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I would like to thank Thomas Christ for introducing me to AERA and the AERA conference. I would also like to offer two apologies. First, I apologise for not being present. I would very much like to be there today. Second, I apologise to and commiserate with whoever is burdened with reading out my tortuous and convoluted prose. I appreciate how difficult it is delivering other people's material.

Martin Lipscomb – RN, PhD

Critical realism and realist pragmatism in mixed method research: the problematics of event identity and abductive inference

While mixed method research is not universally accepted as an appropriate research choice (and in certain situations it is, self evidently, an inappropriate choice), mixed inquiry is now widely embedded in and accepted by many disciplines. Indeed, it might be argued that debates regarding the legitimacy or otherwise of mixed method research have, in some if not all cases, been superseded by detailed discussion about quality or the specific mechanisms by which mixing can best be facilitated.

Although the 'paradigm wars' are, if not ended, then certainly in abeyance, controversy nonetheless remains regarding the relationships that exist between methods and the research traditions with which they are associated. The significance of these relations can be and often is overstated. Nevertheless, mixed method researchers who conjoin methods (as tools) that invoke or are coupled with divergent epistemologies and ontologies continue to grapple, to skirmish, with questions of argumentative coherence.

Pragmatism has been advanced as one means by which the Gordian knot of theoretical dispute can be cut and critical realists have, in recent years, also asserted that as both a philosophy of science and methodology, realism can coordinate or structure mixed

method inquiry. Both approaches promise much. Yet there are different pragmatisms and different realisms and here, as elsewhere, conceptual clarity is required if muddle is to be avoided.

The beneficial role and place for realistic pragmatism in mixed method research is here assumed. However, contra some research texts, the belief that pragmatism and/or realism offers a way around theoretical dispute is here rejected. Rather, it is suggested that problems attend the mixing of methods based on realist and pragmatic assumptions. These problems may surface between realism and pragmatism and also with methods emanating from non-realist traditions. Specifically, mixing realist and non-realist concepts of events and event identities can cause confusion and problems also accompany mixing methods of inquiry based on critical realist abductive inference with inductive and deductive inferential forms favoured by alternative research traditions/philosophies.

A short presentation such as this can, of course, only skim the surface of the issues covered and a great deal of background knowledge must be assumed, perhaps unfairly, of the audience. Nevertheless, in unpicking the above claims the following structure is employed. To begin, pragmatism is situated in mixed method work. It is suggested that texts on mixed method research may misrepresent pragmatism. Critical realism is then introduced. It is proposed that similar problems of representation beset this approach to understanding. Links between realism and pragmatism are outlined. To conclude, difficulties in mixing pragmatism and realism and also pragmatic realist with non-realist approaches are sketched in relation to event identity and abductive inference.

Pragmatism

As publications such as Shook and Margolis' (2009) *A Companion To Pragmatism* and Misak's (2007) *New Pragmatists* attest, pragmatism is very much 'in vogue'. No doubt a variety of

reasons contribute to this reinvigorated popularity. Suffice to say that, for mixed method researchers, the widespread perception that pragmatism offers a way out of seemingly intractable and interminable theoretical disputes must presumably be acknowledged as a significant driver in its resurgence.

This perception can however be challenged. To be provocative, it might be argued that the descriptor pragmatism is misused in mixed method texts and this misuse cloaks, amongst much else, the very conflict it is meant to supersede. To illustrate this point I hereafter make reference to the 2nd and latest edition of Creswell and Plano Clark's influential book *Designing and Conducting Mixed Method Research* (2011).

In everyday speech pragmatism is, often, little more than a synonym for 'sensibleness'. More formally pragmatism has been presented in research texts as a distinct paradigm. Thus, Creswell and Plano Clark present pragmatism as the equal of empirically reductionist 'postpositivism', 'constructionism' and what they term empowerment or issue orientated 'participatory' worldviews.

