
**PRAGMATISM RESEARCH PARADIGM: A PHILOSOPHICAL
FRAMEWORK OF ADVOCATING METHODOLOGICAL PLURALISM IN
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH**

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ABSTRACT

A philosophical stance in social science research informs the overall research methodology and provides the rationale to understand the philosophical underpinning of a particular research study. Due to the pivotal role of the philosophical underpinning which informs the overall research strategy, there has been growing debate among social science researchers concerning what paradigms/worldviews researchers should bring to the social science inquiry. Primarily, this paper throws light on the long lasting issue regarding the use of either positivism (quantitative) or constructivism (qualitative) research paradigm in the social science research and offers rationale pertinent to use of pragmatism (quantitative and qualitative) research paradigm in social science research. This paper argued that pragmatism, as a philosophical underpinning, facilitates mixed methods researchers to inquire into some aspects of social research with quantitative approach and some others with qualitative approach, which can contribute to achieving a consensus on conceptualizing good quality social research. This paper concludes that pragmatism philosophical approach due to its wider orientation through advocating methodological pluralism can produce socially useful knowledge which enables researchers to appreciate the complexity and unpredictability of social life.

Keywords: Social Science, Methodology, Research Paradigm, Pragmatism, Positivism

INTRODUCTION

In social science research, philosophical assumptions serve as a foundation, because they influence every aspect of the research inquiry (Lincoln, 1990) and facilitate researchers to elucidate their philosophical stance in relation to elaborating their research approach towards social inquiry (Denscombe, 2010). Different approaches to social science research have varyingly determined what constitutes knowledge and consequently, diverse perceptions about the nature of knowledge have developed among social science researchers. On the whole, in social science research, research paradigms have appeared as the central notions (Morgan, 2007), which have been conceptualized varyingly from different perspectives to describe the philosophical stance of the researcher to conduct research. Different authors

have elaborated and classified research paradigms in different ways (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Cohen *et.al.*, 2011; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Bryman, 2012).

Generally, based on these philosophical assumptions, inductive and deductive research strategies are used to conduct social science research, in their distinct ways. Due to the importance of the philosophical underpinning which informs the overall research strategy, there has been growing concern among social science researchers regarding what paradigms/worldviews researchers should bring to social science inquiry. This debate is more common between purist methodologists and pluralistic methodologists. Purist methodologist support either quantitative or qualitative research method in a single study to advocate incompatibility thesis (Howe, 1988). This perspective does not allow the application of quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study. Conversely, pluralistic methodologists permit and emphasize using both quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study, to address the research question in the best possible way (Morgan, 2007; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Denscombe, 2014, Midgley *et.al.*, 2017).

In response to the criticism raised by purist methodologists, there is a growing debate concerning the idea of polarization of research into the dichotomy of either quantitative or qualitative methods, with respect to their related objectivity and subjectivity (Ercikan and Roth, 2006). This polarization has been termed as neither meaningful nor productive. In fact, quantitative and qualitative research approaches have been conceptualized as being compatible with each other (Denscombe, 2008). In order to further elucidate the issue of polarization, Morgan (2007) suggests that the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative research mainly resides in the induction-deduction, subjectivity-objectivity and generalization-contextualization debate.

Morgan (2007) argues that these dissimilarities could be bridged with abduction, inter-subjectivity and transferability. Where, abduction reasoning is moving in-between induction and deduction, inter-subjectivity relates to the practice of communicating shared meaning in research instead of focusing on complete subjectivity or objectivity, which is an impossible notion to achieve. Moreover, transferability refers to the findings, which need not be very specific to a particular research context, so they have no implications beyond that setting or need not be very generalized, as they are assumed to be applicable across the wider context in any setting (Morgan, 2007). Primarily, this paper contributes towards the ongoing debate concerning the use of either positivism (quantitative) or constructivism (qualitative) research paradigm in the social science research and offers

rationale pertinent to use of pragmatism (quantitative and qualitative) research paradigm in social science research.

