Publishing a Methodological Mixed Methods Research Article

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At the Journal of Mixed Methods Research (JMMR), we welcome and encourage methodological/theoretical and original empirical mixed methods submissions. But to make the odds better for a competitive submission, we wanted to become more transparent about our expectations. The particular focus of this editorial is to share our experience both with common reasons for desk rejections, and to promote elements of rigorous methodological/theoretical and empirical mixed methods research papers that have been proven to be successful at JMMR. This editorial builds and expands on the previous suggestions of Mertens in 2011 (Mertens, 2011). At JMMR, we seek original mixed methods studies written to illustrate or emphasize novel methodological procedures or innovative applications. We are very excited about the growing number of purely empirical mixed methods studies, but JMMR is not the optimal venue if authors only seek to present the results of original mixed methods research. An ever-growing number of journals in many fields are publishing rigorous and compelling, mixed methods studies. Thus, original papers solely presenting results without consideration of unique methodological issues should be submitted to a journal focused on the specific content. The most successful empirical original mixed methods papers at JMMR use content-specific findings to illustrate methodological issues.

On Desk Rejection

Unfortunately, desk rejection (rejection from the editorial office without sending for peer review) remains common at JMMR, primarily as the authors have not followed the instructions for submission (“Manuscript submission guidelines,” 2015). The first assessment at JMMR is whether the authors have conformed to specified requirements, including length and reference formatting. Failing to do so triggers return to the author. Other common reasons for desk rejection include: failure to rigorously review and incorporate relevant mixed methods literature (newcomers to the mixed methods methodology genre may want to follow the link on the JMMR website http://mmr.sagepub.com/ of the most read and cited JMMR articles), or failure to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. A paper only with qualitative data that has been transformed into quantitative data and reports results will not meet JMMR criteria for an

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empirical mixed methods study. However, if the paper provides a novel approach to data transformation, places it in the context of literature about data transformation approaches in mixed methods, and characterizes how the approach is novel or expands data transformation procedures, the paper would be a welcome methodological/theoretical submission. As noted in our last editorial (Fetters & Freshwater, 2015), we expect authors to address the “integration challenge” in order to reap the rewards of the integration equation of $1 + 1 = 3$, achieving a sum greater than the individual qualitative and quantitative parts. We hope the points below will help contributors develop competitive submissions.

**Write for the Audience**

Authors of well-written articles follow the sage wisdom of writing for the audience, and this holds true for *JMMR* as well. The audience of *JMMR* is highly multidisciplinary. The most important constituencies include both research methodologists and empirical researchers of all walks of life and academic disciplines who are looking for methodological guidance or innovation. An additional constituency is those who come to *JMMR* to consume the empirical articles for empirical content, though since *JMMR* has a multidisciplinary focus, we assume this represents a smaller contingency. When writing for consumers of methodology, authors persuasively identify the relevant theoretical/methodological literature. Typically, this involves identifying a deficit, gap, conflict or controversy in the field. When citing relevant literature to make the case, authors should speak to the multidisciplinary audience of the journal. Methodology is the glue that bonds the primary audience of the journal. Hence, to reach the broad, multidisciplinary *JMMR* audience, the papers should speak about methodology.

**Write for the Understanding of the Reader**

A corollary of writing for the audience is to write for the understanding of the reader. Effective authors compose their articles for the understanding of the reader, and not their own egos. Authors who write for the understanding of the reader consider every word and sentence, and ask themselves, “Will this make sense for the reader? Will this help the reader understand what I want to convey?” All too often, it seems authors seek to impress others with use of acronyms and the technical language of their field. Acronyms as a rule should only be used when widely understood by readers in the field. As few mixed methods acronyms are widely understood, most acronyms, and essentially all from other fields are particularly good insomnia agents. Articles dense with acronyms are at high risk of alienating reviewers and readers alike because the odds are that if the author overuses technical language, the article will be more fatiguing to read for the majority of readers who are not from that field. Finally, write succinctly. This requires a lot of time as reflected by the adage, “If I had more time, I would have written less.” At *JMMR* we are going to push authors to be succinct, efficient, and sufficient.

