A comprehensive, yet accessible volume, this handbook is an excellent resource for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of long-standing and emergent issues of violence. It is an outstanding contribution to criminology. It synthesizes and extends theoretical, methodological, and policy approaches to violence by featuring a range of analyses that illuminate how interlocking inequalities inform violence in complicated ways. In doing so, the collection demonstrates how a critically informed criminology is an important—and arguably essential—part of addressing complex and pressing public health concerns.

Kathryn Hemme, Canada Research Chair in Biosecurity, Law and Society, University of Waterloo, Canada, and Associate Professor of Regulation and Governance, The Australian National University, Australia

The Routledge International Handbook of Violence Studies

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Walter S. DeKeseredy, Callie Marie Rennison, and Amanda K. Hall-Sanchez
Mixed methods in violence studies

Kai M. Thaler

Introduction

How and when should scholars of violence integrate different research methods in designing, conducting, and writing up studies? Mixed methods research (MMR) has grown in prominence in recent decades throughout the social sciences, developing in an own field within social science methodology with specialized handbooks and journals such as the Journal of Mixed Methods Research (e.g., Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Heise-Biber & Johnson, 2015; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2009, 2010), although scholars have long been calling for increased integration across research methods (e.g., Jack, 1979; Sieber, 1973). Studies of violence across a number of fields, ranging from public health and education to economics to sociology and anthropology, have increasingly been utilizing mixed methods approaches. Mixing methods can provide stronger inferential leverage in answering complex questions and untangling the causes, consequences, and potential prevention measures for violence, potentially enriching our theories and empirical knowledge. As Randall Collins (2008, p. 32) points out, in a pressing social problem and complex phenomenon, violence merits examination from “as many angles of vision as possible . . . Methodological purism is a big stumbling block to understanding, particularly for something as hard to get at as violence.”

Yes, mixing methods “is not a panacea” (Thaler, 2017, p. 69). How can researchers apply MMR approaches in the study of violence, and when do they provide comparative advantages over single-method approaches? In this chapter, I briefly discuss the principles of MMR, and why it might be useful to violence scholars, and I then provide examples of how MMR has been applied in studies of violence across disciplines. I then discuss how mixed methods can best be utilized to achieve the aims of a research project and improve the validity of findings, as well as their potential interest for other scholars and for policy makers.

Mixed methods research: theory and practice

As MMR has become more common, scholars have developed a variety of typologies through which to classify different MMR designs or styles of research presentation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, pp. 56–59; Guest, 2013; Thaler, 2017). The definition of MMR, although
debated, is generally considered to be research that “mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study or a set of related studies” (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, p. 129). Beyond quantitative and qualitative approaches, however, formal mathematical models, often used by economists, political scientists, and sociologists, can also be combined with qualitative and/or quantitative methods in a multifaceted approach to studies of violence. Examples include use of geographic information systems (GIS) software to spatially analyze how scholars in a multidisciplinary field study or research, and use of additional methods or analyses (e.g., Corra & Elwood, 2005; Kwan & Ding, 2008).

The motivating principle behind MMR is that utilizing and combining multiple methods allows for richer, more empirically valid findings that would be impossible with one method alone. MMR is motivated by an underpinning commitment to pragmatism in epistemology and practice (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, Johnson, & Curry, 2009). Greeen, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) offer four purposes for MMR: triangulation, complementarity, development, and extension. Greeen et al. (1989, p. 268) originally intended to use different methods to build up the scope of inquiry across different study components; for instance, using quantitative methods to study outcomes or experiences and qualitative methods to examine perceptions around the same question.

Classification systems for the implementation of MMR. Focus on sequence and emphasis in how different methods interact (e.g., Creswell, 2007; Platt, 1994; Corra & Elwood, 2005) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another? Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a clear, widely used exemplar over another?

