

Integral Research as a Practical Mixed-Methods Framework

CLARIFYING THE ROLE OF INTEGRAL METHODOLOGICAL PLURALISM

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The mixed methods community could represent a significant opportunity to place Integral Theory at the very heart of the academy. Methodological communities often define what is and is not acceptable within academic research. Soon, the mixed methods community will need to move beyond designs involving a relatively small number of intra-study methods to larger intra- and inter-methodological frameworks. Integral Theory is well positioned to provide key portions of these needed frameworks and assume a more central role within the academy. This article begins by examining and clarifying some core definitional issues with Integral Methodological Pluralism and Integral Research. It next defines the current state of the mixed methods community and the opportunities provided. Finally, it discusses how Integral Methodological Pluralism and Integral Research are positioned to take advantage of these opportunities.

Introduction

It is not necessary to spend a lot of time in the mixed methods community to realize that they are currently mired in intra-study structure and language definition.¹ Missing, at the moment, is the “big picture” that this research community promises to be able to provide. Once the core foundation has been established, their sights will likely turn to these more global structural elements. I suggest that Integral Theory is well positioned to provide much of what they will need.

For decades now, integrally informed approaches to research have been moving forward with minimal definition across a range of disciplines. Loosely tied together by the AQAL model this kind of research views inquiry in a fundamentally different and more integrative way, though typically through the lenses of traditional academic methods. In recent works, Ken Wilber has put forth the notion of an overall theoretical framework for Integral Methodological Pluralism (IMP).² He has written little thus far about how to operationalize it, which has resulted in the creation of “IMP Research,” or Integral Research (IR), by Integral theorist, Sean Esbjörn-Hargens. Further, as we will see, the terminology used for the methodological families defined as part of IMP are largely incompatible with the definitional norms of both the quantitative and qualitative research communities. Consequently, these labels are not of substantial help to researchers who are working within traditional academia and wish to incorporate Integral Theory.

I argue that in the coming years, the mixed methods community could represent an unprecedented opportunity to inject Integral Theory into the heart of the academy. No other framework I am aware of is as well vetted and prepared to step into the looming structural void

that community will soon find it necessary to address. Methodologists set the agenda for what is and is not considered acceptable within academic research. Their adoption of key aspects of Integral Theory would lend a degree of acceptability and stature that could significantly further its credibility within the academy.

In this article, I briefly examine some of the core definitional issues with IMP and Integral Research.³ Next I look at the current state of and debates within the mixed methods community, as well as its future directions. Finally, I examine how Integral Methodological Pluralism and Integral Research address these issues and opportunities.

IMP: Relevant Components and Issues

Readers of this journal need no introduction to Integral Theory, so I will not take up space by offering one. The aspect of Integral Theory that is most relevant to the issues addressed by this paper is the eight zone extension of the original AQAL model.⁴ I believe that the eight Primordial Perspectives (8PP) provided by this view of AQAL offer an unprecedented, structured ability to ensure that all major, relevant perspectives are used when examining a research question. This aspect of Integral Research—the relationship between 8PP and academic research—is what currently sets it apart from other methodological approaches, which generally consider a problem from only one or two major research perspectives.⁵

Wilber incorporates these 8PP into IMP but, in doing so, creates issues with the labels he assigns and the way he defines many of the methods he incorporates.⁶ He uses the term “methodological families” in earlier work, while later writing refers to these labels directly as methods.⁷ Personal communication with him has clarified that he views his writing on the subject up to this point as theoretical and that he meant these selected terms only in the broadest sense as example for discussion within that context.⁸ Thus, IMP can be understood as the 8PP plus a meta-method framework. Building on this, IR is an operationalization of IMP in the context of actual mixed-methods research: exploring how to combine various methods (zone specific and cross-zone) in both intra- and inter-study research projects.