METHODOLOGY

This paper has critically reviewed the various viewpoints concerning the use of positivism, constructivism, and pragmatism research paradigms in the social science research. Keeping in view the distinct nature of social science research the comparative applications of different philosophical stances in the social science inquiry have been debated. In this regard, relevant studies focused on application of different philosophical perspectives were thoroughly reviewed. Notably, this paper mainly draws on positivism, constructivism and pragmatism philosophical perspectives. Some other philosophical strands such as post-positivism, realism have not been debated due to their proximity with other philosophical perspectives (Saunders *et.al.*, 2009). Moreover, the rationale for the selection of pragmatism research paradigm in the social science research has been highlighted.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Pertinent to philosophical assumptions, Morgan (2007) characterizes research paradigms as a system of beliefs and practices which impact upon deciding how the researcher will select the questions to be investigated and the methods to be deployed to investigate those questions. In a similar vein, Bryman (1988) conceptualizes a paradigm as a group of beliefs which guide the types of issues to be investigated, how the research should be carried out and how the results should be interpreted in a particular discipline. Creswell defines a paradigm as a “worldview” and refers it as a general philosophical assumption concerning the world and the nature of the research which researchers adopt in their studies (Creswell, 2014:6).

Although paradigms have been conceptualized as sets of beliefs, they vary in detail in the terms of their assumptions regarding the nature of reality (ontology) and ways of knowing and understanding (epistemology). Based on these assumptions, a social science inquiry entails sharply different ways of looking at social reality and the interpretation of social reality is informed by explicit and implicit philosophical assumptions (Cohen *et.al.*, 2011). On the whole, three research paradigms (positivism, constructivism and pragmatism), which have been commonly debated in the social science literature, advocate different perspectives pertinent to their associated ontological and epistemological assumptions.

THE POSITIVISM

Primarily, the positivist researcher identifies reality as being lawful and orderly where, by the application of systematic observations and accurate scientific methods, it is possible to describe, control and predict phenomena

(Usher, 1996). In this regard, the definite view of social science researchers as analysts or interpreters of their subject matter advocates the scientific approach towards social inquiry, to provide the best possible and clearest idea of knowledge (Cohen *et.al.*, 2011). Although the outcomes of social science inquiries generated by statistical measurement are more likely to be reliable and relatively objective, they may be indifferent to individual differences (Ernest, 1994). Moreover, positivism characterizes human behavior as passive, necessarily determined and controlled, and overlooks intention, individualism and freedom, which imply the findings drawn from the positivist approaches being more trivial and less relevant to the consequences of those for whom they are intended (Cohen *et.al.*, 2011).

THE CONSTRUCTIVISM

Whereas, the constructivist research paradigm is typically associated with qualitative research and follows the assumption that individuals are part of the social system, so they influence and are influenced by the context in which they live and work. This research paradigm emphasizes that individuals develop subjective meanings which are constructed socially and historically, by experiencing interaction with each other (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, this interaction leads the researcher towards exploring the complexity of diverse meanings, drawn from the participants' views on the underlying situation, rather than just focusing on a few variables (Creswell, 2014).

Contrary to the positivist research paradigm, which supports an objective reality, the constructivist research paradigm advocates the existence of multiple realities, and believes that multiple, varied, but equally valid explanations of the same phenomenon can exist (Onwuegbuzie *et.al.*, 2009). By acknowledging the distinctiveness of human nature, constructivist researchers believe that the subject matter of social science research relating to the study of human behavior is fundamentally different from the natural sciences in terms of the existence of multiple realities and subjective meanings, which entails a distinctive approach to undertake social science research (Bryman, 2012).

THE PRAGMATISM

In contrast to the positivism, and constructivism research paradigms which believe in either singular or multiple realities and are generally committed to particular research strategies, the pragmatism research paradigm believes in both singular and multiple accounts of truth (Cohen *et.al.*, 2011), which might take subjective, objective, scientific or humanistic orientation, and which keeps the utility, practical aspects and outcomes at the forefront of the research process, rather than just focusing on the pursuit of the most accurate representation of 'reality' (*Ibid*). Following this

perspective, the pragmatism research paradigm reinforces that positivism and constructivism are not different at an epistemological or ontological level; rather, they share many common characteristics in their approaches to conduct an inquiry (Hanson, 2008).