Promises of mixed methods research on violence

What advantages can MMR present for researchers of violence? One of the primary benefits of MMR is the ability to examine both structural and agentic factors in situations of violence and conflict: what political, social, economic, and environmental factors contribute to or constrain violence, and how collective or individual actors make decisions within their structural boundaries (Thaler, 2017, pp. 60–61). Quantitative data are generally less suited to analyze the outlines and details of structural conditions, whereas qualitative case studies, such as the process of how various processes behind aggregate patterns (in as Bresan’s (2017) demonstration of how varying religious social geography and local-level policies affected individuals’ and communities’ decisions to protect Jews targeted for genocidal violence in the Netherlands and Belgium during the Holocaust.

The integration of multiple methods also permit analyses that bridge the all-too-frequent gap between the macro-level and micro-level dynamics of violence (Bakels & Justino, 2014). Traditionally, quantitative methods and less detailed qualitative case studies have been used for large-scale, macro-level cross-case comparison, whereas qualitative methods and relatively blunt survey analyses have been applied at the micro level. Methodological sophistication has been increasing across disciplines and paradigms, with qualitatively oriented scholars now seeking to deploy more systematic techniques at the macro level (Bennett & Checkel, 2014; Bennett & Elman, 2006) and quantitatively oriented scholars more frequently examining the “micropolitics” (King, 2004) and social–psychological aspects of the causes, processes, and effects of violence beyond the university laboratory (Gilligan, Pascale, & Sanu, 2014;Hampey & Weinstein, 2010), MMR allows us to bring together perspectives in a single study, combining rigorous attention to theory building or testing with thick description of cases, experiences, and perspectives, putting humanity behind numbers or general statements, and ensuring correspondence with the lived reality of violence and other social phenomena. If a contradiction arises between the findings generated using different methods, this offers a wealth of opportunities for researchers to reconsider their research strategy and data to ensure concordance across methods (Ahlström, 2013), as well as suggesting potential avenues for further study that might not have been noticed using only a single method.

A further benefit of mixed methods approaches is the opportunity to engage readers across methodological perspectives, potentially increasing consumption of studies by appealing to scholars who might primarily read works using only one type of evidence. The use of MMR can make complex theories more accessible to a wider audience—for example, a formal mathematical model may be confusing or difficult to interpret to those without training in the method. By employing the model’s logic in presenting case studies and ethnographic evidence, however, works such as Drucill’s (2015) study of warlords in Central Eurasia demonstrate how the assumptions and parameters of a parsimonious theory are rooted in reality and have played out in observed events, making the formal model and theory legible to a broader audience (see Bates, Greif, Levi, Roshen, & Weingast, 1998). Broaden engagement should be a priority to advance collective research agendas aimed at understanding and addressing violence, and so long as scholars remain entrenched in “paradigm wars” (see Ailes & Teddie, 2010; Goetz & Mohoney, 2012; Johnson et al., 2007), MMR can provide a means to bridge research communities and develop more complete, realistic knowledge of the social world. As Tarrow (1995, p. 474) puts it, “a single-minded adherence” to one set of methodological approaches “contradicts scientific progress” and can prevent fruitful collaboration or cross-pollination of ideas that might aid violence prevention and conflict resolution. Mixed methods in existing studies of violence

Scholars studying violence have used MMR approaches to examine the dynamics and effects of violence at all different scales, ranging from interpersonal violence to collective social violence in riots or repression, to civil war to interstate war to mass violence or genocide. In this section, I briefly review how and why selected studies have used MMR at these different levels of violence. Interpersonal

In an overview of MMR in criminology, Maruna (2010, p. 134) argues that, “there is a long history of mixed method research in violence research, in particular . . . understanding the
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qualitative case study data to verify his findings and illustrate the social mechanisms and processes at work during ethnic riots.

