



Theoretic and Methodological Approaches Towards the Application of Mixed Methods in the Discipline of International Relations

Uluslararası İlişkiler Disiplininde Karma Yöntemlerin Uygulanması

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Abstract

Discussions regarding the conduct of scientific inquiry have existed throughout history. Questions of how to uncover the truth and achieve reliable and valid scientific conclusions, all under the umbrella of objectivity, have led the sciences to evolve in a systematic manner. Hitherto, the general leniency within this conversation has been directed at the hard sciences; however, the Social Sciences have also recently been on the receiving end of paradigmatic shifts in methodologies. Since the behavioral revolution, the conduct of many disciplines under the Social Sciences has slowly moved towards a more quantitative outlook on the path of uncovering social phenomena. Such an alteration in methodology has its benefits as well as certain handicaps when dealing with abstract social concepts and notions which are difficult to quantify. This is especially the case for the discipline of International Relations (IR), where data are of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. Thus, the aims of this study are threefold: first, the study will present a brief summary of the historical and scientific evolution of methods in the discipline of IR; secondly, it will describe the current situation in which scientific inquiry is conducted, focusing on mixed method approaches; and third, it will deal with the different methodological approaches of MM designs established above by highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, particularly in the discipline of IR. Hence, this study aims to contribute both to the literatures of the disciplines of IR and of methodology in Social Sciences.

Keywords

International Relations (IR), Methodology, Mixed Methods, Qualitative Methods, Quantitative Methods

Öz

Bilimsel araştırmanın yürütülmesine ilişkin tartışmalar tarih boyunca var olmuştur. Gerçeğin nasıl ortaya çıkarılacağı, güvenilir ve geçerli bilimsel sonuçlara nasıl ulaşılabileceğine ilişkin tartışmalar, nesnellik şemsiyesi altında bilimin sistematik bir şekilde gelişmesini sağlamıştır. Bugüne kadar bu tartışmalardaki genel kabul pozitif bilimlere yönelikken bugün, sosyal bilimlerde de yönetsel olarak bu paradigmatik değişimlerden bahsetmekteyiz. Davranışsal devrimden bu yana sosyal bilimlerin altındaki pek çok disiplin, sosyal fenomenleri ortaya çıkarma yolunda yavaş yavaş daha nicel bir bakış açısına sahip olmaya doğru evrilmiştir. Yöntemsel olarak bu tür bir değişikliğin faydaları olduğu kadar nicelleştirilmesi zor olan soyut kavramlarla çalışırken bazı dezavantajları da bulunmaktadır. Bu durum, özellikle, verilerin hem nitel hem de nicel nitelikte olduğu Uluslararası İlişkiler (UI) disiplini için geçerlidir. Bu doğrultuda, bu çalışmanın amaçları üç yönlüdür; ilk olarak, bu çalışma UI disiplinindeki yöntemlerin tarihsel ve bilimsel evriminin kısa bir özeti sunacaktır; ikinci olarak, yönetsel olarak karma yöntem yaklaşımlarına odaklanarak bilimsel araştırmanın yürütüldüğü mevcut durumu tanımlayacak; ve bir üçüncüsü, özellikle UI disiplininde, bahsi geçen karma yöntem tasarımlarının güçlü ve zayıf yönlerini vurgulayarak farklı yönetsel yaklaşımları ele alacaktır. Böylece bu çalışma, hem UI disiplinindeki hem de sosyal bilimlerdeki yöntem literatürüne katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Uluslararası İlişkiler (UI), Yöntem, Karma Yöntemler, Nitel Yöntemler, Nicel Yöntemler

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Introduction

Discussions regarding the conduct of scientific inquiry have existed throughout the history of science. Questions of how to uncover the truth and achieve reliable and valid conclusions, all under the umbrella of objectivity, have led the sciences to evolve in a systematic manner. Hitherto, the general leniency within this conversation has been directed at the hard sciences; however, the Social Sciences have also been on the receiving end of paradigmatic shifts in methodologies. Since the behavioral revolution, the conduct of many disciplines under the Social Sciences has slowly moved towards a more quantitative outlook on the path of uncovering social phenomena. Such an alteration in methodology has its benefits as well as certain handicaps when dealing with abstract social concepts and notions, which are difficult to quantify. This is especially the case for the discipline of International Relations (IR), where data are of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. Here it is critical to amalgamate both the theoretical and methodological evolution of the discipline through the Grand Debates in IR (idealist vs realist/ behavioralist vs traditional/ rational vs reflectivist). The First Grand Debate is of ontological orientation; this is theoretical. The Second Grand Debate is epistemological, which touches upon methodology more than theory. The Third Grand Debate covers both ontological and epistemological debates, and bridges theory and methodology.

