

Pragmatism and Survey Research

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Abstract

abstract

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1 Introduction

Abstract

Generally speaking, survey research is dominated by what might be called scientific cognitivism. The centrality of cognitivism is clearly evident in the dominant models of “the survey process” and the practices of “cognitive interviewing”. The “scientific” part is evident in the sort of language that dominates survey methodology, which routinely treats questionnaires as instruments of measurement and models interviewing on the experimental methods of the physical sciences.

Meanwhile a quiet revolution has been underway for the past several decades in the human sciences (including e.g. AI and neuroscience).

The “new sciences” - “cognitive” this or that - are generally speaking neither new nor particularly scientific. The only genuinely new element is computation. The emergence of a well-defined concept of computability in the first half of the 20th century did indeed mark a conceptual innovation of truly historic proportions. But the various “cognitive” sciences to which it gave rise, once scholars began to take a computational perspective on psychology, were not revolutionary; they only advanced an agenda that has its roots in the 17th century Enlightenment. Those “cognitive” sciences in which computation plays a central role seek to mathematicize the human, just as Galileo, Newton, and other Enlightenment scientists have sought to mathematicize nature.

The truly revolutionary movement is marked by the development of Pragmatism. Properly understood, Pragmatism doesn’t advance the agenda of the first Enlightenment; it turns it upside down.

Pragmatism liberates us from the tyranny of objective reality (Truth, etc.) without stranding us in a jejune relativism. It cheerfully accepts the existence of the real world and the constraints it imposes on us, but it rejects the notion that we can somehow find the Archimedean point of purchase that will allow us to prize apart the real from the apparent, the True from the False. It denies that there is any one true method, scientific or otherwise, that will lead us to the promised land of True Knowledge. It denies that we can learn to speak the one true language of nature, or that such a language even exists.

Remark 1 *But it also denies, for all that, that we are condemned to ignorance and error. It insists that we can learn, that we can cope with each other and our environments in the ways that matter. Etc. TODO: state the positive case in a way that ties it back to our ordinary intuitions of truth, objectivity, etc.*

Up to now, however, the Pragmatist Enlightenment has had relatively little impact on survey research. Even the relatively small number of sr researchers who have tried (since at least the early 90s) to draw attention to the contextual and interactive aspects of survey interviewing have tended to accept the main commitments of the traditional cognitivist perspective. They tend to treat context and interactivity as important but essentially peripheral aspects of a “process” whose center remains firmly entangled by cognitivist and representationalist commitments: to mental entities and processes, the autonomy of language, the atomicity of words, representational semantics, and so forth.

The survey research literature shows distinct signs of a cargo-cult science mentality. A clear example is the use of the term “probe” in discussions of cognitive interviewing. The metaphor is obvious: a probe is a scientific instrument used to examine a specimen. So long as this is treated as nothing more than a metaphor there is no problem; but the “theory” of cognitive interviewing

tends to take it much farther. It takes the notion of a probe literally, and construes ordinary questions as scientific instruments designed to probe the cognitive architecture of responding subjects. The clear implication is that there is something distinctive about the “probes” used in cognitive interviewing, something that makes them scientific instruments, when in fact they are nothing more than ordinary discursive performances. Merely calling a follow-up question a “probe” does make it an instrument; still less does it make it “scientific”. To pretend otherwise is to engage in cargo-cult science. To put it another way: the cognitivist theory under which we are to treat some verbal performances as “probes” is the *only* justification we have for thinking they are scientific instruments. But it provides no means of distinguishing a set of such performances from any other discursive performance, no way of deciding what counts as a probe, other than its own theoretical claims. The logic is entirely circular.

Critical v. constructive

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First it provides an overview of contemporary Pragmatism, in order to give substance to the claim advanced above as to its revolutionary character. One way to do this is by contrasting it with its opposite number(s), so the result will be to expose and clarify the fundamental themes and commitments of representationalism and cognitivism, etc. This will sharpen some boundaries.

Once the background issues - theoretical, methodological, philosophical - are clear, the other task is to examine, at least in a preliminary manner, the implications of Pragmatism for Survey Research. What is on offer is a radical re-conceptualization of the entire enterprise. A move away from scientism toward a more properly (and appropriately) anthropological perspective.

