Marrying mixed methods and critical realism

Critical realists, with their concern for deep understanding, particularly of agency, tend to gravitate towards the use of qualitative methods. Nevertheless Sayer (2010) recognises that quantitative methods have a place when used with respect for the said framework; particularly though, they should be used to deepen meaning rather than to uncover regularity (McEvoy & Richards, 2006) for this would lead to the epistemological fallacy (Scott, 2000), or internal inconsistency within the underpinning design.

A mixed methods approach, can be applied in the spirit of critical realism. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011) identify that mixed methods can mean many things; it can refer to the use of multiple types of data collection that are aligned with both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). Mixed methods have been used widely in educational research for accuracy, building up a complete picture, and extending the sampling possibilities. Despite these known benefits, mixed methods research has sometimes been criticized for indiscriminate acceptance of both positivist and constructivist ways of knowing (Danermark, 2002; McEvoy & Richards, 2006) particularly this criticism is levied when the methodology is used out of pragmatism, without explicit reference to ontology and therefore congruence. Use of mixed methods should not inevitably imply ontological indifference; it can be applied thoughtfully, in a way that upholds the spirit of the parent ontology (Danermark, 2002; McEvoy & Richards, 2006; Zachariadis et al., 2013).

Robson (2011 p. 166) explains that sometimes “it is difficult to judge what has been gained by employing both [qualitative and quantitative] approaches”. To ensure clarity of purpose Robson (2011), and also Caruth (2013), urge all mixed methods researchers to be absolutely clear of why mixed methods are being used. A mixed methods approach is particularly justified by the need for completeness, abductive inspiration, and to a lesser extent, confirmation.
Completeness

Mixed methods can help get the widest possible range of views or interpretations. Exposure to a broader range of perspectives and experiences can in turn assist with the formulation of explanation (McEvoy & Richards, 2006) In opening up the research to hear a greater number of perspectives, mixed methods can act as a developmental aid (Zachariadis et al., 2013).

Abductive inspiration

Mixed methods can help deepen the explanation of a phenomenon and to generate theory (Danermark, 2002; McEvoy & Richards, 2006) Creating a substantive and varied data set can only assist in moving towards a hypothesis or explanation, not withstanding the risk of data overload.

Confirmation

The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods enables research findings, to be further reinforced (McEvoy & Richards, 2006; Venkatesh et al., 2013). Confirmation can be sought as a measure of trustworthiness. While Zachariadis et al. (2013) and Danermark et al (2002) caution that an epistemological fallacy can occur when trying to validate qualitative results with quantitative methods, McEvoy & Richards portray that that confirmation makes sense in terms of assessing a tangible social reality. Confirmatory use of a secondary method is thus used carefully.

References

Caruth, G. D. (2013). Demystifying mixed methods research design: A review of the literature. Online Submission,