**Attend to Structure**

The next corollary of writing for the audience is, attend to *structure*. Readers of empirical studies, including empirical mixed methods methodology studies, expect authors to follow conventions about the ordering of the content. Extensive use of headers and subheaders will help organize during the writing process, and help the reader follow the prose when it comes to the finished product. Readers can most efficiently absorb content of an article when the author
organizes the different components of the article where they ought to go. This expected order is often represented using the “hourglass” model of writing that can be traced at least to the representation made by Hill, Soppelsa, and West in 1982, who note that the Western Model of writing the (a) introduction, (b) procedure (methods and results), and (c) discussion can be attributed to the time of Aristotle (Hill, et al., 1982). Authors from various fields have advocated for the hourglass model (Hill et al., 1982; Schulte, 2003; and Derntl, 2014). The writing proceeds from the general to the specific and from the specific back to the general. The wide top of the hourglass represents how authors write about the general problem in the broadest sense. The tapering of the top of the hourglass illustrates how the writing narrows to the specific. The procedures in the middle indicate what was done, the methods, and what was learned, the results. The widening at the bottom of the hourglass symbolizes coming back to the general by returning to the general problem and discussing the broad implications.

**Hourglass Model of Writing and Mixed Methods Research**

*JMMR* accepts two types of articles, namely, methodological/theoretical issues, and original empirical mixed methods research articles. To our knowledge, the hourglass model specifics for mixed methods studies have not been presented. Below we speak to how the hourglass model can inform the structure of the writing for both types of articles accepted at the journal. These suggestions are not meant to preclude other formats, but following such formats will generally produce an effective submission for *JMMR*.

**Methodological/Theoretical Articles**

At *JMMR* we solicit “methodological/theoretical” articles. Topics of interest include the following: types of research/evaluation questions, designs, sampling or measurement procedures, approaches to data analysis and integration, validity, software applications, paradigmatic stance, writing structure, theoretical lenses, cultural issues, ethical issues, validity, and quality issues in mixed methods research. The hourglass model for such papers generally should follow that of a persuasive essay, as illustrated in Figure 1. This involves reviewing the relevant mixed methods context to illustrate the problem clearly, and then stating a clear objective or purpose for the paper. Most such papers will address about three to five points. These should be written in the order laid out in the beginning, and use illustrative and persuasive examples. At the bottom of the hourglass, authors briefly summarize the key points or implications, honestly discuss limitations, and suggest broadly future implications or applications. Structurally, the introduction—persuasive argumentation—discussion typically has a 1:3:5:1 proportion in terms of word count, so a 6,000-word manuscript should have roughly a 1,000:4,000:1,000 words breakdown, though the range will be 1,000:3,000-5,000:1,000. An abstract of 120 words will roughly parallel these word proportions, 20:80:20.

**Original Mixed Methods Research Articles**

At *JMMR* we also solicit original mixed methods studies from all fields provided the research addresses methodological concerns. Once again, original mixed methods articles are characterized by the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. Authors should integrate the findings and draw inferences based on the qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods findings (Creswell, 2015). While integration is a challenge (Bryman, 2006), considerable guidance exists for integration. Integration approaches have included (a) those integrating results from analyses of separate data components, (b) those with one form of data informing
the design or analysis of another, (c) those integrating multiple data components or sources during the analytic process, (d) those integrating with more than one strategy for analysis, and (e) those where methods are “inherently mixed” based on the sampling (Bazeley, 2012). Additional views about integration have been articulated at the level of philosophical/theoretical, design, methods including sampling, and analysis and interpretation (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013; O’Cathain, Murphy, & Nicholl, 2007). Recent work by Jennifer Greene (2015) illustrates novel consideration of integration at the method, methodology, and paradigm levels. Empirical mixed methods research methodology articles should include discussion of how the article adds to the literature on mixed methods research methodology in addition to making a contribution to a substantive area in the field of inquiry of the author(s).

Figure 2 illustrates the hourglass model of empirical mixed methods research writing. What makes the empirical mixed methods research methodology model unique is that authors first attend to a general methodological problem, and then use an empirical mixed methods study to illustrate a point or points about the methodology. In addition, highly effective original mixed methods research articles have both a mixed methods methodology aim as well as a content-specific empirical aim. The shape of the model is also unique as JMMR expects many details of the methodology and results. Thus, the introduction–methods–results–discussion will typically have a 1:2:2:1 proportion in terms of word count, so a 6,000-word manuscript has about a 1,000:2,000:2,000:1,000 words breakdown. Original research articles in other genres often skimp on the methods and have proportionately longer results/discussion sections.

