

## Book Review: A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences

by Blog Admin

May 22, 2013

*In **A Tale of Two Cultures**, Gary Goertz and James Mahoney argue that qualitative and quantitative methods constitute different cultures, each internally coherent yet marked by contrasting norms, practices, and toolkits. The authors seek to promote toleration, exchange, and learning by aiming to enable scholars to think beyond their own culture and see an alternative scientific worldview. Those instructing research methods will find the book a particularly helpful teaching tool, writes **Maria Kuecken**, with clear examples and case studies throughout.*



**A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences. Gary Goertz and James Mahoney. Princeton University Press. August 2012.**

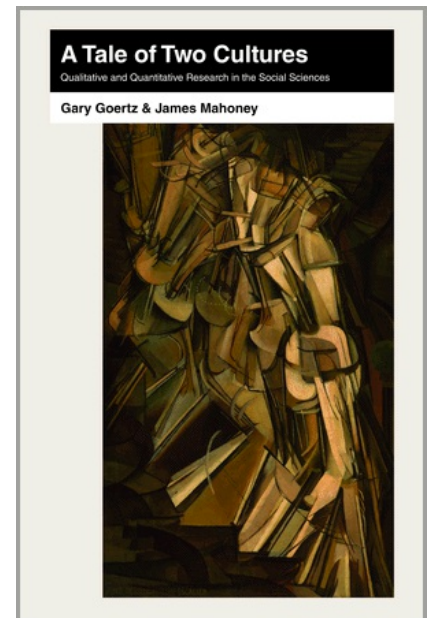
### Find this book:

Between camps of quantitative and qualitative researchers, a discussion of research methods is one that usually incites more contention than cooperation. But, according to [Gary Goertz](#) and [James Mahoney](#), conflict doesn't need to be the norm. By carefully dissecting each methodological tradition in their book *A Tale of Two Cultures*, Goertz and Mahoney do social scientists a great service by promoting mutual understanding and appreciation of both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Goertz and Mahoney frame their book with the assertion that “the quantitative-qualitative disputation in social sciences is really a clash of cultures.” Like different cultures, they explain that each tradition abides by its own sets of practices and beliefs. And while there is potentially a great deal to be gained from cross-over between the two, more often than not cross-cultural interactions are waved away or, at the very least, misunderstood.

Gary Goertz and James Mahoney are both social scientists themselves – the former is a political scientist at the University of Arizona and the latter is a professor of political science and sociology at Northwestern University. Both have extensive chops in teaching and writing about research methods, which explains why *A Tale of Two Cultures* is easy to follow despite its technical subject.

The authors encourage social scientists to avoid knee-jerk reactions deriving from an aversion to or preference for one particular methodological tradition. Instead, they maintain impartiality, reminding the reader that both traditions “are appropriate for different research tasks and are designed to achieve different research goals.” Put simply, no tradition is better than the other. Moreover, to reduce the clash of cultures as simply “numbers versus words” is to make an unhelpful and misleading simplification. Adopting the cultures approach thus allows Goertz and Mahoney to initiate a breakdown of the two research traditions in a systematic and nuanced fashion.



kindle edition

amazon

An important take-away is that some analogies which seem useful on the surface can instead be misleading. The authors emphasize early on that there is a translation problem across cultures. For example, the quantitative researcher is equipped with probability theory and statistical tools. Qualitative researchers don't typically consider their tradition as one that is explicitly couched in mathematics but, as Goertz and Mahoney explain carefully in their mathematical prelude, logic and set theory support this paradigm. They demonstrate how applying fuzzy-set math as a formal tool in qualitative analysis can produce useful distinctions with quantitative analysis as well as illuminate the translation problem across the two research cultures. A simple demonstration is the seemingly straightforward comparison between using either statistical multiplication or the logical AND to aggregate data. While analogous, they result in two entirely different mathematical procedures since the latter requires taking the minimum. Thus, when taken to the mathematical roots, attempts to translate directly from one culture to another can be misleading.

But it is not just the mathematical values that differ; norms and procedures do, too. Quantitative social scientists tend to begin investigations of causality by hypothesizing the impact of a particular cause on an outcome, while qualitative social scientists take the opposite approach, starting their investigation with a given outcome and working in reverse to find the causes. Choices such as these direct quantitative researchers to pursue methods of estimations that yield average effects of specific variables across samples, while qualitative researchers focus on a multivariate approach which leads them to look for explanations that fit a group as well as individuals within said group. The authors make similar distinctions regarding concept and measurement in each methodology as well as the qualitative within-case analysis (and its implications for both traditions).

For a book that celebrates the complementarities between quantitative and qualitative research methods, it is unsurprising that the authors wrap up with a call for more mixed-method research. While a completely sensible suggestion, it is also a bit ironic, considering that the book's tendency to focus on sociology and political science risks making other social scientists feel excluded. Yet, all social scientists do in fact have something to gain from the discussions presented here, especially by being more open-minded to the value of exchanges.

*A Tale of Two Cultures* is an informative read for social scientists, especially those who find themselves specialized in one culture of research instead of the other (which, of course, is most of us). If one is absent a background in either culture, Goertz and Mahoney provide clear examples to illustrate their arguments. Thus, those instructing research methods will find the book a particularly helpful teaching tool, even if some may take issue with the 'two culture' approach. After all, promoting appreciation and exchange of research methods through better understanding is indeed a worthy goal.

---

**Maria Kuecken** is a Ph.D. candidate in Economics at the Paris School of Economics—Paris I Pantheon-Sorbonne University. Maria teaches graduates and undergraduates in Applied Econometrics and Development Economics. Specializing in development economics, her own research focuses on the determinants of educational quality in developing countries. She has blogged on a variety of issues for the European Journalism Centre, worked on educational projects in Rwanda, and interned in the Health Division of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. [Read more reviews by Maria.](#)