Notably, the quantitative and qualitative research approaches, embraced with distinctive characteristics and guided by positivism and constructivism philosophical assumptions, are commonly used in social science research. The quantitative and qualitative research strategies draw impetus from two competing approaches of acknowledging the world (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). In this regard, quantitative research relies on positivism through applying measurement procedures to social life, developing variables from the literature which formulate the investigation and present the researcher's point of view (Bryman, 2012).

In addition, while conducting the research, a quantitative researcher develops no rapport with their subject, remaining neutral. The research is conducted in an artificial setting or controlled environment, with an emphasis upon generalization of the study findings to a relevant population, and focusing on measuring individuals' behavior rather than understanding it (Bryman, 2012). Alternatively, qualitative research draws impetus from constructivism philosophical assumptions, a researcher maintains close ties with their subjects to view the world from their eyes, relying on the words of the participants to understand the social reality. Such research is conducted in the natural environment and focus is placed upon the contextualized understanding of the actions of people (Bryman, 2012).

THE RATIONALE FOR USING PRAGMATISM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Taking account of the quantitative and qualitative research approaches associated with positivism, and constructivism, the social science research needs to be governed by a philosophical underpinning that allows the application of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches in a single study. In the relevant literature, pragmatism is often referred to as a philosophical partner for mixed methods research (e.g., Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Maxcy, 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell, 2014). In conducting social science inquiry, the epistemological and ontological stances are drawn from the pragmatism research paradigm (Cohen *et.al.*, 2011), which believes in singular/multiple realities and where knowledge is constructed in terms of 'what works' (Onwuegbuzie *et.al.*, 2009).

Mainly, the pragmatist considers "epistemological issues as a continuum" (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009:90) instead of polarization, because participants in a social science research at different points might

require a different degree of interactive relationship with the researcher (Ndoh, 2013). Supporting this assumption, pragmatism philosophical approach acknowledges that truth and reality might exist in singular based or multiple forms, and might have an objective or subjective orientation. It thus has an emphasis on offering answers to practical problems in a practical world, rather than only focusing on philosophical debate (Cohen *et.al.*, 2011).

Pragmatism, as a philosophical underpinning, facilitates mixed methods researchers to inquire into some aspects of social research with quantitative methods and some others with qualitative methods (Feilzer, 2010), which can contribute to reaching a consensus on what constitutes “good quality social research” (Hammersley, 2008:177). A pragmatism research philosophy may help researchers to understand the objective and subjective viewpoints of the participants concerning various aspects of the social phenomenon under study, by permitting the use of different research techniques in practice.

Contrary to positivism and constructivism, pragmatism philosophical viewpoint stressed that commonalities between quantitative and qualitative research approaches are primarily aimed at exploring various dimensions of social reality in their own way, so they should not be treated as rigid, polar opposites or dichotomies (Creswell, 2014). Rather, they should be conceptualized as being positioned at different ends of the same continuum (Newman and Benz, 1998). This refers that the mixed methods research approach should be conceptualized as being positioned at the midpoint of this continuum. By following this perspective, pragmatism research paradigm advocates mixed method research, because it incorporates the characteristics of both quantitative as well as qualitative research approaches, which could largely enhance the credibility of an investigation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011 and Creswell, 2014). This perspective strictly emphasizes that the incompatibility of quantitative and qualitative research approaches could ignore the complexity of the research process, therefore the researcher’s bias with respect to preference for a specific research approach might lessen their flexibility in terms of adopting the different methodological options (Patton, 2002).