**Elements of Well-Written Empirical Mixed Methods Research Paper Titles**

The title should reflect the main content of the paper, ideally, the methodological and content-specific substance of the paper. A common approach is to add “mixed methods study” at the end of an introduction of the main comment. Alternatively, specific mention of the type of mixed methods design makes it very clear! As the field of mixed methods increasingly expects rigorous collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, it is preferable to use neutral title words that avoid emphasizing a quantitative or qualitative approach.
Abstract

The abstract includes information about the type of mixed methods design and integration used. The word distribution of the abstract parallels the structure of an empirical mixed methods methodology paper with a 1:2:2:1 words breakdown, so for a 120 word abstract, roughly a 20:40:40:20 distribution (Figure 2). Effective manuscripts start with a statement of the methodological problem to hook the multidisciplinary readership. In this approach, authors introduce briefly the topic of research including a statement as to why it is informative for understanding the methodological issue. This is followed by stating the mixed methods design, the qualitative and quantitative data sources, and the type of integration used. It is preferable to mention how data were integrated. Succinctly, the article should end with a conclusion about what is known anew as a result of the research findings that was not known before.

Structure of the Empirical Paper Depends on the Design

Our advice draws from and builds on the sage wisdom of JMMR cofounder John W. Creswell as articulated in his recent book, “A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research” (Creswell, 2015). Creswell notes that the structure of empirical mixed methods papers depend on the design. We agree with Creswell that most integration occurs in the methods, results, and discussion. While the background of empirical mixed methods studies is similar regardless of the design, certain additional features are desirable in an empirical mixed methods paper.

Background

A distinguishing feature in the background of empirical mixed methods papers is that the authors provide a rationale for the methodological importance, rigorously review the relevant previous methodological literature, and present the rationale and importance of the research in their own fields (sufficient but not overwhelming for the multidisciplinary audience to understand). The vast majority of manuscripts we receive start with the field specific problem as this is the pattern most empirical researchers are accustomed to using. This may often be followed
by a parenthetical statement about how mixed methods research is unique to the author’s field. Unfortunately, this is not what appeals to the multidisciplinary audience of the journal. Methodologists are interested in methodological questions, hence, we prefer authors to identify the methodological question first. This should include a rigorous review of the relevant mixed methods literature and persuasive arguments for why there is a gap in the field. These elements should be followed by the field-specific literature to illustrate how the study, as an example, will enhance understanding of mixed methods research. Authors of empirical mixed methods studies should provide a persuasive rationale as to why a mixed methods study is needed. Often used rationales include the following: one data source is insufficient; a need exists first to explore qualitatively a phenomenon; a need exists to explain results qualitatively or, a need exists to augment one database with another (Creswell, 2015). In a traditional hourglass structure, the final section of the introduction includes a purpose statement, and methodological papers should do this as well. But for JMMR, the readers are interested in both the content-specific objectives as well as the methodological objectives. The mixed methods original research purpose statement should include (a) general intent and (b) quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods purposes. Where relevant, it is appropriate to state quantitative questions or hypotheses, qualitative questions, and a mixed methods question.

The Middle of the Hourglass

In the methods and results sections, authors have different choices and leeway for presentation of mixed methods procedures and results. To someone unfamiliar with mixed methods, this section seems mysterious as integrating the methods of two very different paradigms can seem overwhelming. In addition, despite all planning attempts in advance of data collection, how the data will actually look, what the data will say when they come together, for example, will there be congruence, conflicting or different lessons learned, is largely unknown when embarking. When explicated intentionally, thoughtfully and often creatively, the methods and the results come together in informative ways to achieve the mathematically challenging integration equation of $1 + 1 = 3$. The integration illustrates how the combining of the qualitative and quantitative produces a sum greater than the individual parts. The methodologically minded readership hungers for sufficient detail to illustrate the methods. Such illustration allows publication of full methodological details in JMMR where they are desired and fully appreciated. Results sufficient to illustrate the methodology are needed, but can be highly truncated. We encourage authors to present the details needed to demonstrate the methodological point(s) of their empirical mixed methods studies in JMMR while publishing the full results of their studies in field-specific journals. Publication of the full methods in a methodology journal provides credibility to the work (for reviewers in content-specific fields less familiar with mixed methods), and the convenience of being able to abbreviate the methods and preserve space in the content-specific journal as these papers frequently require fewer words (and the author feels pressured to keep the methods short due to restrictive word counts).

