

A critical realist rationale for using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods

Gary Rolfe

Journal of Research in Nursing 2006 11: 79

DOI: 10.1177/1744987106060898

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jrn.sagepub.com/content/11/1/79>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Research in Nursing* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jrn.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jrn.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://jrn.sagepub.com/content/11/1/79.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Feb 2, 2006

[What is This?](#)

A critical realist rationale for using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods



Journal of Research
in Nursing
© 2006
SAGE PUBLICATIONS
London, Thousand Oaks,
New Delhi
VOL 11(1) 79–80
DOI: 10.1177/
1744987106060898

Gary Rolfe PhD, MA, BSc, RMN, RGN, NT, PGCEA
Professor of Nursing
University of Wales, Swansea

This paper makes a valuable contribution to the growing debate on method(ology) mixing, and the focus on the epistemology/ontology of critical realism is very welcome and offers a constructive way forward in the ongoing discussion. In this review, however, I wish to focus on two questions the paper leaves largely unanswered.

First, there is the question of terminology and, in particular, the use of the terms ‘method’ and ‘methodology’. Despite advocating an anti-conflationist position in which ‘a methodology should not be conflated with the technical aspects of a method’, the authors consistently fail to distinguish between the two. Indeed, in the first paragraph alone they use the term ‘method’ four times and ‘methodological’ twice, apparently interchangeably. The real problem with this mixing of terminology is that it encourages us to regard ‘focus groups, unstructured interviews, textual analysis and ethnographic case studies’ as of the same epistemological order. However, whereas the first two are *methods* for collecting data, and the third is a method for analysing the data collected by the first two, the final example is a *methodology* for structuring and rationalising the above methods. Thus, the methodology of the ethnographic case study might employ the data collection method of unstructured interviews and the data analysis method of textual analysis. To confuse the picture further, the authors sometimes use the term *methodology* to denote a much broader paradigmatic stance, such as in Table 1, where ‘hypothesis testing’ is referred to as a methodology.

This rather cavalier approach to terminology makes it difficult at times to understand what the authors are arguing for. Clearly, mixing *methods* such as qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires is not usually considered problematic, and occurs regularly at all epistemological levels. Not only do certain *methodologies* such as case studies frequently employ a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, but even some data collection tools such as questionnaires often include a mixture of closed items which are coded quantitatively alongside free-text items which are coded qualitatively. The question that arises is therefore: at what level or levels is method(ology) mixing problematic? Are we faced with the same issues at the *paradigm* level of positivism, interpretivism and critical realism as we are at the level of research *methodologies* such as survey and phenomenology, and at the level of data collection *methods* such as questionnaires and interviews?

The second question that this paper leaves unanswered is how the critical realist deals with conflicting data. The concept of triangulation would suggest that data from all sources simply offer different perspectives on the same construct, and should therefore be treated equally. However, the authors appear to suggest in their illustrative case study that we should trust quantitative data as more reliable than qualitative data, that the interviewees provided only 'anecdotal accounts', that the quantitative data was somehow 'independent' (of what?) and 'backed up by statistical tests', and that the interviews merely 'augmented' the survey findings. What emerges is not so much a triangulation of method(ologies) as a quantitative study supported by some qualitative data, which suggests in turn that quantitative method(ologies) are somehow superior to qualitative ones. The problem with this position is that it is neither new nor radical; indeed, it is a position held by many unreconstructed quantitative researchers. Thus:

There is of course a place for qualitative methods, but such research needs to use a rigorous approach and should be linked to quantitative methodologies ... for it to have any meaning.

(Gournay and Ritter, 1997: 442)

Whilst I am not suggesting that the authors would go quite that far, they are perhaps at the top of a slippery slope.

Overall, though, this is a very welcome paper that employs the philosophy of critical realism as a way of reconciling the differences between quantitative and qualitative method(ologies). However, like many cutting-edge studies, it raises as many questions as it resolves.

Reference

- Gournay, K., Ritter, S. (1997) What future for research in mental health nursing? *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 4: 441-446.