Caveat: we are not talking here about merely methodological issues. It is not a question of doing the same thing, only better; of finding an innovative method that solves the old problems. What is suggested is rather a fundamental change in the way we conceive of the task, asking different questions, discarding the old questions as not useful or even very meaningful.

2 Survey Research: The Received View

Field v. experimental science (Ryan, [“Replication in Field Biology”](#)), (Hurlbert, [“Pseudoreplication and the Design of Ecological Field Experiments”](#))

Remark 2 *What is “Survey Research”? Two answers: research that uses surveys to collect (and construct) data, and research into the nature of surveys. First, each survey project studies something, or several things (each question being “about” something). Second, Survey Research as a kind of meta-discipline studies surveys; usually this goes by “Survey Methodology”.*

- Survey Research: production and collection of social science “data” (more accurately: *facta*, *mades*, rather than *data*, *givens*) by means of questions. Better: survey *based* research; research that *uses* survey techniques to enable study of a phenomenon. How then do we know that these techniques are appropriate for the object of study?
- Survey Methodology: study of the use of questions to produce and collect data

2.1 The Standard Model

Laboratory model: based entirely on (bad) analogy to the physical sciences.

2.2 The Extended Standard Model

XSM = SM plus interaction

2.3 Survey Methodology

Monism v. pluralism.

3 Pragmatism

Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.

CS Peirce (CP5.402)

“Although the term pragmatism is frequently used to characterize some or other highly specific thesis or program, pragmatism is not and never was a school of thought unified around a distinctive doctrine.” talisse 1

“As a kind of naturalism, pragmatism is partly a thesis about the relation of philosophy to the natural sciences; consequently, one should expect pragmatists to engage the questions of the proper aims and methods of philosophy.” talisse 9

“In its most muscular form, the pragmatist thesis is that, once we understand properly the nature of philosophy, we will discover that there are no philosophical problems anyway.” talisse 9

Pragmatism integrates naturalism (science) and humanism:

“What makes each of these authors pragmatist is their emphasis on naturalistic and variously humanistic accounts of philosophical problems and solutions. One of the reasons as to the variety of pragmatisms is the variety of humanisms available to pragmatists.” talisse 5

3.1 Major Themes

Negative and positive.

- anti-foundationalism

- anti-representationalism
- normativity
- inferentialism
- expressivism
- cognitivism, mentalism
- naturalism
- evolution & statistics

“Quine’s corpus presents an ongoing development of a few key pragmatist and naturalist insights about science, language, and ontology, and an attempt to fit them together. Importantly, Quine proceeds by way of critical engagement with nonnaturalist critics and interlocutors....the case for pragmatism was to be made on a case-by-case basis, not by way of a comprehensive philosophical system.” Talisse intro p. 8-9

3.2 The Strategy

Brandom, Price, etc. adopt similar analytic/explanatory strategies which have their roots in Peirce’s Maxim.

“Roughly speaking, deflationists suggest that semantic vocabulary enables speakers to do useful things with (other, pre-existing) words and sentences - to do things which they couldn’t do so well, or at all, without semantic vocabulary...A functional account of this kind is, *inter alia*, an account of the use speakers make of the semantic vocabulary concerned. It explains the vocabulary in terms of its use and function in the linguistic community. But it does not reduce or analyse facts about meaning to facts about use. Instead it explains talk of meanings, and tells us what it takes to belong to a community who go in for such talk.” Price, *Deflation about truth* p. 112

“If semantic properties do attach to physical objects in a primary sense, then deflationism is a non-starter. In particular, it is not enough to try to show that these philosophers are looking for the wrong sort of property - a thick notion of aboutness, where a thin one would do, for example. As deflationists, we need to argue that they are looking in the wrong place, that they have the wrong conception of the nature of the problem.” Price 112

“The solution, I think, is to abandon the idea that among the goals of a use-based theory of meaning should be that of providing a non-semantic reduction of propositions of the form ‘x means F’. On the contrary, I think, the right approach to these locutions is that applied with such success by deflationists in the case of truth: viz. to explain the function of such a locution - in general, the function of talk about meaning - in terms which don’t require that it refers to substantial properties.