From the standpoint of discussions involving the traditional academic methodological community, these current terms present a potential problem. For example, Wilber uses the traditional Husserl definition of phenomenology as a descriptor for which methods align with zone #1. In some narrow corners of the academy, such as philosophy departments, this is acceptable and certainly it can be argued that this definition provides a strong description for zone #1. On the whole, however, the qualitative methods community has been moving away from this definition of phenomenology for some time.⁹ In many cases, leading qualitative methodologists like John Creswell are also thought-leaders in the mixed-methods community.¹⁰ By using the traditional definition of phenomenology (to illustrate zone #1), the model as stated is immediately made less compatible with the norms of these two of the three major methodological communities.

Use of a term such as autopoiesis for zone #5 is another example. Autopoiesis is not an academic methodology or method. While it may provide the “flavor” for methods that might fit zone #5, attempting to interject it into a methodological discussion is a non-starter. Zone #6’s empiricism

is, of course, a very high-level quantitative methodology, but can it really be restricted to zone #6? Even if we associate zone #6 with narrow empiricism, this still extends beyond the boundaries of zone #6. Among other academic disciplines, zone #2 deals with developmental psychology. Do we really expect these scientists not to consider themselves empiricists (i.e., broad empiricism), and instead adopt a new high-level methodology termed structuralism? After all, “structuralism” as a label has been used to describe research associated with zones #4 and #8. While Wilber insists that these labels were never meant to be this restrictive and that discussions have gone on in the Integral community for many years that take these concerns into account, it must be kept in mind that currently this is how they will appear to outside observers from the academic methodological communities.¹¹ This is one key item that must be addressed and set straight in advance of broader adoption by these communities.

The Academic Methodological Communities

Of the quantitative (quan), qualitative (qual), and mixed-methods (mixed) communities, it is probably reasonable to expect the quantitative community to be the least interested in an Integral framework.¹² Traditionally, they have been resistant to multiple perspectives and assigning credibility to the wide variety of research methods Integral Research requires. Certainly there are implications for the qualitative methodology community, however I feel that these will likely be realized as a trickle down effect from the mixed methodologists. I believe this latter group has the most to gain and the greatest need for Integral Theory. For this reason, I primarily address this segment of the wider methodological community in this article.

Although mixed methodologists have been around, at least, since the German academic model took hold in the US, the current transdisciplinary methodological community only started to form within the previous 20 or so years, with most of the major strides being made in the last decade.¹³ Recent years have seen the first major texts emerge that provide guidance on community norms for conducting this form of research.¹⁴ In 2007, the community’s first major journal was launched.¹⁵ The primary discussions in this journal’s first year centered around core definitions of mixed methods in general, attempts at addressing key issues such as validity, intra-study structural issues, best practices for combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, and so forth.¹⁶

In many ways, this community and the methodology under discussion is still in its toddler years. They have yet to take a step back and ask wider questions, such as how to address highly complex intra-study designs involving more than a few methods, and how to view mixed methods from within an inter-study framework. The community is strongly grounded in a paradigm of pragmatism, which I would argue is very much aligned with Bernstein’s *pragmatic fallibism*.¹⁷ In other words, they are interested in results. They want to get accurate answers to complex and difficult questions and are willing to push traditional methodological boundaries to get them.¹⁸

For this reason, I believe that once they have completed laying their groundwork it is only a matter of time before they begin to ask how to structure intra-study designs with larger numbers of mixed methods carefully tailored to address even harder problems. I also believe that they will reach a point of acceptance regarding the limits of a single study, and begin to explore how

mixed methods can be used in crafting *inter*-study designs. They will be exploring how to use the foundations they have established to construct multiple mixed-studies that attack a research problem from several angles for increased validity.

