report.

To conclude, Hesse-Biber posits that a qualitative approach to mixed methods research, driven by theory and the research problem, adds to the general understanding of complex research topics. She emphasizes that the use of mixed methods does not constitute a new methods paradigm, but rather responds to the relationship between method and research problem.

Hesse-Biber adds to the existing literature on mixed-methods research and channels discussion toward the merits of a qualitative approach to mixed methods research design. The book falls short, however, in the clarity and flow of its discourse, and can prove difficult reading for the research methods novice. Notwithstanding the merits of the qualitative approach, the justification for its uses presented in the book is not explored in a systematic or in-depth manner, which leaves the reader with unanswered questions as to its relevance.

The use of practical examples throughout the book, though commendable, at times detracts from the logical flow of the text, given what appears to be a disconnect between the discussion around theory and the example provided. The reader is thus presented with an array of information that neither adequately explores nor clearly merges theory with practice in mixed methods research. To maximize the benefit of the book to the reader, there is need for a focus on the coherence, rather than the expanse, of the discussion.

In a broader perspective, while undeniably useful for a novice researcher, the book presents mixed methods research as a relatively new paradigm, subsumed within a positivist and quantitative perspective. In that sense, some of the debates presented in this book appear somewhat outdated.

However, Hesse-Biber's perspective does point to a broader issue regarding the absence of methodological cross-pollination that plagues social science research. Whereas interdisciplinary studies, as well as interpretive, feminist, and postmodern theories have been increasingly adopted over the past four decades or more, the dominant methodological perspective, especially in North America, appears to be of the positivist, mechanically quantitative persuasion. This creates an *ex ante* predisposition to assume that these approaches are necessarily best suited for data gathering and analysis, regardless of the research question. In this respect, Hesse-Biber's contribution is a welcome reminder of the value of a more praxis-based appreciation of qualitative methodologies in mixed methods research design to address the complex and multidimensional phenomena that are the focus of evaluation practice.