Mixed Method Data Collection Strategies

Social scientists have long relied on a wide range of tools to collect information about the social world; but as individual fields have become more specialized, researchers are trained to use a narrow range of the possible data collection methods. This book draws on a broad range of available social data collection methods to formulate a new set of data collection approaches that combines elements of those existing methods. The new approaches described here are ideal for social science researchers who plan to collect new data about people, organizations, or social processes. The methods the authors present are designed to create a comprehensive empirical description of the subject being studied, with an emphasis on accumulating the information needed to understand causes and consequences with a minimum of error. In addition to providing methodological motivation and underlying principles, the book is filled with detailed instructions and concrete examples for those who wish to apply the methods to their own research.

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Demography deals with issues of great social importance, and demographic research fuels some of the central current policy debates of our time. Yet, demographic theory has not changed much over the years, and old and sometimes inappropriate models are still being applied to new problems. Increasingly, however, demographers have become aware of the limitations of standard surveys and statistics and are moving to incorporate theoretical and methodological approaches from other disciplines, in particular anthropology. For their part, anthropologists have generally failed to take account of the advances in modern demography, but they are now beginning to take part in the central debates on questions of theory and policy in population research. A new wave of interdisciplinary research is emerging, combining the interests and approaches of demographers, anthropologists, and other social scientists. Some of the most interesting products of this new wave will be published in New Perspectives on Anthropological and Social Demography.
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Preface

This is a book about data collection methods for the social sciences. Our focus is on mixed method data collection. Our purpose is to provide detailed documentation of many of the most useful mixed method data collection approaches in the social sciences. We provide concrete operational examples so that those interested in using these methods have a clear starting point. We also identify several of the principles at the foundation of these methods. We hope this will stimulate the continued creation of new mixed method data collection approaches.

We do this within the context of research aimed at advancing the understanding of cause and consequence in the social world. Although data collection cannot itself resolve the questions of cause and consequence, we argue that the data collection methods described here are particularly powerful tools for advancing our understanding of cause and consequence. The methods we describe are also useful for social research that is not focused on causal questions. In fact, the mixed method approaches we describe are extremely useful for reducing measurement errors in social research no matter what the topic. We present them in the context of research on causal processes because we argue that they are particularly useful for that purpose.

This is not a book about survey methods, ethnographic methods, focus group methods, archival methods, quantitative methods, or qualitative methods. It is a book about data collection methods that combine elements of survey methods, unstructured interview methods, observational methods, focus group methods, and archival methods. We assume that readers already have familiarity with these methods. They form the building blocks of the mixed method approaches we describe, so readers may want to review descriptions of those methods before using this book. We provide a number of helpful references to resource materials covering those methods in Chapter 1.

Empirical social research includes research design, data collection, data coding, and data analysis. Although this book touches on each of these dimensions of the research process, our primary focus is on data collection. We also explore issues of the intersection between research design and data collection methods. The book does not provide a review of data coding or data analysis issues.
The authors have substantial data collection experience employing mixed method approaches in sociological and demographic research in Nepal and the United States. The vast majority of the specific examples used in the book come from research projects the authors direct in either Nepal or the United States. In every case, however, the examples are designed to illuminate a research strategy that can be used in many different settings to study many different topics. Our presentation specifically addresses issues involved in applying these methods to data collection in a broad range of settings and about a wide range of topics. We hope you find it a useful collection of tools for your research.