

Time to reset the clock on the design of impact evaluations in criminology:

Summary

This is a summary of Morris, S., Smith, A. and Fox, C. (2020) 'Time to reset the clock on the design of impact evaluations in criminology: The case for multi-method designs', It is published in *The British Journal of Community Justice* and is available to download at: https://www.mmuperu.co.uk/assets/uploads/bj_cj_files/BJCJ_Morris_Smith_Fox_2020.pdf

Introduction

In recent years there has been a welcome growth in intervention studies in criminology that adopt randomized designs. Randomized experiments provide estimates of average treatment effects through comparing differences in mean outcomes between groups formed at random, where groups are exposed to different levels of an intervention (often including a control condition). If the experiment is performed correctly, estimates of average treatment effects are said to be unbiased or internally valid.

Evidence from randomized experiments is playing an important role in advancing knowledge of 'what works'. However, the central contention of this paper, is that the usefulness of and insights from randomized intervention studies are significantly enhanced through incorporating explicit and planned mixed method elements, and particularly qualitative research, but this is not yet

happening routinely within criminology. Using examples from other sectors the paper highlights how qualitative research can promote better causal explanation.

At least three broad types of question remain unanswered in results from standard experimental analysis:

1. Questions relating to the processes or mechanisms that generate or lead to the observed effects
2. Questions addressing the factors present in the context in which the study took place that may enable or constrain the operation of the intervention
3. Questions connected with the implementation of the intervention and how far implementation fidelity was achieved

While these questions can sometimes be addressed through additional analysis of the results from the experiment, relatively small sample sizes in many randomized interventions and/or the assumptions required for valid analysis often limit the analysis that is possible. To address these and other issues researchers in other sectors increasingly turn to mixed method designs. For example:

- In international development what are variously termed mixed-method randomized controlled trials or RCT+ designs have been discussed and implemented.

- In health research there has been a long tradition of promoting mixed method intervention studies.
- In education, the growing use of randomized designs has been accompanied by an increased emphasis on studies that combine randomization with mixed method implementation process evaluation.

The full paper includes three examples of experiments from different sectors that highlight ways in which qualitative methods specifically, and mixed methods more broadly, can be integrated with randomized designs to address questions of causal processes or mechanisms, context, and implementation. These examples illustrate the potential to be gained from the integration of qualitative approaches with randomized study designs. Moreover, their existence and success acts to refute claims that integration of mixed methods is neither practical nor intellectually coherent.

Mixed or multi-method intervention studies in criminology – an assessment of the academic literature

The paper explores the extent to which such mixed method designs can be found in experimental criminology. To do this the authors reviewed studies published between 2013 and 2018 in four leading criminology journals, selected as those likely to publish high quality, exemplar randomized studies. Within these journals the authors identified studies

that described the use of randomization and identified 46 articles that met their criteria.

Analysis of these articles found that only four of the studies described the planned use of qualitative methods. In addition some studies did report findings of what might be described as rather informal, piecemeal or opportunistic forms of data collection that might be construed as qualitative in the very broadest sense (often referred to vaguely as ‘observations’ with no further elucidation of the techniques or approach involved). The authors also searched the bibliographies of each of the 46 papers uncovered to determine whether any additional, supplementary qualitative studies linked to the main study were cited therein, but no further qualitative outputs associated with the papers included in the review were identified.

Possible obstacles to integrating qualitative approaches within randomized interventions

The authors are not the first to argue for the integration of qualitative approaches within experimental studies in criminology. However, their review of over 40 recent randomized intervention studies in criminology suggests that despite these calls the practice of integrating qualitative research formally within studies that involve randomization is rare in criminology, at least in the academic literature. So, why is this?

One set of challenges to greater methods integration relate to the underlying philosophies that different researchers subscribe to. The integration of qualitative research and

randomized experiments as a form of mixed methods research has been subject to criticism, particularly from those who hold to the fundamental incompatibility of quantitative and qualitative research. This critique stems from the notion that qualitative and quantitative research are derived from separate and fundamentally incompatible ontological positions, 'world views' or 'paradigms'. However, increasing numbers of researchers argue that there is no essential link between method and paradigm. Furthermore, for those combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, 'pragmatism' as philosophical perspective, provides a sound footing for such endeavors. Separately, researchers operating in the 'realist' tradition also see no barrier to combining quantitative and qualitative approaches within single studies, though the place of experimentation within 'realism' is still hotly contested. What these debates suggest is that the integration of qualitative approaches within randomized studies need not be seen as attempting to reconcile the fundamentally irreconcilable.

However, there may also be more prosaic reasons that explain the lack of methodological integration in criminology that are to do with the confidence and competence of researchers to work across different methods traditions or the ability of the organisations in which researchers work to facilitate effective working between different methods specialists.

One possible explanation relates to the nature of criminology as a discipline. Some commentators suggest that criminology is not a

coherent discipline but rather a point where different disciplines and people converge around a common subject area. Given this variety, perhaps it is not a surprise that methodological rapprochement required for the development of mixed or multi-method trials has been slow in coming. Rapid growth in the sector has, perhaps, exacerbated this tendency. Another possible explanation, particularly relevant in the US, where many of the top-rated journals in criminology are located is a perceived bias towards quantitative research. Commentators have suggested that integrating quantitative and qualitative methods will be challenging if these studies are harder to publish.

Other forces that keep quantitative and qualitative methods at arms-length may come from outside academia. Some commentators have pointed to the influence of competitive contract research. Many of these funding opportunities emanate from government or from service providers who are most interested to answer questions about impact and cost benefit – questions that favour quantitative methods.

Conclusions: Encouraging mixed methods in randomized intervention studies

The authors suggest some steps that might be taken toward encouraging qualitative research and mixed methods in randomized intervention studies more broadly.

First, if we accept the advantages of mixed method intervention studies, this may involve revisiting the way research methods are taught in universities, but also that they are understood and appreciated by research commissioners, to say nothing of journal editors and reviewers. This is clearly a long-term project, but a useful starting point suggested by a leading criminologist is to recognise that the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods in criminology is overstated. The key then is greater dialogue between criminologists working within the quantitative and qualitative traditions.

Secondly, it is suggested that while criminology has historically drawn on many disciplines, as the discipline has grown it has become more inward looking and criminologists have possibly taken less notice of the development of multi-method, randomized intervention studies in other fields. There is now a need for the learning in other sectors to be considered and incorporated into the next generation of randomized studies.

Thirdly, many of the studies identified in the review appear to be have been staffed by researchers with little understanding of qualitative research. It is argued that a conscious effort should be made by principal investigators to build research teams that reflect a diversity of methodological perspectives and specifically seek to recruit qualitative researchers into their teams.

Finally, experience from other fields of study, particularly health, international development

and more recently education, suggests that the use of programme theories (theories of change, etc.) can be helpful in terms of framing the integration of different methodological contributions to identifying and explaining causal effects.

Many researchers intuitively find combining quantitative and qualitative research appealing. It offers the prospect of addressing a wider set of questions than mono-method-study-designs within a single study. However, a word of caution: various commentators distinguish between using qualitative research to enhance or justify experimental research and a more fundamental integration of methods in which qualitative research helps to shape the research, giving equal weight to practitioner and participant's subjective experiences and addressing unquantifiable aspects of context that can determine success or otherwise of an intervention. If causal explanation is to be maximized intervention study designs must adopt the latter strategy.

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