Such developments and advancements require a more sophisticated approach to our understanding of the cyclical effects of theoretical developments over methodological choices and vice versa. In this light, the aims of this article are threefold; first, the study will present a brief evolution of the evolution of theory and methods in IR; secondly, it will describe the current situation in which scientific inquiry is conducted, focusing on mixed method approaches; and third, it will highlight the strengths and weakness of the different approaches established above.

The Evolution of Scientific Inquiry in International Relations

The formation of the discipline of modern IR is generally attributed to E.H. Carr (2001), who put forth his ideas of studying the international system in a systematic and objective manner in his seminal work “The Twenty-Year Crisis,” where he presented a clear dichotomy between the normative/idealist and realist analyses of world events. The idea of dividing political philosophy from systematic theory building shaped the framework on which IR has evolved as a discipline. Although precise discussions of methods utilized in analysis followed much later, the notion of objectivity introduced in the 1920s by Carr have been the foundation leading to IR as a science. In order to fully comprehend this route, a brief discussion of the “Grand Debates” in IR needs to be understood thoroughly.

The “Grand Debates” of International Relations Theory

Since its inception in the aftermath of the Great War, IR Theory has housed many diverging viewpoints of theoretic, paradigmatic, and methodologic orientations. The field of IR encompasses far more than interstate interactions: investigating a plethora of phenomena ranging from wars and conflicts to the effects of interstate cooperation and outcomes of domestic issues on the global atmosphere, the discipline of IR analyzes a

multitude of notions from various paradigmatic stances. Stemming from such plurality and complexity of the issues of inquiry, scholars have debated the appropriate ontology and epistemology of the field. The methodological patterns of the Grand Debates of IR theory and discussing their contributions to our knowledge and understandings of IR hold the key to understanding the manner in which the science is conducted. The first major discussion, aptly titled “The First Grand Debate,” circled around the distinction between political normative theory making and its applications to the international system.

The end of the Great War called for recognition that war was not the business of soldiers anymore (Carr, 2001), a development that signaled the beginnings of the field of international relations. The global atmosphere was one of recovery and cynicism, especially after the carnage of the First World War. The failure of Wilsonian idealism and the concomitant surge of opposition marked the origins of the First Grand Debate of IR theory, pitting idealists and realists against one another. Although this debate is regarded as having an ontological basis due to its focus on human nature, its epistemological implications, thus its methodological applications, cannot and should not be disregarded. Carr posits that realism is the “acceptance of facts and analysis of causes and consequences” (Carr, 2001) underlining the positivistic tendencies of the realist paradigm as well as stating the shortcomings of the idealist paradigm as being naive.

With realism being the victor of the First Grand Debate and dominating the American school, “the Second Grand Debate” emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. Here the discussion was purely epistemological with debate revolving around how one ought to methodologically study international relations. The two camps were highly differentiated: on one hand were the behavioralists, who believed that the positivist methodology should be applied to the social sciences, replicating the natural sciences as much as possible through observation, data, hypothesis testing and falsifiability (Popper, 2002). For the behavioralist camp, causality and analysis through data collection and replication were key factors validating their analyses. The other side of the spectrum, the traditionalist camp, argued that IR could be advanced through detailed historical investigations, participant observations, unique case studies and interpretation (Kaplan, 1966). The behavioralist critique of the traditional approach was based on the notion of falsifiability: the traditional findings were close to storytelling and did not accumulate systematic knowledge and identify/develop general patterns and therefore, were not scientific because empiric evidence could not be verified through the traditional methods. This debate shook the social science discipline to its core with the winner by a landslide being the behavioralist methodology, an outcome still relevant to the discipline today.

The Third Grand Debate of 1988 (Robert Keohane’s speech at APSA) centered around the rational versus reflectivist approach. This debate encompassed both ontological and epistemological concerns. The rationalist camp encompassing the realist and liberal paradigm argued that the positivistic methodology, and the measurement of material-based interest of rational actors was critical in understanding IR. The reflectivist camp, with its critical theory and post-modernism, were firm supporters of the idea that subjective study and interpretation were inseparable from observations and that the rationalist camp was flawed in viewing the complexity of reality. The rational approach criticized the reflectivist camp for their lack of scientific methods (Keohane, 1988). However, the

reflectivist side claimed that they did not believe in a subjective science and this was not a game they could play (Kurki and Wight, 2016).