Civil war

Scholarship on civil war has been greatly advanced by excellent MMR, the civil conflict and different armed groups in Colombia, where a variety of armed actors and forms of violence allow for to be developed and tested on a range of civil war dynamics (e.g., Arrojo, 2016; Daly, 2016). Among this group, Steele’s (2017) work on forced displacement helps tackle a form of violence that is often overlooked. Although individuals and groups may spread and escape as a consequence of violence, Steele focuses instead on when armed groups engage in “political cleansing”; targeting collective groups for their divergent political preferences. She argues that, to understand and explain displacement, we need an approach as “the middle ground between large-scale contextual factors and individuals’ characteristics, so study the interaction between armed groups” and how civilians’ characteristics and networks lead to varying treatment or targeting (Steele, 2017, pp. 3–4). Using ethnographic knowledge and data gained from the examination of documents collected in local and regional archives, Steele developed the contextual knowledge necessary to then gather appropriate quantitative data on displacement and elections to test her intuition that armed actors had targeted groups for forced displacement based on their political affiliates. In addition to informing quantitative data collection, archival and interview evidence help to illustrate the local manifestations of different patterns of political violence during the war.

Interstate war

Although scholars of international relations have often examined interstate war as a unique, isolated phenomenon, with the numerical decline of interstate war and increasing intermou- nalisation of civil conflict, innovative mixed methods studies have been able to consider violence in interstate wars in comparative perspective with other forms of violence. Downes (2008), for example, conducts cross-national statistical analyses of state targeting of civilians in interstate and colonial wars to show that even democracies are highly willing to direct violence against civilians to protect their own citizens and gain leverage to improve their relative bargaining position in the conflict. He then uses qualitative case studies and archival materials to test and illustrate his coercive bargaining theory, analyzing different types of civilian targeting in World War I (saturation blockades), World War II (aerial bombing), the colonial Boer War (forced displacement and internment), and the territorial annexation in the British-Inda independence war (ethnic cleansing). Downes’ comparison shows similar logics of violence applying in both interstate and colonial wars, and he further strengthens his study by adding a qualitative case study of a negative case, the Persian Gulf War, in which the US and its allies did not target civilians, providing an additional example in which to test his theory against alternative explanations.

Researchers also need not use quantitative data in a regression framework to integrate it with finely tuned material from other methods. In an article that examines violence from a global perspective, from homicide to civil conflicts to interstate war, Mann (2004) critiques the “liberal optimism” who claim war and violence have been declining worldwide. Mann (2008, pp. 49–57) uses additional descriptive statistics, case anecdotes, and key case examples to demonstrate that war has not necessarily been on a downward slope. Instead, there is great variation in war and violence over time and space, and the character of war has undergone a transformation, as
large-scale interstate wars have largely been supressed in frequency by civil wars and inter-
nationalized civil conflicts, and technologies have increased the distance between attacker and
attacked. Violent homicide rates, meanwhile, have declined in the Global North through a
process of state consolidation and increased policing, but homicide rates in regions such as
Central America have in fact been rising (Mann, 2018, pp. 48-49).

