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# Measure Twice and Cut Once: A Review of Clark and Creswell's Mixed Methods Reader

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## Measure Twice and Cut Once: A Review of Clark and Creswell's Mixed Methods Reader

### **Abstract**

The Mixed Methods Reader is an edited book that presents the reader with a synthesized introduction to the philosophy, history, methodology and practice of mixed methods research. The first section presents the reader with a series of 14 foundational articles, with a second section presenting nine carefully chosen exemplar articles demonstrating best practices in the field. The editors did a remarkable job in combining theory and application with the inclusion of a framework throughout the text which includes discussion questions, visual diagrams and introductory comments for each article. This creates a synthesis and ease of use that guarantees this text to be a classic for years to come.

### **Keywords**

Mixed Methods, Qualitative, Quantitative

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## **Measure Twice and Cut Once: A Review of Clark and Creswell's *Mixed Methods Reader***

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*The Mixed Methods Reader is an edited book that presents the reader with a synthesized introduction to the philosophy, history, methodology and practice of mixed methods research. The first section presents the reader with a series of 14 foundational articles, with a second section presenting nine carefully chosen exemplar articles demonstrating best practices in the field. The editors did a remarkable job in combining theory and application with the inclusion of a framework throughout the text which includes discussion questions, visual diagrams and introductory comments for each article. This creates a synthesis and ease of use that guarantees this text to be a classic for years to come. Key Words: Mixed Methods, Qualitative, and Quantitative.*

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As a classically trained quantitative researcher, more and more often I find myself somewhat dissatisfied with the rather simplistic answers my data analysis gives me. After all, one could argue that the analysis of numeric values is nothing more than the answer to “if” something occurred; nothing is really known about “why” it occurred. Because of that, like many researchers of my ilk, I find myself turning to qualitative data collection and analysis, in particular a mixed methods approach where I collect both types of data, to better answer my questions. In a manner of speaking, it reminds me of my friend Bob, a contractor who always insists that one should measure their lumber twice before they cut it; that way they are less likely to make an error. In our case, we also want to measure twice – qualitatively and quantitatively. Our aim, like Bob’s, is to improve our precision.

When I first became interested in the field, I found the number of books on the topic somewhat overwhelming but, fortunately, a name I recognized from my “number crunching days” kept appearing repeatedly. Thinking back to the quality of John Creswell’s excellent quantitative and qualitative research work (e.g., 1994, 2004), I chose his recent book, *The Mixed Methods Reader*, co-edited with Vicki Plano-Clark, to begin my education in the field. I could not have made a better choice in my effort to both understand the philosophy, history, methodology and application of mixed methods research.

From the outset, let me say that this is not an entry level research book. It is an edited book that contains material written by leading experts in the field and is designed for readers who have a firm foundation in both quantitative and qualitative research methodology. The book itself is divided into two parts; a series of methodological selections describing the philosophy, history and basic principles of mixed methods research, followed by a set of nine exemplar studies demonstrating the different approaches in various settings.

## Part I

In the editor's introduction, Plano-Clark and Creswell explain the purpose of Part I by noting it is:

A collection of 14 foundational writings from the mixed methods literature. These readings convey the overall development and evolution of methods research and address essential topics for researchers new to the field of mixed methods research. These topics include its foundations; design types; implementation issues such as sampling, data analysis, and validity; rhetorical devices for reporting...; and critiques about current thinking in the field. (p. xvii)

The first chapter contains a classic work in the field, *The Evolution of Mixed Methods Research*, by Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998). The chapter begins with an editors' introduction, followed by discussion questions and applications for consideration while reading. The reader is then presented with related references on the given topic, the text of the chapter and then a biography of the authors of the chapter's text. Throughout the book, I found this approach to be quite appealing as the editors not only set the stage for the chapter to be read but, in many instances, tied together ideas from previous chapters in doing so. This gave the reader a feeling of synthesis that is often missing in edited texts and led to a natural flow throughout the entire first part of the book.