As noted above, such an approach is bound to appeal to facts about usage. It will tell us under what circumstances speakers use the locutions concerned, and what functions this use serves in the speech

communities concerned. But instead of analysing facts about meaning in terms of facts about use, it explains our talk of meanings, and tells us what habits of usage underlie such a discourse.” same, p. 115

3.3 Brandom

Contemporary philosophical pragmatism receives its most complete and thorough exposition in Robert Brandom’s masterpiece “Making It Explicit”¹.

3.3.1 Sellars: Myth of the Given, Space of Reasons

3.3.2 Sellars: Language Entries

This is the device that accounts for the relation of causal and rational orders. It is true that the world in some sense has a causal influence on our language performances, but that is not enough to account for the intelligibility of those performances. When we declare “That’s red” in the presence of red things, we do so “because” (in some sense) of those red things and their (causal) relation to us. This is what Sellars dubbed a “language entry” move. But that sort of causality cannot account for the conceptual content of our utterance.

3.3.3 Brandom: From Sentience to Sapience

To say “That’s red” is to apply the *concept* “red”, and the subpersonal, causal relation between the presence of a red thing and our conceptually contentful utterance cannot account for this. It cannot account for our ability to apply the concept red *correctly*, to red things, not non-red things. After all, if the presence of red things caused us to say “That’s red”, then we would in fact say that hundreds or thousands of times a day. A causal model cannot account for four fundamental normative aspects of our behavior: the ability to lie, to err, to hedge (“It *seems* red”), and to remain silent.

Brandom’s Parrot: one of Brandom’s favored illustrative examples is a parrot trained to squawk “That’s red” in the presence of red things. This is an example of *sentience* rather than *sapience*. Brandom’s Parrot is not sapient; its performance does not count as conceptually contentful (rational), since it does not involve the application of concepts. This is where inferential semantics enter the picture: the content of “red” is essentially inferentially articulated. To count as a concept user the parrot must be capable of drawing inferences (either explicitly or implicitly) involving the concept “red”. For example, it must know that “That’s green” is incompatible with “That’s red”. Those inferences, in turn, are only intelligible in terms of what Brandom (following Sellars) calls “the game of giving and asking for reasons”.

Question-based interviews: only intelligible as “language games”, denizens of the Space of Reasons.

¹*MIE* is over 600 pages of close argument covering most of the philosophical topics of interest to Survey Research. For a more manageable introduction to Brandom’s ideas see his ([brandom_precis_1997](#)), ([brandom_articulating_2001](#)). See also ([brandom_perspectives_2011](#)), ([brandom_reason_2009](#)), and ([brandom_between_2008](#)).

Remark 3 *The fundamental mistake made by the Standard Model is failure to distinguish between distinct “orders of explanation”: the subpersonal, causal world, and the personal, discursive, rational world. Q&A-based interviewing lives in the latter, not the former. The notion that questions are stimuli that “cause” responses is fundamentally mistaken. Whatever causal relations may obtain between a question utterance and the ensuing response utterance are not relevant to the intelligibility of the game. Responses have reasons, not causes.*

Remark 4 *An example would be useful here. Maybe “How old are you?” A correct response to this question is one that involves propositional commitments and entitlements. It does not involve any causal relationship to the question, still less to any “latent” age variable whose value is, say “27 years”. Crudely put, you know you’re 27 years old if you know that last year you were 26. More accurately, you know how to respond because you know the rules of the language game, which involves also counting years and birthdays. Consider how children learn their ages: they learn that certain verbal performances (e.g. “I’m four”) are correct, regardless of whether they understand what they mean, and they learn that every year they have a “birthday”, after which a different performance (“I’m five”) is correct.*

3.4 Normativity

The Space of Reasons is a normative space of reasons, not a natural (causal) space of laws.

3.5 Vocabularies

Measurement as description. Description v. evaluation. Price on naturalisms. The bifurcation thesis.