Elements of Well-Written “Design” Section

A good rule of thumb to reduce the mystery of the methods, is to describe the methods in the order of the study phases as it happened. JMMR readers expect authors to name the specific type of design used and to include references to recent mixed methods literature to help educate the community unfamiliar with design terminology. As the field is changing rapidly, consulting recent literature is needed. For example, the use of concurrent mixed methods design has largely fallen out of favor and been replaced by the term convergent mixed methods design (Creswell,
A figure of the methods is enormously helpful, required at *JMMR*, and exemplars can be found in recent mixed methods text books (Creswell, 2015; Curry & Nunez-Smith, 2015) or *JMMR*-published studies. In an explanatory sequential design, an initial quantitative phase is followed by the qualitative phase. In an exploratory sequential design, the qualitative phase is followed by the quantitative phase. In a convergent design, the order of presentation should be driven by choices made relative to how the data interact or “talk” to each other for integration. These three designs fundamentally form the foundation for advanced designs such experimental, participatory/social justice, case study and other multistage designs (Creswell, 2015; Fetters et al., 2013). Whatever order is followed, the presentation of the methods should be logical, and more often than not, a temporal framework articulating the ordering of phases and data collection is the easiest to explain. Lumping is also possible and encouraged. So, if a sample of subjects for qualitative phase data collection is chosen from a larger population used in the quantitative phase, it typically makes most sense to present the quantitative data collection procedure details first.

### Setting, Participants, Instruments, and Analysis

As expected with any good research study, there should be detailed and thorough descriptions of the separate quantitative and qualitative methods, so to include specific forms of quantitative and qualitative designs (e.g., correlational analytics, grounded theory), recruitment procedures, sample selection, sample size, instruments (instrument by instrument if multiple ones are used), data collection procedures, topics related to data collection (e.g., validity, reliability of scores on instruments), and types of data analysis.

### Organization of the Structure of the Methods Sections

When the setting, participants, and instruments differ between the quantitative and qualitative data collection, these need to be presented separately. This situation is very common (but not always true) with sequential designs. So, in an explanatory sequential design (Figure 3), the author should present the QUANTITATIVE phase features, setting, participants, instruments, data collection, and analysis followed by the QUALITATIVE phase characteristics, setting, participants, instruments, data collection and analysis. In an exploratory sequential design (Figure 3), the descriptions will follow the order of the QUALITATIVE phase characteristics followed by the QUANTITATIVE phase. Whenever there is overlap between the setting, participants, and instruments, an efficient approach is to present the details about the common threads together. This overlap occurs most commonly as illustrated in Figure 3 for a convergent mixed methods design when the setting and participants may actually be the same (e.g., intentional sampling from the population participating in the quantitative phase occurs and identifies a subsample for the qualitative phase). If not the same, not closely related, or difficult to explain together in the text, then these features need to be separated.

### General Issues in the Results

In contrast to a mixed methods empirical paper focused only on the results, a key point about *JMMR* empirical mixed methods papers is that the paper does not need the full results; rather, only enough results to sufficiently illustrate the unique aspect(s) of the methodology are needed and desired. For demonstrating integration of illustrative quantitative and qualitative results, authors can use any of at least three approaches for integration in the results: narrative, data transformation or joint display presentation. The narrative approach involves written descriptions of the qualitative and quantitative findings. This can be done separately or concurrently.
When presented separately through narrative, authors use a contiguous approach as the quantitative and qualitative data are in close approximation in separate sections, but are not integrated together. Another approach to narrative integration is referred to as weaving. In the weaving approach, the results are presented theme-by-theme with both qualitative and quantitative data presented for each theme. In data transformation, qualitative data are transformed into quantitative data, for example, using counting and numerical presentation of qualitative themes and subthemes, which are then compared with other quantitatively collected data. Alternatively, quantitative data are transformed into text-based themes or trends that are contrasted with qualitatively collected themes and subthemes. Another important approach to data integration is the use of a joint display. Increasingly, methodologists have emphasized the use of joint displays in the form of figures, tables, and matrices to integrate data. (Greene, 2007; Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman, Creswell, & Kuckartz, 2015) A joint display includes representations of the qualitative and quantitative data. Importantly, the development of a joint display facilitates not only analysis of the data during the interpretative stage but also presentation of data for dissemination and publication.

**Figure 3.** Variations in the methods section of empirical mixed methods research methodology papers.

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<th>Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design</th>
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<td><strong>Design</strong></td>
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<td>QUANTITATIVE Phase-setting, participants,</td>
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<td>MIXED METHODS Integration</td>
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<th>Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods Design</th>
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<td><strong>Design</strong></td>
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Like the methods, the ordering of results should follow the design. An overarching principle is that the presentation of the results should be consistent with the flow of the design and the ordering of the quantitative and qualitative sections. In sequential designs, one type of results is followed by the other type of results. So in an explanatory sequential design, the quantitative findings are presented first, and these are followed by the qualitative findings. In many cases, but not all, it will be desirable and possible to have a third section of results, namely the mixed methods findings that have been produced when the quantitative and qualitative data are integrated together. In an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, the qualitative findings are then followed by the quantitative findings, and possibly by integrated mixed methods findings. This type of presentation has been called a contiguous approach as the results are beside each other in the paper, but are not strongly integrated physically.