Presenting pragmatism as a distinctive worldview is however problematic. Pragmatism is not one thing. There are almost as many pragmatisms as there are pragmatists and, importantly, pragmatists disagree profoundly about the meaning and remit of this approach to understanding. Major theoretical differences divided pragmatism's founding fathers (Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey) and modern pragmatists are no less at odds (e.g. Richard Rorty and Nicolas Rescher).

This is important. Pragmatists and pragmatisms can, depending upon the version being considered, share much with the positions labelled by Creswell and Plano Clark postpositivism, constructionism and participatory worldviews. Eliding or subsuming divergent pragmatic perspectives under a single general heading (as Creswell and Plano Clark do) thus obfuscates and dilutes the meaning of the descriptor and conceptual muddle

is likely to ensue if readers/researchers, unaware of the range of perspectives captured by the term, accept a singular pragmatism as a paradigm or worldview. Indeed, devoid of this understanding, it is difficult to conceive that the descriptor conveys or refers to anything of substance.

If it is granted that pragmatism describes a broad range of philosophic positions, and this seems difficult to refute, then mixed method texts ought to clarify the meaning they attach to the term. We should either be told which specific pragmatism is being referred to, or, we should be told which versions are being discounted.

Critical Realism

Critical realism is in a similar position to pragmatism. Critical realism is experiencing a surge in popularity and those associated with it might be considered members of a movement¹. Popularity stems, in part, from the belief that critical realism can reconnect social theory with research practice.² Moreover, like pragmatism, although critical realism now informs activity across a number of fields, in use, works by key theorists such as Bhaskar (2003, 1998, 1997) are employed erratically or idiosyncratically and it is occasionally difficult to be clear about which version of realism is being presented. Anyone unfamiliar with critical realism might investigate introductory works by Danermark *et al* (2002), Archer *et al* (1998) or Collier (1994). However, even a cursory glance at the literature indicates that this approach to understanding is a work in progress and thus,

¹ The descriptor 'movement' is notoriously difficult to define. Nevertheless, suggestive evidence for a critical realist (CR) movement is apparent. From a UK perspective, the UK Centre for Critical Realism (CCR) was founded in 1996 and The International Association for Critical Realism (IACR) launched in 1998. The CCR newsletter *Alethia* has grown into the *Journal of Critical Realism*. Routledge publish two CR book series. The British Sociological Association inaugurated the Realism and Empirical Research group in 2003 and, in the US, Utah University has I believe been prominent in promoting discussion around Bhaskar's work.

² Groff (2004) states that critical realism offers a "point of entry into epistemology and metaphysics for practicing social scientists" (p.23) and Carter (2000) suggests critical realism may reconcile the threatened "divorce between social theory and empirical research" (p.1).

finally, like pragmatism, mixed method research texts such as Creswell and Plano Clark's might be said to misrepresent critical realism by oversimplification. Thus, while critical realism is recognised to be a research approach that can provide "a potential contribution to mixed methods research" (ibid, p.44); its internal divisions and external hostility to non-realist positions are overlooked or ignored.

Realist pragmatism

The critical realist theoretician Roy Bhaskar argues *against* judgemental relativism (which by critical realist standards, speciously gives equal voice or weight to multiple theories or interpretations), *for* epistemological relativism and *for* judgemental rationality (which suggests that it is, in principle, possible to reach contingently reasoned and accurate judgements about truth and reality). This approach, hugely simplified, allows researchers freedom in their choices of investigative technique while holding onto a strict realist metaphysic. It is an approach that has proven attractive to realist (not necessarily critical realist) mixed method researchers (Lipscomb, 2008; Downward and Mearman, 2007; McEvoy and Richards, 2003) as well as those interested in pragmatism (Rescher, 2002, 2000a,b).