Moreover, pragmatism research paradigm stressed that the use of mixed method approach in social science research aims to benefit from both commonalities as well as the discrepancies which exist between quantitative and qualitative research approaches to conduct comprehensive inquiry. Concerning this aspect, Dzurec & Abraham (1993:75) argue that “the objective, scope, and nature of the inquiry are consistent across methods and across paradigms”. This infers that a methodological pluralism should be encouraged in social science research, as it empowers the researcher to

conduct more credible research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In this regard, there is a need to acknowledge that the research endeavor should be informed by the research question, which might include sub-questions that need to be answered by employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, instead of only relying on the methodological preferences of the researcher in terms of either a quantitative or qualitative approach (Cohen *et.al.*, 2011).

Taking account of the multi-dimensional nature of social science research, the combined use of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches has been appreciated on the premise that both approaches embrace a distinctive research culture, where one favors the power of “deep, rich and observational data”, whilst the other approach focuses on obtaining “hard and generalizable” data (Sieber, 1973:1335). In addition, both approaches employ analytical techniques to gain the maximum meaning from the data, either by words or by numbers, and are intended to investigate the complex relationships prevailing in the social science world (Dzurec and Abraham, 1993). Based on this notion, it is rational to assume that instead of treating quantitative and qualitative approaches as being contradictory to each other, they could be considered as complementary to understand multilayered social phenomena (Cupchik, 2001).

The pragmatism research philosophy based on mixed method research offers benefits of triangulation. Triangulation refers to the technique of conceptualizing things from different perspectives, which enable researchers to gain a better understanding of the underlying phenomenon by examining it from different positions (Denscombe, 2010). This triangulation adds validity and reliability to the social science inquiry by acknowledging the mixed and messy nature of the real world, in order to do justice to the different facets of social reality (Cohen *et.al.*, 2011). The pragmatism research paradigm places emphasis on the selection of an appropriate research strategy to address the underlying research question(s), rather than focusing on particular methodological preferences pertinent to quantitative or qualitative research, being often associated with a mixed methods research (Creswell, 2014). In this way, the pragmatism research paradigm holds the research problem at the centre of the inquiry and allows the application of all available approaches to address the research problem in the most appropriate way (Rossman and Wilson, 1985).

Since, the positivism believes in a singular reality and refutes any relationship between the researcher and the subject being researched, whereas constructivism believes in multiple realities and acknowledges the close interaction between the researcher and the subject being researched, therefore, pragmatism which includes the characteristics of positivism and constructivism could better unfold the hidden aspects of social inquiry. Keeping in view the exploratory and explanatory nature of the social science

research, which entails the application of both quantitative and qualitative research methods, drawn from an inductive-deductive research strategy, the pragmatism research paradigm appears to be the most closely aligned with the social science inquiry, in order to achieve the study objectives in the best possible way. The pragmatic research philosophy could thus help the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from multidimensional perspectives based on subjective and objective views (Bass, 2008), to enable a deeper and broader understanding (Stentz *et.al.*, 2012).

Historically, pragmatism as a set of ideas was put forward by early pragmatist writers, such as John Dewey, William James and Charles Sanders Peirce (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). In terms of distinguishing the social world from the natural world, Dewey points out that, unlike the natural world where phenomena occur in a particular order, human actions are identified on the basis of the interpretation of the actions of others, learned by interaction, which is the essence of typical complexity of social interaction (Biesta and Burbules, 2003). The basic rationale concerning Dewey's support for using pragmatism in social science research is based on the fact that it offers a different version of knowledge and different comprehension of the ways by which individuals can acquire knowledge (Biesta and Burbules, 2003).

Pragmatism does not believe in one specific nature of reality, either independent of mind or within the mind. Instead of focusing on a particular type of reality, it views truth as 'what works' at the time (Creswell, 2014). In broader terms, pragmatism considers practical consequences as an important characteristic pertinent to meaning and truth and by supporting this perspective, the researcher acknowledges the distinctive nature of social science research, relative to natural science research, in terms of the subjects being investigated (often human beings or institutions) (Bryman, 2012).