Mass violence
The study of mass killing, genocide, and other forms of collective mass violence has tended toward
cross-national statistical examinations when and where such violence occurs (Hart, 2003;}
Kim, 2018; theory-driven case-case comparisions (Geisal, 2010; Kiernan, 2007; Strauss, 2015),
or close, often qualitative, studies of specific cases (Blackhawk, 2006; Luff, 1915; Robinson, 2018;
Stauss, 2016). Although these studies have all been valuable, recent mixed methods studies have
demonstrated the potential to examine not only macro-level patterns at the cross-national and
national level but also micro-level processes and experiences (Finkel, 2012; Kaykos, 2003) within
cases down to the local and individual levels.
In one innovative study, Su (2011) examines variation in violence during China’s Cultural
Revolution. Rather than a state-directed mass killing, violence during this period happened
outside of direct government control, and Su seeks to untangle why certain provinces and locales
experienced collective mass killings outside of a wartime context. Su冝tudies the study with
intensive, personal accounts of individuals’ victimisation and defiance, relying on archives and
interviews (2011, pp. 1-5). Su then uses a combination of quantitative analysis of county-level
data and individual and community-level qualitative analysis to demonstrate how community
structures and attributes led to aggregate variation in the places and times where violence emerged,
as well as the processes by which certain individuals and groups became victims or perpetrators.”
Finkel (2017) looks not at the perpetrators of mass violence, but at those targeted for
elimination and how they react and resist. Finkel (2017, p. 18) argues that too often studies of
genocide and mass killing focus on the tragedy of the violence directed at victims, glossing over
their “agency, choices, and behavior—in all their positive and negative aspects and inherent
complexity.” Examining Jewish communities during the Holocaust, he combines qualitative
evidence from archives and memoirs with quantitative analysis of data on local politics in Poland
prior to World War II and data on ghettos the Nazis established in Poland, the Baltic countries,
and the western USSR. His qualitative data are ideal in helping fulfill his goal of humanizing
Jewish Holocaust victims as “ordinary people,” and the quantitative data demonstrate system-
atically the diversity of strategies employed by different communities at different times, and the
outcomes of their efforts to survive in the face of genocidal violence.

Potential pitfalls for mixed methods research on violence
Conducting quality MMR can be difficult, however. It is necessary to have skills and
experience across more than one method—although this can potentially be addressed
through collaboration by scholars with complementary methodological expertise. The word
limits of journal articles impose another barrier, as the presentation of research from multiple
methods requires significant space for justifying research design and analysis decisions, as
well as detailing findings across methods. There are particular concerns for scholars in my
home discipline of political science, that is to use qualitative and quantitative methods as one component of
a study. Advocates for increased “transparency” demand larger research methods sections or
appendices for qualitative research, cutting into the space that could be used for substantive

Discussion and often overlooking the ethical issues inherent in collecting and disseminating
data on violence (Moorhouse, 2018).
In conducting and presenting MMR, a further concern is coherence in conceptualization and
measurement across methods. For a hypothetical example, a mixed methods study that
examines patterns of violence must be attentive to the fact that measures of violence from
surveys or administrative data used for quantitative analysis may not accord with the under-
standings of violence held by interviewees. If the two components of the project are not
measuring the same thing, then the results will be at most "complementary, rather than
comorrobating" (Ahmim, 2009, p. 6). These differences across methods in the operationaliza-
tion of concepts, however, can be useful if seen as a means to explore multiple potential causal
mechanisms and differing understandings of a concept across populations (see Ahmed & Sil, 2012:
Ahmim, 2013).
Beyond methodological concerns, when studying a sensitive subject such as violence,
researchers must be attuned to the ethical dilemmas that arise when conducting different
types of research. Especially when conducting research during conflict (Campbell, 2017;}
Cotton-Foruhan & Luke, 2018; Malejczyk & Makiłopek, 2016), in authoritarian settings
(Ahman & Goode, 2016), or among heavily policed or surveilled communities in developed
democracies (e.g., Roberts & Indergaard, 2008), the protection of research subjects and their
data is of paramount importance. Scholars should closely examine the latest information and
debates about research ethics and data protection, both around the particular substantive
topic they are researching and about the methods they plan to employ.

Data protection and identifiers may be different with quantitative versus qualitative
information, for instance. The research context and its particular political and social features
should be studied in depth to understand how they might create ethical challenges that could
for subjects at risk of harm (Breyer & Kan, 2002). Researchers should also carefully consider
the data security policies of their own universities and the laws where they are based. This
is necessary to avoid the divulgence of information that research participants were told was
confidential, as in the infamous case of Boston College’s oral histories of participants in
violence in Northern Ireland (see Palys & Lowman, 2012). All of these potential issues must
be accounted for, because, as Brewer and Hunter highlight, MMR studies hold the potential
to "identify and combine a variety of discrete data points from different methods, thereby
linking information about individuals and groups that could not be linked if the methods were
used separately" (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 14).