However, as may be guessed, realism's ontological premise prohibits some forms or mixed method work and some forms of pragmatic engagement. Specifically, although methods from non-realist traditions can be utilised in realist work, the presumptions upon which they are based must generally be jettisoned when those presumptions derive from non-realist traditions and, likewise, realism's epistemic promiscuity does not extend to engagement with the grounding theory behind overtly non-realist forms of pragmatism (e.g. in the modern period, the pragmatism of Rorty). Thus, despite Creswell and Plano Clark's portrayal of pragmatism as a unified or homogenous entity, this assumption must

be rejected by realists and, where idealist forms of pragmatic understanding are asserted, this rejection can be vigorous.

Over the years, I have become increasingly dismayed at the tendency . . . to misconstrue pragmatism as a freewheeling form of relativism designed to *abrogate* rational standards instead of a normatively rigorous doctrine designed to substantiate them.

Rescher (2000b, p.ix – italicisation in original)

From a realist (not necessarily a critical realist) position Rescher looks favourably on the pragmatism of Peirce while rejecting that of, for example, James and Dewey. Combining Peircean pragmatism with a realist ontology offers an interesting and, I would argue, potentially productive philosophic scaffold for mixed method research. And yet, despite these asserted benefits, at least two theoretical ‘problems’ must be acknowledged.

First, Peirce famously developed the notion of abductive inference or hypothesis making (1992, 1998a,b,c,d) and, likewise, critical realists valorise retrodiction and retrodiction (forms of abduction) as key elements in the research process (Bhaskar, 1998, 1997). However, here the direction of their paths begins to separate. In Peirce’s developed or later theory, abduction came to be seen as the first in a three stage process of scientific investigation. Thus, abductive hypothesis formation is followed by deductive and inductive testing/confirmation (Anderson, 2009). Bhaskarian realism also requires that ideas about the world be supported by evidence. Yet because critical realism rejects, most forcefully in the social realm, the feasibility of establishing causal laws as traditionally understood in the physical sciences (the term nomic law is preferred), formal deductive and inductive testing is problematised. The important thing to recognise here is that despite close working similarities between Peircean pragmatism and critical realism, their methods of working, of inference making, are not necessarily coterminous. Further, although Peircean pragmatism

shares important ideas with some versions of postpositivism (e.g. valuing strict rational inquiry and the pursuit of objective truth) it is not necessarily the case that postpositivists would acknowledge the place and significance of abduction (and thus important if well practised theoretical disputes surface).

Second, it must be noted that different event descriptions or objects of inquiry are allowed by the various perspectives described so far. Critical realists, for example, permit unobservable event objects ontological veracity (objects can be known by their effects) whereas strict empiricists would not recognise or countenance such objects (Lipscomb, 2010). Once again, when these sorts of difference are detailed against the range of pragmatisms and realist pragmatisms that are available to researchers then, if argumentative coherence is to be protected, I propose that enormous care needs to be taken if ideational confusion is to be avoided. Put simply, *if* the first stage of a mixed method study employed methods that were thereafter interpreted using critical realist ideas about event objects, and *if* the second stage employed methods that were interpreted from an empiricist viewpoint on event objects *then* the argument presented to research report readers would be flawed because the second part of the study would be grounded on concepts or ideas about the world that it rejects vis-à-vis the first part of the study (the argument would be internally inconsistent).

Concluding remarks

Critical realism and realist pragmatism both have a great deal to offer mixed method researchers. That said something of a *Catch 22* problem remains to be resolved. Research textbook writers and practicing researchers need to explicitly detail the forms of realism and pragmatism that they are writing about or using since failure to do so may result in conceptual muddle. However, as soon as this necessary detail is provided new or perhaps

old theoretical problems appear. These problems – e.g. the nature of event identity and the place of abduction in theory development – raise complex questions and the temptation may be to overlook them. This, I propose, would be a mistake. Although this brief presentation cannot do justice to the issues raised, I suggest that mixed method research needs to air these difficult topics. This prescription does not offer a solution to the dilemmas identified. It does however bring to focus important themes that need to be addressed.

Martin Lipscomb – April 2011
University of the West of England (Bristol)

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