**INTRODUCTION TO PRAGMATISM**

**by Simon Moss**

|  |
| --- |
| **Introduction** |

**History of positivism**

 During the 1700s, philosophers began to develop and to defend the scientific method. The scientific method is not a single procedure but a particular suite of practices and priorities. In particular, individuals who embrace the scientific method believe that

* objective truths or realities exist—such as laws of nature—independent of our consciousness; that is, even if we were all unconsciousness, these laws would persist
* people are susceptible to biases; their beliefs often deviate from these objective truths
* therefore, the aim of research is to uncover these objective truths and reject biases
* researchers thus need to observe and measure phenomenon as systematically as possible to preclude these biases

This set of beliefs are collectively often called positivism. The term positivism is derived from previous words, like positif, that refers to how experience affects the contents of our mind. The term underscores the notion that our beliefs should be dependent on experiences—that is, systematic observations and measures.

**History of interpretivism**

 Throughout the previous century, philosophers began to question this notion of objective truths. These philosophers challenged the assumption that society can be reduced to a set of objective laws, principles, and patterns. Instead, the values, culture, and language of communities are likely to shape the beliefs and principles individuals propose to understand the world. The beliefs and principles that individuals propose—such as natural selection—are not objective truths but merely arguments that people have constructed to understand the world. Researchers who adopt this perspective

* do not strive to uncover objective truths
* believe that researchers cannot uncover objective truths that are unbiased by personal values
* but instead focus on how individuals interpret the world
* they strive to understand the meanings that guide the choices of people

**Emergence of pragmatism**

 Although pragmatism can be traced to the late 1800s, this movement mainly evolved after the 1960s. Proponents of pragmatism do not advocate positivism or interpretivism. Instead, they espouse the approach that is most helpful to the circumstances. They might sometimes adopt practices that are compatible with positivism and sometimes adopt practices that are compatible with interpretivism, depending on the circumstances. For example

* because of their respect towards systematic measures, positivists tend to collect quantitative data—data that include numbers
* because of their respect towards the perspectives of participants, interpretivists tend to collect qualitative data—such as responses during interviews
* pragmatists will tend to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, sometimes called mixed methods.
* pragmatists appreciate that no methods are devoid of limitations—and tend to assume that one method might diminish the limitations of another method

If you plan to utilized mixed methods, you will probably, although not necessarily, espouse pragmatism. In your thesis, you will thus need to define and discuss pragmatism. This document might help you achieve this goal.

|  |
| --- |
| **History of pragmatism** |

 To justify pragmatism, you may need to delineate the historical antecedents to this movement. The following table helps you achieve this goal.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Key development | Detail |
| Philosophers began to question some of the assumptions of positivism or the scientific paradigm.  | * During the last half of last century, philosophers began to challenge the assumption that scientists can uncover observations that are unbiased—that is, data that does not depend on the values or beliefs of the researcher (Phillips & Burbules, 2000; Zammito, 2004).
* These philosophers still believed that researchers should strive to uncover objective truths—such as the laws of nature—but recognized that biases in researchers might cloud the data.
* Hence, they attempted to develop measures to diminish or prevent these biases
* This perspective is often called post-positivism (Phillips & Burbules, 2000; Zammito, 2004)
* The work of Ian Hacking (e.g., Hacking, 1983) and Nancy Cartright (e.g., Cartright, 1989) epitomizes this perspective.
 |
| Many philosophers questioned post-positivism as well and embraced constructivism or interpretivism instead | * Post-positivism still assumes that an objective truth underpins nature—even if this objective truth is hard to unearth
* In contrast, some philosophers started to question this notion of an objective truth that is independent of the observer
* They proposed the values and culture of people always affect the beliefs they construct to understand the world
* This perspective is sometimes called naturalistic (Guba & Lincoln, 1988) constructivist (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), or interpretivism
 |
| Until the 1960s, researchers tended to apply only one method: quantitative and qualitative  | * According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998),this period before the 1960s can be referred to as the mono-method era
* During this time, researchers either adopted a positivist or post-positivist perspective—and thus tended to apply quantitative techniques—or adopted an interpretivist or constructivist perspective—and thus tended to apply qualitative techniques.
* The two approaches were regarded as contradictory; researchers could either embrace or reject the notion of an objective truth
* That is, many researchers perceived these two positions as incompatible and irreconcilable
 |
| Gradually, some researchers began to apply a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches | * Some researchers blended quantitative approaches and qualitative approaches during data collection and, for example, utilized interviews and surveys in one study (Creswell. 2003)—called the **mixed methods** approach
* Some researchers applied qualitative techniques to analyze quantitative data and vice versa (Creswell. 2003)—called the **mixed models** approach
* These studies ignited the debate over whether positivist and interpretivist perspectives are actually incompatible
* This debate is sometimes called the qualitative-quantitative debate (Reichardt & Rallis, 1994).
 |
| To reconcile this apparent contradiction between positivist and interpretivist perspectives, researchers started to argue that which approach individuals choose should depend on the purpose and nature of their research  | * These scholars argued that researchers should not merely choose a qualitative or quantitative approach depending on whether they embrace a positivist or interpretivist perspective (Darlington & Scott, 2002)
* That is, researchers should not commit to either perspective—but choose the approach that is most beneficial in the circumstances.
* That is, sometimes quantitative methods may fulfill the goals of researchers, indicative of post-positivism. In other occasions, qualitative methods are more likely to fulfill the goals of researchers, indicative of interpretivism.
* This position, called pragmatism, challenges the assumption that researchers need to choose between positivism and interpretivism (Morgan, 2007).
 |
| Not all researchers who advocated the use of mixed methods adopt pragmatism  | * Occasionally, scholars apply both qualitative and quantitative techniques but do not adopt pragmatism
* For example, they may argue that both qualitative and quantitative methods can be consistent with both positivism and interpretivism. The method is not always related to the philosophical or theoretical perspective (Greene & Caracelli, 1997; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham 1989)
* Therefore, individuals can utilize mixed methods but still espouse post-positivism, interpretivism, or other paradigms
* Thus, the application of mixed methods or mixed models does not indicate the researcher has adopted pragmatism.
* Indeed, according to some researchers, besides pragmatism, researchers often apply three other paradigms or philosophies to underpin mixed methods: transformative-emancipation, dialectics, and critical realism (Shannon-Baker, 2015)
 |