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4 Science

Remark 5 *Q: What does Pragmatism have to say about science, and why should we care? A: Philosophy as therapy (Rorty) or edification (Wittgenstein?). Exposure of unexamined presuppositions and consequences, etc.*

Remark 6 *The major point: the Pragmatic Enlightenment dethroned “objectivity” or “Reality” as the source of unimpeachable external authority over our intellectual lives, just as the 17th century Enlightenment remove religion as the source of authority over our political and civic lives. It follows that pragmatism undermines science’s self image as the one true objective external source of authoritative knowledge. For pragmatism, science is one of many human vocabularies, with no legitimate claim to special authority as an external, independent arbiter of truth claims.*

Remark 7 *This has special significance for the human sciences. Among other things, it suggests social scientists should stop trying to mimic physics. Not for the traditional reason (i.e. that this is impossible), but because physics should not be granted such special status. Why should we take physics as the model science? Undoubtedly because it is so successful in practice, as predicting and manipulating the world. But practical success is not the same as epistemic authority.*

In fact it seems we are seeing a shift in the relative prestige of scientific fields; these days biology seems to be displacing physics as the model science.

4.1 From Empiricism to Pragmatism

Sellars, Quine, Wittgenstein and the demolition of Empiricism.

Empiricism smuggles the conceptual into perception. Pragmatism remedies this by first recognizing that “all perceptual awareness is conceptual” (Sellars, somewhere), and second, that the conceptual is fundamentally pragmatic (and inferential).

With respect to measurement, this means that the appeal to isomorphisms between mathematical and “empirical structures” is problematic. Empirical structures are already conceptual. They are not “given”. Pragmatism shifts the focus to the practices in virtue of which we are able to recognize the empirical as such in the first place. So the isomorphism of measurement theory must be supplemented by an account of the relation of the conceptual structure of empirical systems to the world. And this relation is essentially pragmatic, a matter of what we do, how we interact with our external environment, rather than an antecedently established correspondence between our concepts and the world.

This can be illustrated in the history of temperature measurement, where theory and its relation to measurement practice played the decisive role.

4.2 Price: Global Expressivism

From Rorty to Price: science as one among many vocabs, with no special claim to authority.

4.3 Measurement

Abstract

Measurement pragmatism. No representation needed.

4.4 False Dichotomies: quantitative v. qualitative “variables”

4.5 Deflating Validity

Abstract

Semantic and metaphysical deflationism works as well for validity as it does for truth and reference.

Remark 8 *Deflationism seems to depend essentially on some form of expressivism. Or maybe they amount to the same thing?*

4.6 Causality and the Space of Reasons

Abstract

abstract

Abell, “[Narrative Explanation](#)”

Crane and Brewer, “[Mental Causation](#)”

Gross, “[A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms](#)”

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Morris, “[Causes of Behaviour](#)”

Williamson, “[The Broadness of the Mental](#)”

4.6.1 Conflation of Causal and Logical Relations

4.7 False Dichotomies

Reality-appearance; true-false; etc.

4.7.1 Analytic-Synthetic (Quine)**4.7.2 Fact-Value (Putnam)****4.7.3 Qualitative-Quantitative****4.7.4 Word-World****4.8 Hypothetical Entities****4.9 Personal v. Subpersonal****4.10 Spaces****4.10.1 Natural space of causes****4.10.2 Discursive space of reasons****5 Reconciliation: A Pragmatic Model of Survey Research****5.1 The Deontic Scorekeeping Model of Discursive Practice and Survey Research****Abstract**

Why the deontic scorekeeping model is preferable to others, esp. the cognitive model.

Remark 9 *It's a model of discursive, that is rational, practice. Contrast this with most models on offer which tend to focus on subpersonal processes; hence the prevalence of talk about "the survey process", the "response process", etc.*

5.2 A Quality Assurance Model for Survey Research**Abstract**

abstract

6 Notes**6.1 Evolution**

Instead of "the QA process", the proper object of investigation is the local evolution of discourse.

EM studies local produced order. It may come up with a structural description. But locally produced order is the outcome of an essentially evolutionary process - the mutual adaptation of the participants to each other and the context. Also, any such model may not (probably will not) generalize. But what does generalize is the evolutionary mechanism itself, just like in biology.