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Figure 4. Common variations in the results section of empirical mixed methods research methodology papers.

Design and Order of Results

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Organization of the results with a convergent design can be trickier as the data are brought together for analysis at essentially the same time (Figure 4). While it may not matter, typically the writing order should be driven by priority, that is, which data were examined first or provides the best organizational framework. The order may be influenced by various factors, for example, a large survey was conducted and analyzed quantitatively, while a subset was interviewed qualitatively. In this case, it may make more sense to present the quantitative procedures first. Alternatively, the order of analysis could drive the order, for example, in the same sampling procedure, the earliest analysis was the qualitative data since the analysis occurred iteratively while quantitative data were still under collection. Based on the iterative analysis of qualitative data, a theory emerges and quantitative data are used to illustrate the theory. A good default is the temporal pattern. Whichever data strand received the most attention first may be a strong hint about which predominates, and should come first. When the data have been
organized to address parallel content, for example, several scales are used and subjects are interviewed and qualitative codes addressing the same three concepts are used, the results can be structured and described using a weaving pattern where there are quantitative and qualitative findings presented together thematically with a weaving back and forth of quantitative and qualitative data by theme or domain. Depending on the particular project, there can be a contiguous approach, weaving approach, or mixed contiguous/weaving approach in the same study (Figure 4).

**Elements of Well-Written Mixed Methods “Discussion”**

In the discussion section, the author is charged with moving from the specifics back to the general. The discussion section of a paper is the most difficult to write. A common approach of novices is simply to repeat the results. One of our highly seasoned and decorated mixed methods colleagues Benjamin Crabtree provides this insight. He advises writing the discussion using this thought, “Before this research we thought XXX. Now, because of this research we think YYY.” In other words, the discussion section of any good empirical research should synthesize and articulate the overarching lessons and contribution to the field. Authors should use this section to suggest implications for the content-specific field, and for the field of mixed methods. Usually the discussion of the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods data should follow the flow of the hypotheses/objectives, methods, and results sections for consistency. In accordance with hourglass mirroring (Figure 2), the discussion order will proceed from the specific to the general, the content-specific results will be presented first, and then this will be followed by a discussion of the methodological results. In papers where there was little or no integration provided during the methods or results, by default, integration through narrative in the discussion is critical.

**Writing Empirical Studies for Content-Specific Journals**

We hope this advice will also provide reference for authors seeking guidance on publishing their empirical mixed methods papers within their own fields. The advice above similarly applies except for a few simple differences. The top of the hourglass will not require articulating a gap in the mixed methods research methodology literature, and will focus on a gap in the content-specific literature. While a specific mixed methods objective will be needed, a mixed methods research methodology objective will not be needed. The discussion can focus on the content-specific findings, without a need to address a mixed methods research methodology objective. The conclusions will focus only on the content-specific findings and implications. We look forward to ever-greater dissemination of empirical work across all fields.

An oft-cited justification of mixed methods is the understanding that quantitative and qualitative studies alike have limitations, so mixed methods authors also need to be honest relative to limitations of empirical mixed methods studies. The unique attribute of the limitations section of methodological original research papers is that there may be important limitations relative to the content-specific topic, as well as limitations relative to the lessons learned about methodology. Authors should include both. But these limitations are often productively used as a sounding board for future research. Since there are complementary components, the field-specific content and the methodological innovation, authors should discuss the future research needs for both. Authors should be sure to address how the study adds to the mixed methods literature and opens up or highlights further approaches for investigation.

We hope that this summary will give the readers a clearer understanding of preferred approaches and pitfalls when considering publication of methodological/theoretical and empirical mixed methods research articles. Attention to writing for the reader, incorporating mixed
methods literature, providing extensive details about the methods, and following appropriate structure for the genre will go far for getting a paper submission published in JMMR. We realize that there often are good recipes that taste even better when deviations from the instructions occur. So, herein, we also bring in the sage advice of Professor Benjamin Crabtree, “Rules are written for novices.” While providing a sturdy framework for presenting mixed methods studies, we also acknowledge and advise (at least sometimes) breaking the rules. After all, as mixed methodologists, we do enjoy the radical middle (Onwuegbuzie, 2012).

References