

synergy workshop 2012

Overcoming our 'irreconcilable epistemological differences' and moving beyond the dichotomy of qualitative versus quantitative research in health psychology

Mixed methods research is becoming more popular with European Health Psychology and beyond. Such approaches are complex and challenging yet potentially offer the best approach to addressing complex applied real world research questions. In Charles University on the hottest days on record in Prague, a very broad range of European scholars dedicated themselves to reflect, learn and play with a variety of mixed methods approaches addressing a range of research questions. The intensive workshop covered a vast terrain, from the philosophy of Pragmatism and the logics of inquiry (Hiles, 2012), to developing research designs which addressed current calls for commissioned health research. The ethos focussed on group learning, career development and critical discussion throughout the two and a half days.

The workshop began with a discussion about the opportunities Pragmatism can offer Health Psychologists as a philosophical touchstone for thinking about mixed methods research. Pragmatism will enable Health Psychology to develop across Europe and deliver impact at multiple levels (transforming health and well-being) as its validity is judged by whether it reaches its goal, i.e., whether the research question has been answered satisfactorily (Yardley & Bishop, 2008) rather than any rigid commitment to any single epistemology, sometimes referred to as methodolatry (Chamberlain, 2000).

The MRC Complex Intervention Framework (2008) was presented and discussed as one way

of implementing mixed methods in applied health research. Through a number of small group exercises which

mixed those with qualitative and quantitative expertise, we worked on quickly developing research designs based around the insights of pragmatism. Each design also followed the iterative cycle of the stages of feasibility/piloting, development, implementation and evaluation to address a principle research question.

In our small group discussions, we attempted to address particular research questions set by commissioned calls for research proposals. In these discussions, we applied our learning concerning Pragmatism and began to think carefully about the appropriateness of method(s) in relation to particular objectives rather than blindly favouring qualitative or quantitative methods. A key challenge remained though: how and when do we mix methods responsively instead of formulaically. Simple sequential mixed methods research designs might represent an emerging norm but perhaps are not always the most appropriate.

Synergy presented an opportunity for people from across Europe with diverse skills and expertise to focus upon a common language. Our differences were set aside and replaced by a common, shared concern with answering particular research questions to the best of our collective ability. It would be fair to say that the days in Prague have only started the attendees on a journey and for all of us the workshop raised more questions than it provided answers. ■

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References

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