New directions for research
Scholars of violence have tended to combine qualitative and quantitative methods and data
gathered from surveys, official sources, interviews, and published accounts, in some
cases have integrated formal mathematical models. These remain a variety of possibilities for
expanding the methodological palette for MMR studies. One avenue is the continued
integration of GIS mapping and spatial analysis with other qualitative and quantitative
methods to uncover, document, and understand conflict and violence (e.g., Maddox &
Monin, 2009). Experiments to intervene in prevent interpersonal violence have often been
tried using mixed methods, with quantitative measures and data demonstrating whether or
not the intervention was effective in terms of outcomes and qualitative data helping untangle
mechanisms and processes (e.g., Edwards, Hunt, Meyers, Grupe, & Jerren, 2005), and Pollock
(2016) argues that this can be scaled up to efforts to prevent communal and civil war violence
in developing contexts.
Technological advances have made content analysis of large volumes of text data more feasible than in the past, and quantitative data on overall frequency and patterns of specific terms or types of terms can be combined with qualitative analysis of specific articles, reviews, or other units of communication (e.g., Proctor, Vos & Voix, 2013). Causal is needed, however, in using "Big Data" for predictive analysis (e.g., Mueller & Rauh, 2018), as data sources have selection biases, and algorithms and study parameters necessarily entail subjective decisions. The quantitative data frequently generated using the neuroimagining tools of neuropsychology can also be combined with analyses of qualitative elements of question responses or follow-up questionnaires to give a better understanding of the psychological aspects of violent behavior or reactions to it (Niibwe & Cohen, 1996).

A final possibility is increasing the use of visual data gathered through participatory methods. One possibility would be to use participatory photography, with study subjects taking photos of their environments and experiences, or survey enumerators could take photos of the environments in which they are working, although in both cases with consideration of the emotional and general ethics of photographic research (see Priest, 2010). Participatory mapping exercises can also generate visual and spatial data and act as checks on findings from other methods in examinations of how migration, changes in the communal environments, or the locations of different actors affected or were shaped by violence (e.g., Peterson, 2001; Wood, 2003).

Conclusion

MMR opens up possibilities for scholars of violence to conduct research that captures different aspects of how and why violence occurs and its consequences, working to cut through the "great blooming, buzzing confusion" (James, 1981, p. 462) of social life. By generating more widely accessible findings, MMR can help ensure that research agendas do not become methodologically polarized. This is especially important if scholars want not only to publish but also to work with communities, policymakers, or practitioners to use knowledge to try to prevent or reduce violence, a task to which we should apply all the appropriate methodological tools we possess (Druclman, 2002). Integration of knowledge from the micro to the macro levels, the general to the specific, does not require mixing methods, but MMR provides powerful tools to achieve a more complete picture of violence and its harmful place in society.

Notes

1 On mixed methods in anthropology, see Bernard (2018).
2 I restrict my analysis to physical violence, although mixed methods can also be used to examine structural violence.
3 See Thaler (2017) for a more detailed review of MMR works on collective and social violence, civil war violence, and intimate war.
4 MMR may also be useful in suicide studies (Krol, Lanksa & Bergman, 2012).
5 For exemplary recent mixed methods work on civil war violence elsewhere, see, for example, Balchett (2017) study of violence and revenge during and after the Spanish Civil War, which was an statistical analysis of textual material, ethnographic, interviews, and case study evidence, or Roche's (2016) examination of the origins of and logic of coup and civil war using fieldwork-based case studies of Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to develop and illustrate his theoretical logic, which he then tested using cross-national statistical analysis. For a mixed methods comparison of violent and nonviolent movements in civil conflict, see Chennoch and Stephan (2015), who use statistical analyses to uncover broad patterns and then turn to comparative case studies to explore mechanisms and processes.

References