Following this perspective and in the context of the social science research, a quantitative research approach could facilitate in quantifying the study variables, whereas a qualitative research approach could facilitate in obtaining detailed opinions and personal views, shaped by a real social settings, in order to gain a personal insight and in-depth data. In terms of acknowledging the distinctiveness of human nature, as well as measuring social phenomena using quantitative research, the interpretive approach appears to be necessary to understand the subjective meanings assigned to social actions by individuals (Bryman, 2012). As argued by Briggs *et.al.*, (2012:27) "for an interpretivist there cannot be objective reality, which exists irrespective of the meanings, human beings bring to it, though they may disagree about the extent to which reality is re-constructed by the researchers".

CONCLUSION

Mainly, the pragmatism research paradigm is concerned with addressing the research question in a more practical way and acknowledges the distinctive characteristics of the social world and human nature, which entails the adoption of a comprehensive approach concerning social science inquiry. Majority of the social science research aims at addressing both exploratory and explanatory research questions. The explanatory research questions focuses upon measurement of multiple variables and examining nexus among them. These explanatory questions entail the quantitative measurement of the phenomenon under study, based on a deductive research strategy through quantitative data collection.

Whereas, the exploratory research focuses on understanding social phenomenon and human interaction. These exploratory questions entail the detailed and subjective meaning of the phenomenon under study, based on an inductive research strategy through qualitative data collection. Collectively, both exploratory and explanatory aspects of social science research are aimed at investigating the social phenomenon through objective and subjective perspectives, drawn from the multifaceted and elusive nature of social reality (Stenze *et.al.*, 2012). Keeping in mind the nature of the social science research, the pragmatism research paradigm could facilitate in examining the complex nature of social science issues (Bass, 2008) because pragmatism, due to its wider orientation, can produce socially useful knowledge which enables researchers to appreciate the complexity and unpredictableness of social life (Feilzer, 2010).

Overall, the value and rationale for the selection of a pragmatism research philosophy in the social science research could be established at a general, practical and procedural level. At a general level, it combines the strengths of both approaches by counter weighting their limitations; at a practical level, it provides a sophisticated approach by which to explore complex issues; and at a procedural level, it is a valuable strategy to gain a comprehensive understanding of the underlying research issue, by comparing diverse perspectives emerging from the quantitative and qualitative sets of data (Creswell, 2014). This paper through engaging in relevant literature tries to identify that there is a need to realize that the social phenomenon can rationally be understood by employing multiple approaches and various modes of knowledge acquiring (Greene, 2008). Because the use of a single approaches such as quantitative or qualitative in social science inquiry could only produce partial knowledge.

Notably, the use of pragmatism research philosophy in the social science research is of utmost value; however, some key factors need to be considered while applying this philosophical stance. Primarily, the applicability of pragmatism philosophy embedded in mixed methods

research entails required expertise to carry out both quantitative and qualitative strands of research, feasibility in terms of time and resource availability, and providing a rationale regarding the suitability of mixed methods research to conduct social science inquiry (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Moreover, researchers are required to be aware of how to merge both approaches appropriately for the pragmatism research philosophy to be fruitful (Scott and Morrison, 2006).

Overall, the pragmatism research paradigm has earned its recognition for giving priority to the act of discovery of knowledge rather than the justification of knowledge, which might serve as an appropriate theoretical framework (Small, 2011). Based upon this perspective, pragmatism philosophy believes that social reality is embedded within multiple layers which need to be measured or observed from different dimensions. The pragmatism approach could capture the multiple perspectives of interpretation and inference-making (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). In the context of the social science research, there is need to acknowledge that the distinct nature of the social world embedded within multilayered social phenomenon could not be adequately investigated either by quantitative or qualitative research approaches alone. Therefore, it is crucial that instead of engaging in the quantitative-qualitative debate, the focus should be placed selecting the appropriate research strategies which appeared closely aligned with pragmatism research philosophy based on mixed methods research approach.

In the context of the social science research, there is need to acknowledge that the distinct nature of the social world embedded within multilayered social phenomenon could not be adequately investigated either by quantitative or qualitative research approaches alone. Therefore, it is crucial that instead of engaging in the quantitative-qualitative debate, the focus should be placed selecting the appropriate research strategies which appeared closely aligned with pragmatism research philosophy based on mixed methods research approach.

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