

Chapter 9

Designing Mixed Methods Studies to Contribute to Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice: Implications for Library and Information Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The severity of wicked problems, manifest in climate disasters, a global pandemic, and an increasing gap between rich and poor heightens awareness of the need for researchers to support an increase in social, economic, and environmental justice. Perhaps it is not immediately obvious how library and information scientists can play a role in addressing such problems. However, access to information, criteria to judge the quality of information, and inclusion of the voices of marginalized and vulnerable populations fall within the realm of responsibilities for these disciplines. Transformative mixed methods designs have the potential to support the identification of culturally responsive solutions. In this chapter, a transformative framework is presented that prioritizes addressing issues of justice and supporting transformative change. This framework is then illustrated by examples of mixed methods studies that could be designed to contribute to increased justice in these disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

Library and information scientists can contribute to increased justice in the world by virtue of the centrality of access to information, exploration of criteria to judge the quality of information, concerns about diversity and inclusion, and support for community development (Jones, 2020). The pathway

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for professionals in this field towards increased justice is complex; however, advancements in research methodologies offer an opportunity to understand how they can use a systematic approach to achieve this goal. In this chapter, the transformative mixed methods framework is used to demonstrate how a researcher's assumptions can lead to methodological choices that further justice (Mertens, 2018; Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Mertens, 2020). Assumptions about the nature of ethics, reality, and knowledge are the entry points to understanding how to structure a transformative mixed methods study. A structure for a transformative approach to mixed methods research is presented and illustrated by examples that relate to this discipline.

BACKGROUND

The world is facing many complex challenges, such as climate disasters, a global pandemic, and an increasing gap between rich and poor. These types of challenges are called wicked problems because there is an urgent need to find solutions, but there is no agreed upon solution that is considered to be the "right" one (Mertens, 2015; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Solutions need to come from interdisciplinary teams of researchers who have access to quality information on which to base decisions and measure progress. The complexity of the needed solutions is increased because of the overlap in social, economic, and environmental issues that need to be addressed (Widianingsih & Mertens, 2019). The transformative approach to mixed methods emerged in response to the voices of those who are marginalized and vulnerable who wanted a change in how research is done in their communities so that it would be more responsive and supportive of needed transformative changes (Cram, Chilisa & Mertens, 2013).

Ngulube's (2015) review of research studies in knowledge management led him to the conclusion that making explicit "the paradigms, methodology, approaches and data collection methods add to the quality of the inquiry (p.138)." In this chapter, four sets of assumptions are set forth to define the transformative framework for mixed methods research. (Mertens, 2020). The transformative axiological assumption is concerned with the nature of ethics and values and is characterized by a conscious choice to further social, economic, and environmental justice as an outcome of the research. The transformative ontological assumption about the nature of reality is characterized by the recognition that different versions of reality exist; some of these versions of reality sustain an oppressive status quo and other versions of reality provide a basis for systemic, structural change to increase justice. The transformative epistemological assumption recognizes the value of knowledge that is rooted in community experience and the need to structure relationships in research studies in ways that address power inequities and contribute to sustainable transformative change. The three preceding assumptions provide the framework for the transformative methodological assumption that is characterized by a cyclical process that engages with communities to develop culturally responsive interventions and determine their effectiveness. In the next section, these assumptions and their methodological implications are explored in greater detail.

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