With all of these debates, new ideas, concepts and notions have entered the IR literature, paving the way for new scientific and critical debates. Such new frameworks contribute to our understandings of the complexity of the world around us, which becomes slightly less overwhelming. Whether this be new ways of perceiving the world around us (new paradigms) or how to conduct research (positivistic/behavioralist), it is evident that discussing and investigating bring the discipline to a higher level of sophistication. This is especially critical when both endogenous and exogenous factors affecting theory and method overlap. The following section aims to unveil this issue by investigating such implications.

The Key Implications of the Third Grand Debate on Methodology and Applications

When Robert Keohane gave his speech at the American Political Science Association (APSA) meeting of 1988, he brought attention to the drift in IR theory, coining the terms reflectivists and rationalists for the two contending views on methodology. Concomitantly, the Third Grand Debate stemmed even further. On one hand stood the rationalist umbrella encompassing the realist and liberal theories of IR. On the other side stood the reflectivist camp with critical theory, post-modernism, feminism, and queer theory housed under its roof. The middle child, constructivism, was not accepted fully by either camp, being too state-centric and systemic for the reflectivists and being non-positivistic for the rationalists.

The rationalists base their claims on two assumptions: firstly, actors are rational and secondly, the interests of these actors are material. Here, the logic of expected circumstances is crucial in their world views. The reflectivists, on the other hand, hold a bounded rationality claim of actors and the interests consisting of ideational, norm-based and cultural sort. For them, the logic of appropriateness was the key to shaping international interactions and cooperation.

The critique of reflectivism on the rationalist approach lies in its undermining of the cultural, normative and ideational notions. For the reflectivist, rational approaches are too limited in analyzing the multitude of actors and phenomena around because it is faulty to assume that all expectations and preferences are shaped by calculations of material gains. For the reflectivists, actor preferences are molded by ideational factors and most importantly, culture. Furthermore, the differentiation of culture requires various types of analysis. For the reflectivists, the rationals are trying to understand the world by looking at it with dark glasses. Furthermore, for the reflectivists, constructivists are too state-centric and systematic (recognizes anarchy as one of the possible outcomes) to function under their umbrella due to the fact that they recognize the game that the rationals are playing, where the game is not suitable for a reflectivist to play in the first place. On the other hand, the rationalist critique of the reflectivists rests on the shoulders of the scientific methods: measuring ideational constructs is close to impossible and the findings cannot be empirically verified, therefore, it is not scientific. Namely, the rationalists argue that reflectivists (including constructivism) fail to produce testable hypotheses because the interests formulated under ideational constructs (identity, culture, norms, etc.) cannot

be purely identified. Furthermore, one rational approach would suggest that material and ideational interests are deeply intertwined and therefore, cannot be separated and thus, cannot be measured separately.

Although constructivists have been rejected by the two main approaches and are in the middle ground of the debate (Adler, 2005) it is critical to underline the importance that they give to ideational interests and the links that these interests hold over preferences and behavior. This is something the rational approaches would not take into account. Accordingly, the critical point for the constructivists lies in the effects of these norms, identities and cultures over individual, collective and state behavior. Concomitantly, with this kind of world view of constant dynamism and change, modeling the world in realist or liberal parsimony is difficult.

Overall, both camps and constructivism have valid arguments. It is also true that when an overly general research pattern is employed the resulting generalization fails to capture the sophistication of reality. However, the purpose of IR is to explain international actions, outcomes and phenomena and the reflectivist camp complicates issues to the extent that no possible explanation can rise to the surface. Thus, it seems that it is almost impossible to use both post-positivist qualitative methods and positivist quantitative methods together in a research study, because of their ontological and epistemological differences on the one hand and their different research design patterns on the other. However, we argue that this is not the case in the discipline of IR and we provide some examples from the recent literature in the next section. However, this study is just the tip of the iceberg in that there is a need for further and much more detailed research focusing particularly on the combinations of different methods in IR research under the Third Grand debate and their contribution to the existing literature.

The Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in International Relations

The quality of any research agenda is based on many factors, such as the novelty of the inquiry, theoretical framing, robustness, validity and reliability, as well as the appropriate choice of methodology. The current trend- and the unspoken rule- in IR is to utilize quantitative techniques in analysis. This general acceptance of the quantitative side of the spectrum brings about key concerns as many lean towards a specific type of quantitative analysis because it has a higher chance of publication. However, much is lost when the method is chosen due to its popularity; one of the basic rules of scientific inquiry is to first identify the research question and decide on the variables after rigorous research. After a solid justification of these steps, the second major phase is to ponder deeply over the research agenda- the methodological path the study is to undertake. As mentioned above there is a positivist bias.

