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The appeal of pragmatism for research employing a mixed methodology



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De-constructing the “quantitative-qualitative” dichotomy

Qualitative and quantitative paradigms can be interwoven in the following ways:

- Either of the two primary frameworks may be used but
- strategies from the other framework may be borrowed
- with priority being skewed towards qualitative or
- quantitative data
- The frameworks of the two paradigms may be used
- within a single research project to address different
- research questions

(Jongbloed, 2000; Creswell, 2003)

It is the latter issue, i.e. the research question, which many authors have stressed to be the focus of any enquiry. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) have referred to the “dictatorship” of the research question suggesting that for researchers, who are committed to a thorough study, methods are secondary to the research question and, the underlying world view of paradigms enter the picture only in an abstract sense.

Duncan and Nicol (2004) also claim that the choice of paradigm should always reflect the question and not some preordained beliefs, and that mixed methodology should be possible when multiple realities of a research problem have to be addressed. Especially when research questions are complex, multiple approaches are required (Miller and Crabtree, 2000). This critical multiplism assumes that multiple ways of knowing are necessary, referring not only to multiple methods but also multiple paradigms, multiple source of information, even multiple studies within the same study to address different issues.

Pragmatism is believed to offer the epistemological underpinning for studies, which assume the above.

The Assumptions of Pragmatism

Ontology: Pragmatism finds itself between the transcendental realism of positivist/post-positivist paradigms and the relativism of constructionist paradigm in that it accepts external reality but questions the certainty that we can monitor it. Instead, pragmatism uses chooses explanations that best produce desired outcomes.

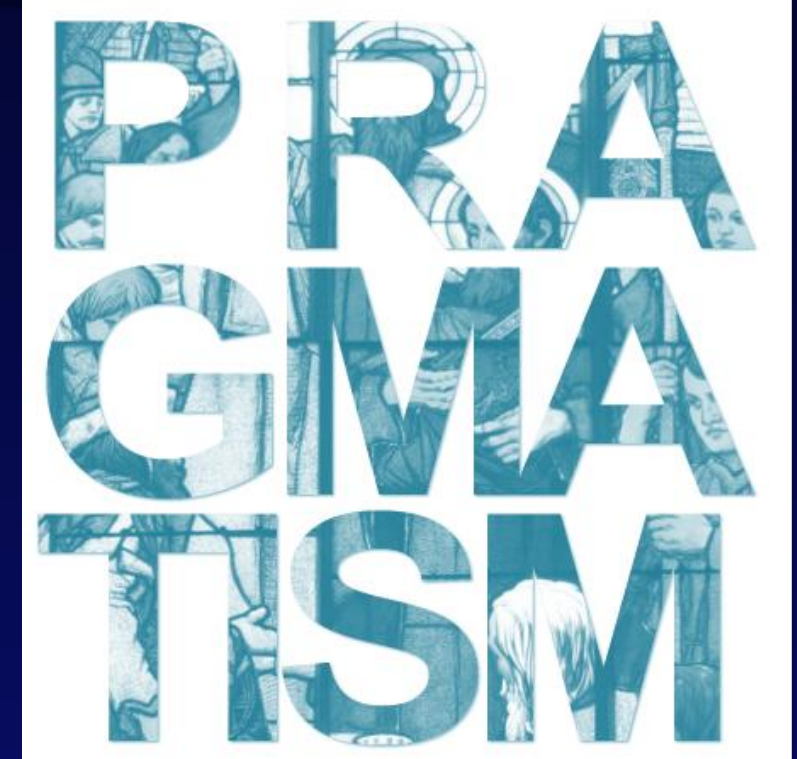
Pragmatists claim that there is an external world independent of our minds but they take seriously the assumption that we are socially and historically situated and we cannot be sure if we can “read the world” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, Cherryholmes, 1992).

Epistemology: Pragmatism accepts both objective and subjective points of view. Once more, it shifts between the dualism of positivism, and the inseparability of the knower and the known in constructionism. Pragmatists appear to have an agnostic approach to knowledge in that they reject any foundational interpretations (anti-foundationalism). This is again based on the assumption that events and objects have no ultimate or final nature and are subject to multiple descriptions (anti-essentialism). It is therefore a mistake to believe that we can “truly” represent or measure those events or objects (anti-representationalism). Pragmatism meets both positivist and constructionist knowledge claims, in that it accepts an external reality that it is very difficult to “pin down” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, Cherryholmes, 1994).

Axiology: Values of the researcher play a large role when interpreting the results of an enquiry. Enquiries are neither value-free (positivism/post-positivism) nor entirely value bound (constructionism). Researchers can intelligently act on the basis of these values through the process of reflexivity (Cherryholmes, 1994; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Logic: Logic is both inductive and deductive, with reasoning and interpretation of findings involving an iterative process, where tentative conclusions are constantly checked for consistency at different phases, by triangulating methods and data (Johnstone, 2004; Gilllett, 2002).

Causal Linkages: Pragmatism accepts some causal relationships but claims that it is impossible to “pin them down”. Beliefs about causality and objectivity are context dependent, and may change (Cherryholmes, 1994).



Pragmatism's “appeal” for mixed methods studies

According to Cherryholmes (1992), research that is founded on pragmatic assumptions is not preoccupied with asking questions about laws of nature and what is really real”. Rather it is devoted to the ways of life we chose and live when we ask the questions we ask. Pragmatic research choices are, according to the same author, based on how we could best approach a topic and what the researcher wants to achieve in terms of politics, values and visions. Its is the focus on the consequences of the “action”.

Cherryholmes (1994) claims that pragmatic researchers should be clear in discussing their purposes and wishes. In pragmatism, choices about tools and ways to investigate a topic have to do with the desired outcomes and the type of the research question. Therefore a democratic process that would involve a mixed methodology should actually be the one of choice. Such processes increase the likelihood that a wider rather than a narrower range of meanings would be reviewed and not arbitrarily dismissed due to ignorance or privilege (Cherryholmes, 1992; Cherryholmes, 1994).

Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) summarise all these points by presenting pragmatism to be the best paradigmatic choice for the use of mixed model designs in that:

- It philosophically embraces the use of quantitative and qualitative elements within the same enquiry
- It represents a flexible, applied research philosophy in which “the researcher...studies in the different ways that he/she deems appropriate and, uses the results in ways that can bring positive consequences within his/her value system” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p.30)