|  |
| --- |
| **Features of pragmatism** |

 More recently, researchers have started to characterize the key assumptions and priorities of pragmatism (for a review, see Shannon-Baker, 2015). The following table outlines some of these features.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Feature of pragmatism | Detail |
| The primary aim of pragmatism is to uncover beneficial outcomes regardless of the underlying philosophy | For example, pragmatists will choose the method that * generates helpful products, such as an intervention manual (Biesta 2010)
* clarifies insight or understanding about some phenomenon (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2006)
* uncovers insights that can be communicated widely and effectively (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003)
 |
| Pragmatism is perceived as an approach—rather than a comprehensive philosophical paradigm or worldview | * Pragmatists maintain that a comprehensive worldview can restrict which insights or observations researchers communicate (Morgan, 2007)
* Thus, other paradigms, such as interpretivism, limit communication of information
* Pragmaticism is not intended to answer broader philosophical questions, such as whether an objective truth can be uncovered
 |
| Pragmatists will often embrace objectivity and subjectivity concurrently | * That is, pragmatists will assume that some of the conclusions they propose might represent objective truths—truths that are largely independent of their values and beliefs (Morgan, 2007)
* But, they appreciate that other conclusions might be biased by their values and beliefs (Morgan, 2007)
 |
| Pragmatists tend to apply abduction—a blend of induction and deduction (Biesta 2010) | * That is, these researchers first generate theories from observations, called induction
* Next, they collect observations to assess theories, called deduction
* And, they might continue this cycle of induction and deduction several times
 |
| Pragmatists value transferability—the extent to which the knowledge gained from the research can be applied to other settings and circumstances | * Because the aim of pragmatism is to generate helpful outcomes, proponents of this approach will value results that can be applied beyond the circumstances that were studied
 |

|  |
| --- |
| **Limitations of pragmatism** |

A few scholars have challenged some of the assumptions that underpin pragmatism. For example, the purpose of pragmatism is to conduct research that is beneficial. But these proponents of pragmatism do not define these benefits. Who should benefit from the research (Mertens, 2003)? Which outcomes are regarded as beneficial? Unless researchers answer these questions, they cannot readily decide which methods are suitable.

