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Critical Realism vs Social Constructionism & Social Constructivism: Application to a Social Housing Research Study

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Abstract

This paper carries out a comparative analysis of the Critical Realist, Social Constructionist and Social Constructivist paradigms and investigates the impact of both on a proposed research study into an aspect of Social Housing in the UK. An overview of each philosophy is presented which describes the background and core aspects of each philosophical position. Critical Realism, Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism are assessed to show the strengths and weaknesses of each research philosophy. The impact of Critical Realist, Social Constructionist and Social Constructivist approaches on the proposed research study are shown to identify which approach would secure the outcomes that the research project was seeking to achieve. From the analysis undertaken the Critical Realist approach was selected for the research project. The paper then outlines how this philosophical approach was to be applied to the practical research project. It concludes by making recommendations about the application of a Critical Realist approach to research within social housing.

Keywords: critical realism; social constructionism; social constructivism; philosophy; research; methodology.

1. Introduction

This paper will look at the philosophical approaches of Critical Realism, Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism. It begins by presenting an overview of each philosophical position before carrying out a critical comparative analysis of them.

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The analysis identifies the strengths and weaknesses of each approach in relation to the proposed research project into social housing. Following this analysis, a Critical Realist approach was chosen for the research project. The paper then outlines how this philosophical approach was to be applied to the practical research project. It concludes by making recommendations about the application of a Critical Realist approach to research within social housing.

1.1 Critical Realism

Critical Realism is a philosophy that defines an objective reality as one that exists independently of individual perception but also recognizes the role that individual subjective interpretation plays in defining reality [1]. On the Positivist Subjectivist Continuum [2] it occupies the middle ground between the two opposites of Positivism and Subjectivism. Positivism is a philosophical position which emphasizes the empirical analysis of objective phenomena [3] and subjectivism emphasizes the individual perception of reality [2]. A Positivist approach looks at the relationship between variables [1] to understand phenomena and the Subjectivist approach looks at the different perceptions of reality that individuals have. It presents a framework within which researchers can choose and apply methodological approaches as opposed to set or prescribed methods for undertaking research [4]. Some academics have posited that under this approach some research findings are more accurate than others [1,5]. Knowledge can be obtained and interpreted in different ways [6] and the changing nature of social reality makes the process of isolating variables difficult [3].

Critical Realism is a philosophical system originating from the work of the Indo-British philosopher Roy Bhaskar in collaboration with other social theorists including Margaret Archer, Mervyn Hartwig, Tony Lawson, Alan Norrie and Andrew Sayer. It has a 'journal, a book series, an association, an annual meeting and all the trappings of an intellectual movement' [7]. Bhaskar sought to develop a realist philosophy of science and social science. It argues for the development of an ontology between empirical realism (Positivism) and transcendental idealism (Constructivism/Subjectivism). It accepts objectivism and presents a stratified view of reality that looks at emergent entities and the underlying structures that cause events to happen [1]. The existence of phenomena with multiple interpretations of them results in a hierarchy of meanings emerges to justify 'from an objective standpoint and how it is understood, perceived and theorized by subjective observers. Reference [8] posited that traditional approaches by researchers to provide an explanation of the phenomena that they were researching were unsatisfactory in seeking to explore and identify the underlying causes for phenomena. Through the Critical Realist approach phenomena are looked at through an explorative process to identify the structures and mechanisms that lie beneath the surface and cause the events that constitute the phenomena. The primary function of Critical Realism thus lies in determining what is objectively real and what is subjectively accepted as truth' [5].

1.2 Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism focuses on the things that are created through the process of social interaction. At the Subjectivist end of the Positivist Subjectivist Continuum it views all knowledge as constructed including representations of physical and biological reality. There are two types of Social Constructionism, strong and

weak. The former believes that all knowledge is socially constructed whereas the latter considers knowledge to be socially constructed but acknowledges that some things are not.

1.3 Social Constructivism

Social Constructivism is a theory about the development of knowledge through the interactions that individuals have with each other. It holds that truth is constructed by social processes and that it is historically and culturally specific. They are contingent based on human perception and social experience. Social Constructivism looks at the learning that an individual person gains from the interaction process. According to Social Constructivism the process of learning builds on knowledge that already exists, an individual can interpret existing knowledge in new ways. It is a philosophical explanation about the nature of learning [9]. Knowledge is

identified as a product of human interaction and is not something to be discovered [10]. It is the outcome of interactions between people within the environment [11].

2. Critical Comparison

These overviews of Critical Realism, Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism show that these philosophies offer views upon knowledge and reality. Critical Realism is in the middle of the Positivist Subjectivist Continuum whereas Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism are at the Subjectivist end of the continuum. These last two philosophical positions are at the opposite end of the Continuum from the Positivist approach.

Critical Realism combines Positivist and Subjectivist approaches in one philosophy acknowledging the existence of an external world as well as a socially constructed world. Social Constructionism is focused on the social world with the weak form being closer to the Critical Realist philosophical position than the strong form. The strong form of Social Constructionism believes that all knowledge is socially constructed which can be critiqued for ignoring natural phenomena occurring such as a volcano exploding (which cannot be explained as a social construction). Social Constructivism does not reject the existence of an objective world but as a learning theory focuses on the perceptions, experiences and process of learning that an individual has developed about the world that they live in [12].