The remainder of the first section is presented in a clear, logical format that shows the natural progression of the philosophy, history and methodology of mixed methods research. In order to understand the evolution of the need for mixed methods research methodologies, the first three chapters focus on the shift in researchers' philosophies necessary to shift to this mindset. Morgan, in Chapter 2, for example, "argues for the value...of paradigm shifts as a tool for examining changes in research fields such as social science research methodology" (p. 29). He follows this with a review of issues leading to the rise of renewed interest in qualitative research in the 1980s and then argues for pragmatism as the guiding paradigm in modern research methods. These ideas are further examined in Chapter 3 with Mertens' extending the field by suggesting a transformative-emancipatory perspective as an alternative to pragmatism. Her excellent discussion of the ontological, epistemological and methodological issues underlying this approach gave credence to her argument that researchers can use different paradigms to understand topics in different fields and settings.

The following chapters provide the reader with foundational material regarding the actual mixed methods designs and provides the reader with insight as to how quickly and divergently some of the ideas grew. For example, Todd Jick, in his ground-breaking 1979 article, discusses triangulation as the first true mixed methods design. In the following article, written only 10 years later, Greene et al. mentioned triangulation as only one purpose of mixed methods research while including complementarity, development, initiation and expansion. The remainder of the chapters in the first section deal with specific methodological issues: sampling techniques, data analysis strategies, establishing validity and generic notation strategies.

In closing the first part of the book, Plano-Clark and Creswell do an excellent job of transitioning into the exemplary chapters in Part II by including a chapter by Sale et al.

addressing implications for mixed methods research. Much as was the case with the earlier chapters, the authors support the call for mixed methods research with the argument that “a new paradigm is in order, one with a new ontology, epistemology and methodology” (p. 372). While I cannot speak for those who will read this book after me, by this point, I was firmly convinced that this was indeed the case.

## **Part II**

The second part of Plano-Clark and Creswell’s book includes a series of nine exemplar studies from a broad range of disciplines. The editors explained their inclusion of these studies by noting:

Why should mixed methods researchers read exemplar studies? Researchers can examine how methodological concepts are applied in practice. Published studies illustrate the different types of mixed methods designs as well as the decisions and procedures that accompany these designs.... In addition, they can be used to inform others ... about how mixed methods studies are conducted and reported. (p. 375)

Following the introduction, Plano-Clark and Creswell include a set of nine discussion questions prior to the first article. These questions are designed to be used with each chapter in the Part II and are linked back to specific topics introduced in Part I. I found this added greatly to the holistic nature of the book as I found I was able to reflect back on the theoretical material presented in the earlier chapters and ensure I fully understood its application in practice.

The articles themselves begin with a brief introduction by the editors and a visual diagram outlining the design of the study being discussed. I found the inclusion of this diagram particularly useful as I was able to use it much as I would a road-map. By using it to guide me through the article, I had to focus less on the specifics of the methodology and could pay more attention to its actual application. This led to a greater appreciation of its design, application and results, as well as a much better understanding on my part.

I was also pleased with the variety of disciplines and applications that the articles represented. Coming from a counseling and research methods background, I was very comfortable with the articles included from those fields but also found the articles from the health field (e.g., research on aging and health promotion), the corporate environment (e.g., physical activity and mental well-being in employees), education (e.g., graduate programs in the United States) and child care (e.g., choice of service providers) both interesting and easily understood within the context of learning a specific mixed methods methodology. Unlike many texts that purport to include such, these are truly exemplary articles; the authors are to be commended for their identification and inclusion.

## **Conclusion**

My career choice has led me to read many edited books throughout the years; unfortunately, many of them were not very good simply because it did not appear the editors had a solid plan for what they wanted to present. That is not the case with Plano-

Clark and Creswell; their mission was clear. The editors wanted to introduce readers to mixed methods research: its philosophy, history and methodology. Simply by assembling the first part of this book, they did an admirable job in reaching their goal. Unlike many editors, however, they went the extra mile. The inclusion of the exemplar articles that were so closely correlated to the ideas and techniques presented in the earlier chapters dramatically distinguished *The Mixed Methods Reader* from its competitors. Given that, I think researchers, practitioners and students in many disciplines can learn from and enjoy using this book as much as I have. Whether it is used as a stand-alone text or as a supplementary reference, it is certainly a worthwhile addition to any library. I would encourage the editors to consider subsequent editions of the *Mixed Method Reader* order to keep the reader up-to-date on the latest advances in mixed methods research as well as in tune with the best applications in the current literature.

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