Integral Research

Some efforts have already been made to try to fit IMP into a more traditional academic format. Esbjörn-Hargens has done significant work as part of the Integral Studies M.A. curriculum at John F. Kennedy University (JFKU).¹⁹ Such a program allows for the terminology of Wilber's original IMP vision to be more readily retained than does the wider academic methodology community. Esbjörn-Hargens has performed a major service by both these initial practical explorations with his students and through publication on this topic to the wider community.²⁰

I suggest that he has laid a foundation that we can build upon and propose that we continue the use of his term *Integral Research* as a specific form of mixed methods research that integrates relevant aspects of Integral Theory, such as IMP and the critical eight zones and 8PP it contains. Rather than attempting to build an independent community around this term, I believe we are much better served to attempt to get it incorporated as an aspect of the larger mixed methods community. One way to do this, of course, is to simply write and speak about it as if it already is, which I believe is the case.

The battle that is being fought over the core definitions and intra-study norms within the mixed methods community leads me to believe that it is wise to initially avoid positioning Integral Research as primarily an intra-study framework. While certainly we should, in passing, mention its capabilities to help with larger and more complex intra-study designs, politically I believe it is most expedient to initially position IR as an inter-study framework and structuring device. This is very much in keeping with the work Esbjörn-Hargens has done and published to date.²¹ However, it is worth noting that in fall 2008 Esbjörn-Hargens is launching a major intra-study six zone longitudinal Integral Research project. This ambitious project is aimed at assessing the transformational impact (vertical and horizontal) of Integral Education at JFK University.

Structuring Integral Research's Complexity

Integral Theory is, in part, about viewing different levels according to the AQAL framework. IR has two primary levels that need to be examined. The first is how IR addresses the major methodologies (quan, qual, and mixed) and how each fits within IMP's eight zone framework. The second level relates to major individual methods (such as statistical analysis, hermeneutics, case study, and so forth) and how they can be positioned within the framework. This is where things get very messy, very quickly. Statistical analysis, for example, can be used for nearly all quadrants and their zones. So, with the possible exception of zone #1, all zones can use quantitative methodologies. Likewise, a method like narrative can easily be seen to work across zones as well. In fact, it is difficult to think of a zone that cannot in some way be covered by one of the primary qualitative methods such as: narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, hermeneutics, case study, and so on. Because mixed methods deal with combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods, it also can cover the entire eight zones.

Looking at this situation, one can hardly blame Wilber for crafting the categories of IMP as he did.²² Nonetheless, in order to expand the influence of both IMP and IR in the larger methodological community it is necessary to adapt to the community's norms, at least as much as possible. The original IMP category family labels (e.g., phenomenology) are simply too out of step with the terminology used by any of the three major methodological communities. As we will soon see, for practical reasons it may not be desirable to attempt to replace them with other academically standard terms. Disciplinary and sub-disciplinary differences may make a single descriptor for each impossible, as may geographic, linguistic, and other complexities. It may prove more helpful to retain the neutral numerical designations of zone #1, zone #2, and so on to refer to the 8PP.

Things do not get any simpler when we step down to the level of individual methods. The narrative method deals in stories and incorporates other sub-methods such as biography, autobiography, and so forth. If we examine these, we might arrive at something like the following:

- When autobiographical, narrative is probably a zone-#2 reflection of the researcher's zone-#1 experiences.
- When dealing with a single individual it is probably a researcher in zone #2 dealing with a participant in zone #2 who is interpreting his or her zone-#1 experiences.
- When dealing with stories from multiple subjects in a group, it is probably a researcher in zone #4 reflecting upon participants' zone-#4 observations of their zone-#3 experiences.
- If not done as a group it is probably more akin to having stories collected and then put together. This may or may not involve zones #3 or #4 depending upon the subject's relationships with each other and the researcher.

An examination of how a major qualitative methodologist such as Creswell defines phenomenology could easily see it spanning all of the above.²³ It is probably also possible to extend the current norms involving it to examine a group phenomenology, which would include the third bullet point above. Of course these two methods, and others such as statistical analysis, that overlap in zones can offer very different research opportunities.

