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Narrowing the Divide: Perspectives on the Future of Mixed Methods Report From Central and Eastern Europe

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Narrowing the Divide?

Though a timely and needed exercise, the Mixed Methods International Research Association's (MMIRA's) Task Force report, "The Future of Mixed Methods: A Five Year Projection to 2020," opens a whole new array of concerns. While in "Western" academia the mixed methods represent an established and sought-after way of doing research, such approach in transitional and post-transitional parts of the world remains close to nonexistent. Suffice to take a look at the authorship of the Report, which is dominated by representatives of English-speaking countries. In our short article we provide an understanding of the situation and argue that threats of perpetuating or even exacerbating the limbo are grave. While the mixed methods excel in studying the left-out groups, they paradoxically could deepen the divide between the advanced "Western" academia and the rest, which has not managed to catch up with the methodological advances.

Social science in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries that belonged to the socialist bloc in the postwar period has faced unique challenges since 1989. While humanities muddled on, social sciences had to be built completely anew, deprived of their previous goal of legitimizing the regime and propagating the teachings of Marxism-Leninism. Many historians entered the related disciplines and spread the canon of the historical method and idiographic studies. Simultaneously, political philosophers helped ideologically substantiate the new regime, and a demand for practical democracy-building expertise emerged. "Western" literature gradually entered the region by way of a few personalities with language skills; they informed the rest of academia through largely descriptive or basic comparative pieces. Kouba, Císař, and Navrátil (2015) point out that the new political scientists subscribed to an "empirical-analytical approach," which in practice meant self-identification in negative terms as being nonphilosophical and non-Marxist (but not necessarily empirical and analytical).

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The legacy of the past left CEE social science after 1989 in a methodologically unsatisfactory state. Some disciplines, such as economy and part of sociology, managed to keep competence in quantitative methods, but advances in qualitative methods remained largely unnoticed. With the exception of few individuals (some of whom moved to “Western” universities), the academic staff at CEE universities has not wielded strong methodological competence. Leading scholars have not been able to concentrate solely on research but have spent substantial parts of their careers building institutions and completely new study programs. The tiny “Westernized” academic elite oriented itself toward the international arena, which was viewed suspiciously by the rest of the community. Moreover, even the top CEE academics have most often contributed by delivering local data or by applying models to the CEE reality. Typically, these articles rejected the quantification of social science and advocated for the use of qualitative and interpretative approaches, yet methodological rigor was missing. Most articles published dominantly in domestic journals discuss various theories and typologies, but without systemic rigorous testing.

Two important phenomena have further aggravated the situation. First, the environment suffers from a high level of path dependency in which younger academics have followed those who established the disciplines and have just copied the past mainstream. Second, high levels of inbreeding (i.e., hiring new staff from within an institution) further reinforced the threat of ossification because the young cadres are probably going to stay at the faculties for decades. As PhD students, they were already substantially involved in teaching and lacked methodologically competent supervision. The methodological curricula for BA, MA, and especially PhD students remain generally limited to introductory courses (Kofroň & Kruntorádová, 2015). The same holds for academics who depend on self-education and stays abroad. The research outputs rely on nonquantitative approaches, but at the same time do not use more sophisticated qualitative or interpretative methods. Needless to say that we describe the state of the recent past very generally, some exceptions—both individual and institutional—exist. But these exceptions rather confirm our argument, for example, “Western”-style CEU in Budapest stands largely isolated in the Hungarian academic environment.

The MMIRA Report exposed gaps in the social science of the post-transitional societies that had experienced serious and unique problems. For researchers skilled in mixed methodology, the CEE presents an ideal opportunity, because the region is largely ignored by mainstream “Western” research (in contrast to, e.g., emerging markets or failed states). At the same time, local researchers do not wield the expertise to look at the challenges through mixed qualitative–quantitative lenses. Mixed methods research (MMR) could moreover increase the quality of analyses used for political decision-making and cultivate public debate.

Thus, a well-prepared MMR offensive might help in solving some of the pressing problems. Due to the persisting methodological inertia, social science in the CEE region could bypass the “paradigm war” fought elsewhere in the last decades. The quantitative approach has been perceived either as truly scientific, but too difficult to master, or as reductionist and thus unacceptable for social inquiry, while the qualitative approach is considered to be a “half-science” not worthy of study, because an informed insight and clever thinking can do the whole job. Introduction to the MMR should not only incite researchers to acknowledge their basic philosophical starting points but also persuade quantitative researchers who concede validity problems to pursue an MMR approach that can help particularly with this issue.

The prospects for the optimistic scenario need not be excessively grim—social science faculties were in high demand among applicants in the 1990s and often accepted only the most promising high schools students, many of whom now staff the universities. Thanks also to EU funds, the schools offer reasonable salaries, equipment, and access to essential books and journals. Moreover, many departments recognize the methodological gap and try to motivate their personnel to address it. MMR stands as an ideal candidate to deal with the specific historically

determined problems of the CEE region and can help upset the dangerous path dependency. For such a change, an active approach of the MMR community would be extremely helpful—such as identification of key books in the area, an open-access journal, model syllabi of MMR courses for graduate students, workshops for faculty members, joint projects, or inclusion of MMR panels in key regional conferences. The instrumental incentive for CEE academia is quite clear—after obtaining MMR skills, they can readily participate in current cutting-edge research without the label of “Eastern backwardness.” As the MMIRA Report indicates, “Western” academia’s mainstream starting line stands not much further ahead in MMR.

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Mixed Methods in Search of a Problem: Perspectives From Complexity Theory

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Complexity theory is a multidisciplinary paradigm that aims to describe the behavior of systems that, depending on the discipline of inquiry, could be biological, social, economical, or anything

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