Edited by A Syntetos

The multi-methodology debate: a response to Harwood


Stephen Harwood (2011) gives an accurate account of some of the debate that has taken place in JORS surrounding multi-methodology. However, I don’t like his ‘solution’ and I wonder whether Stephen really understands the implications of it. His ‘reconciliation’ of ‘the issue of mixing methodologies and the debate about commensurability’ would prevent genuine multi-methodology practice, and therefore weaken our capacity to improve problem situations.

Two ways of handling the difficulty of combining methodologies based on different sociological paradigms in one intervention have been proposed. The first of these is what I call the ‘imperialist’ approach (Jackson, 1987). This allows for a mixing of methodologies but only under the hegemony of some preferred paradigm. Because methodologies are governed by the paradigms they express, this is not being multi-methodological at all. The methodology corresponding to the preferred paradigm sits in a dominant position, and those combined with it are distorted as they are put to use for a purpose for which they were not intended and for which they are not well suited. Further, imperialists believe that they can explain the existence of other paradigms and their associated methodologies, and analyse their limited sphere of applicability, in terms of the paradigm that they favour.

John Mingers’ (2006) advocacy of critical realism as a basis for multi-methodological working is an example of this. As I argued at the time (Jackson, 2006):

Committing oneself to critical realism, as does Mingers, prevents you from also being multi-methodological. Mingers says that critical realism is happy ‘to accept the validity of a wide range of research methods’, but this is true only as long as they can be used to its own ends. So statistical modelling has a role to play in ‘discovering patterns of events that reveal the presence of underlying structures’. Theoretically at least, Mingers opines, ‘that role would always be seen as one of assisting the general critical realist approach’. Interpretive approaches, although they tend ‘to diminish the reality of the world itself’, can be useful for revealing the limitations of our knowledge as we grapple to come to terms with the reality of underlying causal mechanisms. This is not supporting pluralism or multi-methodology in management science but advocating an ‘imperialist’ strategy ... John Mingers is a critical realist imperialist.

Gerald Midgley (1993) goes down the same imperialist route in arguing that pluralists need to give explicit recognition to a meta-theory and that critical systems thinking is a paradigm in its own right.

Stephen Harwood’s ‘reconciliation’ of the problem of combining methodologies from incommensurable paradigms is yet another version of the imperialist strategy. He dissolves the issue, to his own apparent satisfaction, by ‘coming out’ as a constructivist. Like Peter Checkland and Sue Holwell (2004) he is an ‘interpretive imperialist’ – accepting that ‘“soft” approaches can subsume “hard”, but not vice-versa’ (Harwood, 2011). Let me spell out the implications of this by taking one example.

Harwood states that he has been grounded in the work of Stafford Beer and Raul Espejo, and has found himself ‘over the last decade, tacitly using this work in a variety of organisational change programmes’. I presume that he values the viable system model (VSM) because he believes it has something to say about how complex systems need to be designed, in the face of turbulent environments, if they are to be viable and effective. This ‘structuralist’ reading of the VSM (Jackson, 1992) suggests that it provides access to cybernetic laws governing the behaviour of complex systems that we ignore at our peril – real laws that participants in a problem situation cannot simply take or leave according to whim. Knowledge of these cybernetic laws permits a trained analyst, like Harwood, to pinpoint the faults of organisations and suggest how they can be improved. I guess he has made good use of this expertise in the organisational change programmes he has been involved with.

Now that he is an interpretive imperialist, Harwood will have to abandon any claims he has been making to a specific competence based on his knowledge of the VSM.


University of Kent
J Mingers
Interventions are evaluated for the ‘improvement’ they achieve according to the primary concerns of the different paradigms. A successful intervention will score well on improving efficiency and efficacy (functionalist), effectiveness and elegance (interpretive), empowerment and emancipation (emancipatory) and exception and emotion (postmodern).

There are some difficulties with this second approach to multi-methodology theory and practice that are still to be resolved. Brocklesby (1997) has pointed to the cognitive difficulties practitioners encounter in trying to function within a variety of paradigms and shift between them. Others might argue that the three principles of critical systems thinking are not as ‘innocent’ as they look; they themselves constitute a paradigm and taint the use of particular methodologies. The most serious problem, I think, concerns how to choose between different paradigms and methodologies if they happen to push you in very different directions. I have suggested, as Harwood (2011) notes, that it is then a user decision; users still have decisions to make that will draw on their own ethical positions, their own conceptions of right and wrong.

Midgley (1997), Zhu (2010) and, I suspect, Mingers would argue that this is simply not good enough. To quote Zhu

... ‘the holistic doctor’ is now promoted as a root metaphor to prescribe how problem solvers should use methodologies. But where are path-dependence and social embeddedness? Is the doctor living in Heaven, without linkages with communities, histories and power relations?

At the heart of the critics’ objections, I believe, is a fear that critical systems thinking is abandoning its original attachment to ‘emancipation’. True, critical systems practice will always draw attention to the concerns of the emancipatory paradigm but, without a clear metatheoretical commitment to emancipation, it can look too much like a sophisticated form of management consultancy. In that guise, it is too easy to avoid the big issues of poverty, inequality and sustainability, which inspired critical systems thinkers to get started in the first place, and leave the status quo pretty much untouched. They have a point.

Stephen Harwood can declare for constructivism if he really thinks that other paradigms have nothing to offer in helping us gain traction on issues such as designing operations efficiently, ensuring complex systems are viable, arguing for fundamental human rights and promoting diversity. Otherwise, he is welcome to join in and help advance the important debates taking place around critical systems thinking and practice.
References


Hull University Business School

MC Jackson