It Is All about Perspective

At first glance, these overlaps seem confusing and difficult to get beyond. However, a slightly deeper look reveals that although statistical analysis, narrative, phenomenology, and no doubt other methodologies can overlap in zones #1-4, the perspective provided by each is considerably different. Rather than attempting to falsely limit them to only one zone, I contend that we are much better served to explore all of the places that each might fit.

The eight zone version of the AQAL model provides an extraordinary opportunity to explore perspectives. We use research to explore through methodological lenses. IMP and IR can make this both more powerful and more practical:

- A researcher considering a qualitative narrative study, to continue with our example, can be made aware of additional perspectives that could be triangulated without leaving his or her chosen method. This could be explored within a single study or across multiple ones. It could also provide guidance on how to re-purpose existing data.
- Researchers looking at a problem could be empowered to consider it from more than just one zone. This could also be incorporated within a single study, across multiple ones, and provide insight on how to re-use existing data.

The primary contribution that Integral Methodological Pluralism and Integral Research make is the creation of a map that extends the awareness of perspectives. As researchers, we are often stagnant in how we approach our inquiry. Most of us are not methodologists, after all. This view of IMP and IR provides a model that allows us to immediately consider our inquiry within a larger perspective and to see additional methods and ways of approaching them that relate to it. While not all will be relevant or acceptable within our disciplines, some will. There is power in being able to see a larger picture, transcend our typical ways of approaching an inquiry, and consider where and how we can strategically use these elements—both in a current study and across future ones. Increasing the depth of inquiry by using IR both intra-study and also inter-study is a powerful concept, one not readily available to the vast majority of today’s scholars. As participants in the Integral community, we have a powerful tool to offer them.

Summary: A Call to Action

I see no other ready made structures or frameworks that are as capable of addressing these methodological deficiencies as Integral Theory, and I suggest that as interested academics we begin to inject our voices into the mixed methods community. Because the debate is in its early stages, even if only a few of us begin to work as a small group, we can expect to exert a disproportionate influence. At present the major scholars in the mixed methods community are primarily concerned with foundational elements, giving us a significant opportunity to frame the future stages of the debate.

Considerable work needs to be done to make this viable. First, the major quantitative and qualitative methodologies need to be mapped to the eight zones. Next, this needs to be contextualized by discipline. In short, a database needs to be created that any researcher from any discipline can query for guidance that is relevant to him or her and useful in visualizing the possibilities offered by additional perspectives.

Such a database would, of course, also be invaluable to those of us involved in Integral Theory and Research. We are no less susceptible to the tunnel vision that can occur through the use of familiar methods and paradigms. In some sense it can be argued that overworked academics are those least likely to spend time keeping up with the methodological cutting edge. A project such

as this allows us go beyond just keeping up, and into the realm of helping to shape and drive the agenda, while integrating it with our research interests.

NOTES

¹ For example, see Bryman, “Barriers to integrating quantitative and qualitative research,” 2007; Creswell & Tashakkori, “Editorial: Differing perspectives on mixed methods research,” 2007; Dellinger & Leech, “Toward a unified validation framework in mixed methods research,” 2007; Freshwater, “Reading mixed methods research: Contexts for criticism,” 2007; Greene, “Is mixed methods social inquiry a distinctive methodology?” 2008; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, “Toward a definition of mixed methods research,” 2007; Morgan, “Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implications of combining qualitative and quantitative methods,” 2007; O’Cathain, Murphy & Nicholl, “Integration and publications as indicators of ‘yield’ from mixed methods studies,” 2007; Tashakkori & Creswell, “Editorial: The new era of mixed methods,” 2007a; Teddlie & Yu, “Mixed methods sampling: A typology with examples,” 2007; Tashakkori & Creswell, “Editorial: Exploring the nature of research questions in mixed methods research,” 2007b.

² Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006 and “Excerpt D: The look of a feeling; The importance of post/structuralism,” 2003

³ For example, see Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006; Wilber, “Excerpt D: The look of a feeling; The importance of post/structuralism,” 2003; Braud, “Toward an integral methodology for transpersonal studies,” 1994; Esbjörn-Hargens, “Integral research: A multi-method approach to investigating phenomena,” 2006; Esbjörn-Hargens & Wilber, “Towards a comprehensive integration of science and religion: A post-metaphysical approach,” 2006.

⁴ Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006 and “Excerpt D: The look of a feeling; The importance of post/structuralism,” 2003

⁵ Esbjörn-Hargens, “Integral research: A multi-method approach to investigating phenomena,” 2006 and Esbjörn-Hargens & Wilber, “Towards a comprehensive integration of science and religion: A post-metaphysical approach,” 2006.

⁶ Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006 and “Excerpt D: The look of a feeling; The importance of post/structuralism,” 2003

⁷ See Wilber, “Excerpt D: The look of a feeling: The importance of post/structuralism,” 2003 and *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006.

⁸ Wilber, personal communication, February 12, 2008

⁹ For example, see Creswell, *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*, 2007.

¹⁰ See Creswell, *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*, 2007; Creswell, *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*, 2007.

¹¹ Wilber, personal communication, February 12, 2008

¹² See Morgan, “Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implications of combining qualitative and quantitative methods,” 2007; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, “Toward a definition of mixed methods research,” 2007; Onwuegbuzie, & Leech, “Taking the ‘Q’ out of research: Teaching research methodology courses without the divide between quantitative and qualitative paradigms,” 2005.

¹³ See Morgan, “Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implications of combining qualitative and quantitative methods,” 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, “Taking the ‘Q’ out of research: Teaching research methodology courses without the divide between quantitative and qualitative paradigms,” 2005.

¹⁴ See Creswell, *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*, 1998.

¹⁵ Tashakkori & Creswell, “Editorial: The new era of mixed methods,” 2007a

¹⁶ See Bryman, “Barriers to integrating quantitative and qualitative research,” 2007; Creswell & Tashakkori, “Editorial: Differing perspectives on mixed methods research,” 2007; Dellinger & Leech, “Toward a unified validation framework in mixed methods research,” 2007; Freshwater, “Reading mixed methods research: Contexts for criticism,” 2007; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, “Toward a definition of mixed methods research,” 2007; Morgan, “Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implications of combining qualitative and quantitative methods,” 2007; O’Cathain, Murphy & Nicholl, “Integration and publications as indicators of ‘yield’

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¹⁷ Morgan, “Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implications of combining qualitative and quantitative methods.” 2007 and Bernstein, “The abuse of evil: The corruption of politics and religion since 9/11,” 2005

¹⁸ Creswell & Tashakkori, “Editorial: Differing perspectives on mixed methods,” 2007; Greene, “Is mixed methods social inquiry a distinctive methodology?” 2008; Tashakkori & Creswell, “Editorial: The new era of mixed methods,” 2007a; Tashakkori & Creswell, “Editorial: Mixed methodology across Disciplines,” 2008

¹⁹ Esbjörn-Hargens, “Integral research: A multi-method approach to investigating phenomena,” 2006

²⁰ Esbjörn-Hargens, “Integral research: A multi-method approach to investigating phenomena,” 2006 and Esbjörn-Hargens & Wilber, “Towards a comprehensive integration of science and religion: A post-metaphysical approach,” 2006. Also see Luftig, “Living for Playing, Playing for a Living: An integral research study,” 2008 and Hedlund, “Integrally researching the integral researcher,” (this issue) for examples of Integral Research conducted in this context.

²¹ Esbjörn-Hargens, “Integral research: A multi-method approach to investigating phenomena,” 2006 and Esbjörn-Hargens & Wilber, “Towards a comprehensive integration of science and religion: A post-metaphysical approach,” 2006

²² Wilber, *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006 and “Excerpt D: The look of a feeling; The importance of post/structuralism,” 2003

²³ Creswell, *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*, 2007

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