Mixed Methodology (MM): Conceptualization, Advantages and Shortcomings

The advantages of a mixed method approach have been discussed widely, especially since the current trends, which seem to favor quantitative processes. However, this is a rather narrow approach; there are possibilities for large-n studies within small-n research and vice versa (Gerring, 2012). There is a lack of understanding that qualitative and quantitative investigations are indeed complimentary and a combination of methods

is more likely to hold higher explanatory power (Creswell, Plano, & Clark; Greene & Caracelli, 1997; Jick, 1979). The logic behind this is based on the nature of both methods; qualitative work is stronger in highlighting correlations, whereas quantitative work aims to uncover the causal processes at play (Sammons, 2010). As such, both approaches explain the same phenomena from different perspectives, and, if reconciled, would significantly increase the value of the research maximizing the benefits of both methods, while minimizing their respective shortcomings by reconciling the deductive and inductive approaches (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Brady and Collier, 2010). The advantage of adopting a mixed method approach in IR can be recapitulated as the sum is bigger than its parts. Combining two different perspectives is more likely to produce a holistic picture (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010).

However, there are certain points of caution; a mixed method approach is not applicable to all research questions. Secondly, the research design of mixed methodology does not follow the traditional trajectory- although, there have been remarkable works categorizing MM, such as Biesenbender and Heritier, 2014, Morse, 2010 and Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009. There is much debate on the proper way to combine qualitative and quantitative methods.

In their works, Imke Harbers and Matthew C. Ingram have addressed conceptual questions regarding MM. The authors suggest that MM should be understood from three dimensions: “(1) the manner in which the methods are combined, that is, the degree of integration; (2) the sequence in which they are combined; and (3) the analytic motivations for such combinations” (Harbers and Ingram 2020, 1118). This perspective provides a safe road map for authors.

Historically, there have been few investigations utilizing an MM approach. Most visible are the works of Robert Cox and Susan Strange, where categorical and ordinal variables have been considered. In his seminal work titled “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” Cox highlighted the importance of the consciousness of the past (Cox, 1981). Following this logic, in *States and Markets* (1988), Strange advocated for an inclusion of a historical perspective within the discipline of International Political Economy. It is argued that the context in which phenomena occur cannot be clinically separated from its outputs. In simpler terms, context matters. This is not the case for many recent studies, as MM has increased visibly; in 2013, Weaver-Hightower and Skelton (2013) experimented on the benefits of mixed-method design by utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to study the concept of influence of leaders. The author concludes that a mixed-method approach and triangulation could greatly benefit social science research, especially IR and Political Science. Similarly, De Juan and Pierskalla (2014) analyze political trust and how it is influenced by aid and violence, utilizing both survey data and qualitative interviews.

On the other hand, there are many challenges and disadvantages of MM; first, learning and mastering a methodology is temporally quite costly. Second, combining collected qualitative and quantitative data systematically is not an easy feat (Matthews et al., 2005; Kwan and Ding, 2008; Fielding and Cisneros-Puebla, 2009; Yeager and Steiger, 2013). It is quite difficult to decide on the most applicable first step to start the analysis procedures. In some cases, in order to explain and answer the research question of a

study, using MM becomes necessary. Cases such as the following can be considered: when explaining a complex concept of IR, it would be required to evaluate it from different perspectives; when a researcher prefers to explain a research question both in macro (country/international/global) and micro (individual/group) levels; following a correlation between two different variables that came up as a result of a research study, if a researcher would like to explain the causal relationship between those variables in detail; if unexpected results come up during the analysis, a researcher would like to use another method in order to interpret those results (Aydın-Çakır and Türkeş-Kılıç, 2021).

That being said, new developments in the field have suggested novel solutions to seamlessly integrate both methodologies; Abildgaard, J. S., Saksvik, P. O. and Nielsen, K. M. (2016) have suggested the use of quantitative methods to select cases following a qualitative approach, which utilizes the “most similar systems design.” When a qualitative method follows a quantitative one, this approach is called “explanatory sequential design.” In such research, data of the qualitative method allow the researcher to elaborate on the results of the quantitative method. One of the challenges of this MM design is its duration. Research may take a long time, since the research questions, sample and data collection method of the qualitative method should be decided after the end of the quantitative method. Thus, it would be impossible to at the beginning of the research clarify research questions of the qualitative method that could cause some ethical problems (Barnes 2019, 311, Aydın-Çakır and Türkeş-Kılıç 2021, 8).