A limitation of Critical Realism is that it has been described by some commentators as providing researchers with an approach whereby they 'sit on the fence' when interpreting research data to maintain the illusion of objective reality [13]. In any research study the knowledge that is being researched exists independently outside of the study, but the research process cannot independently assess all the external knowledge of the phenomena [5]. The Critical Realist approach allows the researcher to identify, explore and seek to understand the structures and mechanisms that cause events to happen. During the investigation process the researcher can contextualize aspects of the objective world as well as constructs from the social world that influence or determine the link of causation.

A limitation of the approach of Social Constructionism and Social Constructivism is that they encourage

cultism and dogmatism by only seeing truth as 'social convention, playing by the rules of a particular group' [14] where there is no truth beyond the social construct of the group [15]. The danger of a dogmatic approach is that it rejects changes to a way of believing that can be evidenced and by becoming inflexible to accept such changes you are entering the territory of cultism [15]. These criticisms of Social constructionism have been rejected by [16]. Errors are not recognised by Social constructionism and no one view is considered above another [14]. A Critical Realist approach will eliminate the potential effects of cultism, dogmatism, and error. A Realist philosophical approach acknowledges that a real world exists and that knowledge about it can be evidenced [14]. The subjective nature of Social Constructionist and Social Constructivist approaches does not allow the researcher to engage with the possibility of gathering evidence about the real world. Social Constructionism is seen as [17] and unhelpful to the researcher who is seeking to explain the reality of phenomena [14]. Social Constructionism is subjective and allows for the world to be known any way that people perceive it to be whereas Critical Realism 'maintains that people are bounded by a real physical and social world. They need to acknowledge this reality and necessity to achieve their goals. They cannot wishfully dismiss physical and social reality' [14].

3. Impact on Research Project

The research project that was being proposed was a mixed method research study looking at social housing providers operating in both England and Scotland. The aim of the research was to understand how these organizations were functioning within the current competitive operational environment in both countries. This research project requires that the researcher collects data that can be analyzed so that a better understanding can be gleaned from the study of how these organizations are functioning

3.1 Approach Chosen

To take the research project forward an appropriate philosophical approach needs to be adopted. The aim of the study is to identify, explore and understand the underlying structures and mechanisms that are enacted by housing organizations. An appropriate philosophical approach would enable the researcher the flexibility and scope to be able to look at data from both a Positivist and a Subjectivist approach. Both a weak Social Constructionist and a Critical Realist approach could be taken. The research would involve undertaking a statistical analysis of data relating to Social Housing Providers in the research area as well as interviewing staff from a number of these organizations. A weak Social Constructionist does not offer the complete commitment to the exploration of the real world just an acknowledgement that it is there. A Critical Realist approach offers a way for the researcher to engage fully in exploring the real world and the social world. The Social Constructionist approach is superficial.

3.2 Approach Applied

Taylor identified that 'to truly reflect the social world that is being researched then the research design needs to be methodologically *messy*' [18]. This is referring to the ability of the researcher to use a variety of methodological tools to carry out the programme of research as opposed to a rigid one. This has been

characteristic of the Positivist approach which has sought to measure facts and knowledge about the real world through a scientific lens that placed emphasis on the collection of empirical evidence. In seeking to apply a Critical Realist approach to this research appropriate methods needed to be identified by the researcher. The design of the research approach would follow a philosophical approach that places ontology above epistemology, in contrast to the approach of Positivists and Social Constructionists [19].

Critical Realism does not have a prescribed approach for researchers to follow when applying the philosophy to a research project. The Critical Realist researcher is 'interested in many kinds of data' [20] and must employ creative ways to obtain this research data. For this project the researcher was looking for causal mechanisms and the structures that lie beneath the surface are behind the events being researched. In the early stages of research these mechanisms and structures are not easily identified, and the researcher must employ 'ingenious research practice which explores possible uses of new data and information that could indicate their character and existence' [20]. A flexible approach was employed by the researcher to this project employing several different research techniques to apply a Critical Realist philosophy to research at a 'relatively concrete level' [21].

4. Conclusion

Critical Realism is a useful philosophical framework for researchers to use for carrying out social science research. There is not much guidance in how to apply the approach to operational research or what methods to use [22]. One book [21] offers examples from business and management of 'concrete' research carried out using an applied Critical Realist approach. The project that is referred in this article has been carried out within the sphere of social housing. Although there have been examples of a Critical Realist approach within Housing Studies these have been focused on Homelessness [23] and housing systems [24]. This research project looked at social housing providers and to achieve the desired outcomes the researcher used an adaptive approach, utilizing a variety of methods to obtain the required data. Critical Realist researchers have been criticized for not being rigid in their research approach and appearing as not being thorough [20]. However, as the research process involves identifying underlying causal mechanisms and structures these are not always obvious in the early stages of the research process [20]. As such, the researcher must adapt their approach to sift through the data and seek to identify the causal mechanisms and structures.

5. Recommendations

It is recommended that prior to undertaking any research project that the researcher has undergone a process whereby they have assessed the philosophical lens that they are conducting the research through. Their research design and methodology should be congruent with the philosophical approach taken.

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