Review of William Axinn and Lisa D. Pearce, *Mixed Method Data Collection Strategies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2006

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We development economists are in the business of studying people separated from ourselves by vast distances - social, economic and geographic. To bridge this distance we should, at a minimum, be immersed in the field collecting data, conducting research that is shaped by the contexts within which the poor and marginalized people we study are located. Until a few years ago most of us analyzed survey data collected by someone else, though now there is an increasing trend in applied work where survey data is analyzed by the person who collected it and this has led to a deeper and richer understanding of development problems. Some, however, would argue that we need to go a step further: by restricting ourselves to the econometric analysis of survey data we are boxing ourselves into a Cartesian trap; the questions we ask are constrained by the limitations inherent in the process by which quantitative data from closed-ended questions in surveys is collected. We are limited in our ability to ask important questions about the social, cultural and political context within which development problems are embedded. We even miss some critical economic issues such as, for instance, the heterogeneity that underlies what we call "informal" economies, and we miss studying marginal markets that are centrally important for policy – such as the market for drugs, political favors, and sex – all of which require a strong degree of rapport with respondents that a short visit to field a questionnaire will not provide. In other words our research questions are being shaped by our data instead of our data by the questions. A strong case can be made that such questions require a more eclectic approach to data – that mixes participation observation, the analysis of text-based information (e.g. from tape recordings of village meetings or newspaper articles), free-ranging open-ended interviews with key informants and focus groups, and other such types of information that can be loosely called "qualitative data". The name is a bit of a misnomer, however, since a lot of qualitative data can be coded, quantified and econometrically analyzed. This distinction should therefore be more appropriately between data collected from structured, closed-ended questions and non-structured, open-ended, modes of enquiry.

Such mixed-method approaches have the potential to add a great deal of value to development economics in at least the following ways:

1) Extensive qualitative work before developing a survey instrument can help generate new unexpected hypotheses which can be tested for their generalizability with quantitative data.
2) Open-ended approaches can be very helpful in understanding "process", i.e. the sequence of changes that cause a situation to shift from one moment in time to another. This can be central, for instance, to understanding *why* an intervention worked or failed in addition to *how much* – which the focus of most impact evaluations.
3) Some participant observation can be very helpful in "observing" unobservables by directly going to the field and asking systematic questions, observing and understanding context.
4) Qualitative methods can be helpful in discovering new questions, finding instrumental variables, and determining appropriate econometric specifications.
5) In-depth interviews and focus group discussion can help determine the extent of measurement error, and – perhaps more importantly –an in-depth conversation with an outlier can provide important insights into economic and social processes.
6) More generally, qualitative methods help place econometric relationships within their proper institutional context.
7) Finally, open-ended approaches provide a second source of data by which econometric results can be "triangulated" or cross-checked for validity.

There are now a fair number of book length treatments of mixed-methods approaches – each with their strengths and weaknesses[1], and an entire journal – *The Journal of Mixed Methods Research* – devoted to the field. However, it is fair to say that the existing literature does not speak as directly to the needs and concerns of development economists as the book under review by William Axinn and Lisa Pearce. Axinn and Pearce are both social demographers, and much of their work is on the sociology of families and communities in Nepal and other developing countries. Thus the contexts in which they operate and the methods their use have some kinship to those employed by development economists. The book however, does not purport to be a text in mixed-methods. For instance it does not provide an overview of the basic methods in qualitative analysis[2]. Its other limitation is that it has largely been written for sociologists and demographers employing the argot and statistical techniques favored by those disciplines. However, given these limitations, it draws on the authors' work among the Tamang ethnic group in Nepal to systematically demonstrate the added value of mixed-methods approaches.

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[1] See Tashakkori and Teddlie (2002) for a comprehensive overview.

[2] See Flick (2007) for a comprehensive treatment and Berg (2008) for a more concise textbook style approach.

Two chapters, in particular, in this short book are devoted to explicating techniques that could be particularly valuable. The first on "Neighborhood History Calendars" uses a mix of techniques to map information on the institutional history of communities. This is very helpful in rural areas of poor countries with largely illiterate populations and poor public records, where the institutional memory of various key members of the community and of focus groups, are used to complete event-history calendars for the community. The authors show that mixing methods, combined with cross-checking sources of information, can provide excellent data that outlines important events in the history of the community that have a bearing on current conditions. This is potentially very valuable, for instance, in understanding path-dependencies in institutional structures, or in conducting ex-post evaluations of community-based interventions. The second technique on Life History Calendars is less novel, but the authors demonstrate that a hybrid approach can vastly improve the quality of data and expand the kinds of questions that can be asked – particularly in innumerate populations that do not record dates.

The typical EDCC reader will have to make an effort to translate some of these ideas to their own work, both because of disciplinary differences, and differences in topics of research. In order to fully appreciate the added value of the book, it might be helpful to read articles on mixed-methods that are written for development economists: Rao (2002) and Rao and Woolcock (2003) explain the costs and benefits of mixing qualitative and econometric methods, and illustrate their usefulness for understanding difficult development questions, and for impact evaluations. Kanbur (2003) is a collection of essays that debates the pros and cons of mixed methods from various disciplinary perspectives. Seminal readings on the use of mixed-methods in development include Bardhan (1989) which is an edited "conversation" between economists and anthropologists on data collection, Epstein (1962) which is an early effort by a development economist to understand village life combining economic and anthropological methods, and Bliss and Stern (1982) whose work on Palanpur was an important milestone in the institutional analysis of rural poverty.

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