In the discipline of IR, MM has been applied in several studies ranging from conflict resolution and foreign policy analysis to Europeanization and democratic peace theory. For example, Kapur (2007) has primarily applied a statistical analysis (quantitative method) in his research and thus, showed that there are higher tensions in traditional military conflicts between India and Pakistan when their nuclear power increases. Then, he has explained the reasons for this inference by applying a process tracing method (qualitative method). As another example from the field of foreign policy analysis, Greenhill and Strausz (2014) have conducted a statistical analysis in order to explain the time taken by all United Nations (UN) member states from 1948 to 2001 to ratify the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide during the first stage of their research. After that they have focused on the case of Japan and presented a detailed review of the debates over whether to ratify the Convention. Conducting a MM approach would enable them to test the validity of the results of their statistical analysis, following a case study (Aydın-Çakır and Türkeş-Kılıç 2021). As against the main argument of “democratic peace theory” of IR, Mansfield and Snyder (2005) have argued that in states where the democratization process has slowed down, there are weak political institutions and there is a long-standing conflict with one another, there is a high probability of going to war with each other. In order to test this hypothesis, they have first conducted a statistical analysis using large-N data. Then they have examined some democratic countries that went to war with each other in detail.

The MM approach also has benefits for single-case studies in IR by eliminating their limitations via simultaneous MM designs (Aydın-Çakır and Türkeş-Kılıç 2021, 7). Keeping this in mind, Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm (2018) has conducted process tracing in order to answer how and to what extent EU policies have been institutionalized in Turkish

Foreign Policy between 1987 and 2016. At the same time, she has coded data collected from primary and secondary sources, such as interviews, news, reports, press releases, etc., by discourse analysis. Thus, the findings of process tracing would be strengthened by applying a MM design. Another simultaneous MM study in political psychology, a sub-discipline of Political Science and IR, has focused on foreign policy actors (individuals) in foreign policy-making (Rathbun, Kertzer and Paradis 2017). The researchers conducted experimental laboratory testing and an archive-based case study together. By applying a simultaneous MM design, their aim was to understand the behavior of foreign policy makers under different circumstances and check both the internal and external validity of their arguments (Aydın-Çakır and Türkeş-Kılıç 2021, 7).

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to shed light on the historical and scientific discussions linking theory and methodology in social sciences, particularly in the field of IR, and briefly explain the current situation of MM studies, including their advantages and shortcomings, again, in the discipline of IR, where data are of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. Hence, this study aims to contribute to both literatures of the disciplines of IR and methodology in Social Sciences. Thus, first, it has presented a brief summary of the historical and scientific evolution of methods in the discipline of IR. Secondly, we have tried to describe the current situation in which scientific inquiry is conducted, focusing on MM approaches. Finally, this study has dealt with the different methodological approaches of MM designs by highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, providing examples particularly from the discipline of IR. The evolution of scientific inquiry in IR has paved the way for three “Grand debates” of IR theory, which have been summarized above. It is not surprising that IR scholars have been continuously discussing this in order to find the appropriate ontology and epistemology of the field, since the discipline deals with a variety of issues of inquiry together with complex paradigmatic approaches. Regarding the emergence and evolution of the MM approach in IR, the Third Grand Debate between reflectivists and rationalists became determinant. As a result of the Third Grand Debate in IR, although it seems that the rationalists have won the debate (according to the current publication trends in IR utilizing quantitative methodology), we argue that there is a positivist bias. Thus, the obvious advantages of the MM approach in Social Sciences have become a savior for the ongoing methodological polarization in the discipline of IR. This study supports the argument that qualitative and quantitative investigations are indeed complimentary, and that a combination of methods is more likely to hold higher explanatory power not only in Social Sciences, but particularly in the IR discipline as well. In MM research, while the quantitative method eliminates the limitations of the qualitative one, the findings of the qualitative method present causal relationships among different factors/variables in order to interpret the results of the quantitative one.

However, there are also some disadvantages of the MM approach and challenges in applying it. Although the aim of a MM design is to neutralize the weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative methods, if it is applied to a poorly justified and imprecisely planned research design, it can multiply the errors of a single method (Dunning 2007, 22). In addition, duration of the analyses in a MM approach is longer and its implementation

cost is higher than the single method. Last but not least, a researcher who applies MM should have a good command and sufficient knowledge of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Despite all the difficulties and possible problems mentioned above, IR studies conducting MM can reach more valid and reliable results than those that conduct a single method, whether quantitative or qualitative. It is possible to discern this from currently widespread, academically intriguing and successful MM studies almost in all of the sub-fields of IR conducted during the last two decades, as presented in this study. However, as Aydın-Çakır and Türkeş-Kılıç mention, “this does not mean that studies using only qualitative or quantitative methods are less valuable and scientific. It should also be noted that MM cannot be applied to every research question” (Aydın-Çakır and Türkeş-Kılıç 2021, 12).

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