1
Introduction

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Background

The use of mixed methods in researching poverty and vulnerability and evaluation of interventions in this field has expanded rapidly in the last few years. The added value of mixed methods research in analysing poverty and vulnerability has now been widely acknowledged (see Shaffer 2013, Stern et al. 2012). Much work has been undertaken with respect to meaningfully combining methods at various stages in the research process – from generating data to analysis and reporting – and reflections thereon have led to mixed methods not only having become more ‘mainstream’ but also more robust and of greater quality. Despite an exponential growth of studies using mixed methods research in the last decade, gaps and challenges remain.

A workshop on mixed methods research in poverty and vulnerability held in London in July 2013 brought together academics, practitioners and consultants from developing and developed countries to share ideas and learn lessons about the use of mixed methods approaches in this particular area of study. A number of themes emerged in terms of where more advances are to be made, namely credibility, complexity and usability. This edited volume provides reflections on various issues within these themes, largely based on practical applications in research and evaluation. The collection includes contributions from different disciplinary perspectives and holds considerations on the process of data collection as well as the use of data for analytical and policy purposes.

In this introduction, we will discuss each of the three emerging themes and how they are covered in the contributions in this volume.
Credibility

Although mixed methods research in poverty and vulnerability may have firmly established itself as a valuable contribution to development studies, it still lacks credibility in many areas of academia. This holds particularly true for academics studying poverty and vulnerability from a singular disciplinary perspective such as economics (Shaffer 2013). Underlying this scepticism might be the epistemological clashes when trying to combine data and methods grounded in different disciplinary backgrounds. The field of impact evaluation has been particularly liable to such a divide, where quantitatively focused ‘randomistas’ often find themselves on the opposite side of heterodox quantitative, qualitative and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)-influenced researchers (Bamberger et al. 2010). There may also be concerns relating to the rigour of mixed methods research given that few people are expert in both qualitative and quantitative data generation and analysis. This renders conventional guidelines for assessing quality insufficient. For example, Camfield (2014) notes that the mixing of methods requires an engagement with the metanarratives’ underlying assumptions about the topic under investigation and, therefore, with the epistemological understandings that shape those assumptions.

Considerations for improving credibility in mixed methods research, as well as the ways in which mixed methods approaches can make research more credible, are central to many contributions in this volume. From an epistemological perspective, a more explicit consideration of how different disciplinary backgrounds enter mixed methods approaches and shape the subsequent research design allows the researcher to extend beyond the implicit assumptions and methodological choices that are rooted in such disciplinary backgrounds. At the same time, greater reflection on disciplinary considerations that feed into the design of mixed methods approaches may allow users of research to overcome their own epistemological qualms. Edmiston (Chapter 3, this volume) shows how distinct citizenship theories and concepts of relative deprivation can be meaningfully and credibly combined through the study of lived experience, furthering our understanding of poverty and vulnerability in light of social, economic and cultural relations. Fahmy, Sutton and Pemberton (Chapter 2, this volume) highlight how consensus about ‘necessities of life’ is interpreted differently from quantitative and qualitative perspectives and that more deliberative methods are required for understanding public views on necessities.