|  |
| --- |
| **Alternative paradigms** |

 If you want to blend quantitative data with qualitative data, you do not need to embrace pragmatism. You might consider some other paradigms instead. The following table outlines these paradigms. Nevertheless, some researchers, such as Creamer (2017), demonstrate that most of these alternatives are actually variants or subtypes of pragmaticism.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Alternative paradigm | Detail |
| The transformative-emancipatory perspective (e.g., Mertens, 2003) | * Rather than merely seek any benefits, researchers should seek outcomes that benefit marginal communities—or communities that cannot readily voice their concerns and perspectives
* These communities may include people with specific disorders or limited socio-economic status, for example
* To achieve this goal, researchers should develop strong relationships and collaborations with these communities
* The community might contribute to decisions on which questions to ask, which methods are culturally sensitive, and which participants should be invited
* Communities might associate some research methods with exploitation. Hence, researchers should utilize the methods that are accepted in these communities.
* Communities participate in the collection of data and judge whether the research is useful
* .
* **Ontology**. A key focus of study should revolve around inequity because of power and privilege
* **Epistemology**: An egalitarian relationship with participants is essential
* **Axiology:** Research should value human rights and social justice both locally and globally
 |
| Dialectics or dialectic pluralism (e.g., Greene & Hall, 2010). | * The aim of dialectics is to apply the post-positivist and interpretivist paradigms together—rather than develop another paradigm such as pragmatism
* That is, proponents of this dialectics orient their attention to the tension between these two paradigms—such as conflicting results between quantitative and qualitative data—and attempt to derive some understanding from this tension
* Often, proponents of dialectics will invite both post-positivist and interpretivist researchers to contribute to the team
* Researchers might develop techniques to display data that shows the contrasts between quantitative and qualitative data—and then derive inferences from these disparities
* Researchers might also examine more extreme or divergent cases to contradict their initial hypotheses or beliefs
* **Ontology:** Proponents assume that people construct reality, and hence researchers should explore the range of realities or perspectives that individuals construct
* **Epistemology**: Proponents recognize that researchers cannot be perceived as independent of the participant—but shapes the responses and interpretation of participants
* **Axiology**: Proponents value diverse perspectives
 |
| Critical realism (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010) | * Critical realism assumes that some objective truth or reality underpins society
* But, critical realism also assumes that people construct their own perception of the world—a construction their values and culture can shape
* Consequently, humans may never be able to uncover these objective truths or realities entirely; research can only approximate these truths
* This perspective thus recognizes the relative merits of both quantitative data—to uncover objective truths— and qualitative data—to recognize the importance of individual perspectives.
* One key feature is that causality is embedded within local social processes; researchers should not control all extraneous variables, because these variables are key causes of outcomes
* **Ontology:** Proponents assume that reality exists independent of our perceptions but cannot be fully known
* **Epistemology**: Our experiences, emotions, beliefs, and values all bias our perception of the real world—so multiple interpretations of the same event are possible
 |

|  |
| --- |
| **References** |

Biesta G. (2010). Pragmatism and the philosophical foundations of mixed methods research. In Tashakkori A., Teddlie C. (Eds.), Sage handbook of mixed methods in social & behavioral research (2nd ed., pp. 95-118). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cartright, N. (1989). Nature's capacities and their measurement. Oxford University Press.

Creamer, E. G. (2017). An introduction to fully integrated mixed methods research. Sage.

Creswell. J. W. (2003). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Darlington, Y., & Scott, D. (2002). Qualitative research in practice: Stories from the field. Australia: Allen and Unwin.

Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y. (1988). Do inquiry paradigms imply methodologies? In D. M. Fetterman, (Ed.) Qualitative approaches to evaluation in education (pp. 89-115). New York: Praeger.

Greene, J., & Caracelli, V. (Eds.) (1997). Advances in mixed-method evaluation: The challenges and benefits of integrating diverse paradigms. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Greene, J., Caracelli, V., & Graham W. (1989). Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 11, 255-274.

Greene J. C., & Hall J. N. (2010). Dialectics and pragmatism: Being of consequence. In Tashakkori A., Teddlie C. (Eds.), Sage handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research (2nd ed., pp. 119-143). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Johnson R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. (2006). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. Educational Researcher, 33(7), 14-26.

Hacking, I. (1983). Representing and Intervening: Introductory topics in the philosophy of natural science. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Maxwell, J. A., & Mittapalli, K. (2010). Realism as a stance for mixed methods research. In Tashakkori A., Teddlie C. (Eds.), Sage handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research (2nd ed., pp. 145-167). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mertens, D. M. (2003). Mixed methods and the politics of human research: The transformative-emancipatory perspective. In Tashakkori A., Teddlie C. (Eds.), Handbook of mixed method social & behavioral research (pp. 135-164). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Morgan, D. L. (2007). Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implications of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 1(1), 48-76.

Phillips, D. C. & Burbules, N. C. (2000): Postpositivism and Educational Research. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Reichardt, C., & Rallis, S. (1994). The qualitative-quantitative debate: New perspectives, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Shannon-Baker, P. (2015). Making paradigms meaningful in mixed methods research. Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 10(4), 319-334.

Tashakkori, A. and Teddlie, C. (1998). Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. London: Sage.

Tashakkori A., & Teddlie C. (2003). Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zammito, J. H. (2004). A nice derangement of epistemes. Post-positivism in the study of Science from Quine to Latour. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.