Rational selection as the mechanism of the evolution of discursive performances. What accounts for the deontic attitudes we adopt regarding performances? Brandom's account describes the architecture

of such posturings and the significances the institute. But it does not really address the logic of discourse as an evolutionary process.

The idea is that Brandom provides an account of discourse qua rational action. Different attitudes are endorsed or undertaken for reasons - that is the source or ground of the intelligibility of discursive practice. So if we view the unfolding of discourse as being governed by the logic of evolution, we can treat Brandom's sort of rational pragmatism as the selection mechanism that accounts for why some attitudes (meanings) survive (are endorsed) and others do not. Meanings that survive must fit into the space of reasons - they must be assertable and justifiable, even if the participants are unable to explicitly articulate this. This makes the evolution of discourse intelligible as a rational process, rather than a natural process. Responses to questions are not explicable as effects caused by "true values" or the like; this would make them fundamentally non-rational. Or to borrow a bon mot from Garfinkel, this would make respondents "rational dopes".

Similar language: "negotiation", e.g. "...I suggest that the content of talk indicates that imposed hierarchies are continually re-negotiated..." Negotiation as rational evolution?

The "true score" and other orthodox models account for sentience, not sapience.

6.2 Verum Factum

Cartesianism (spectator, etc.) inspection, discovery, certainty, foundationism (external foundation grounding knowledge) v.

Verum Factum, geneological/historical, following growth/development, not certainty but ???; no foundationism, no privileged vocab, no external source of authority

Critical notions: authority. For evidence etc. key idea is authority - the only kind of authority is the kind we assent to. So the question is what do we treat as authoritative and why, rather than how can we discover the One True external foundational source of authority and learn to speak its language

Critical notions: vocabulary. Regardless of what there is, we can only talk about it by using vocabs.

Relevance to SR: we make our truths, by engaging in dialog with respondents in order to teach/train them to understand what we want. In other words we work to make our scorecards converge. We can never be sure that researchers and respondents understand each other, have the same interpretations of qx text, etc. But we can do what nature does in evolution and learning: institute a cyclic process of experiment, feedback, and correction. This is operational even at the most simple and basic level of communication. So we can use this fact to our advantage.

Communication interactions as not essentially different from processes of evolution and learning. Evolutionary process tend to coordinate organism and environment; learning processes adapt the learner to the task environment, etc. Any discursive exchange - even simple greetings, etc. - does the same sort of thing: coordinate and mutually adjust the parties to the exchange.

6.3 Rational Evidence

Evidence-Based Rational SR

RCT: isolate the causal factor that links Treatment to Outcome

The mistake made by orthodox SR (shown by its vocab of measurement, error, etc.) is that it confuses the space of causes and the space of reasons.

In RCT, we observe a stimulus followed by a response (T followed by O) and postulate a causal relation. In SR, we observe a Q performance followed by a R performance. In fact this is an idealization since Q and R cannot be isolated - they are both joint performances. Ignore that for now; the point is that what makes them intelligible as performances is the space of reasons, not causes. That is, as discursive episodes they are essentially rational in a way the T-O trials are not. By definition, "rational" means involving concepts. Stimulus-response does not involve concepts and so is not rational in this favored sense. The natural world may be lawful, but it is not rational.

So SR should abandon the orthodox vocab of measurement, etc. in favor of one involving rationality. What would "evidence-based" mean, then? Not the kind of evidence involved in natural science, since such evidence does not involve concepts and thus meaning. Instead evidence inescapably involves meaning and understanding. What counts as evidence is what we count as a rational explanation or story. And this necessarily involves the perspective of the participants - it is their rationality, their giving and asking for reasons, that provides the observational basis of evidence.

One consequence: Qx does not involve measurement. SR can use stats to statistically measure the collected data, but that is quite separate from whether the data measure anything. So you can say that x% of respondents pick option X, but that does not mean that you have measured the distribution of "true values" of some latent variable. What you have measured is a distribution of deontic scores, or discursive postures. There is no warrant for claiming that each member of the x% means the same thing by picking X.

6.4 Misc

1. What is a question? Better: what counts as a question, what is it to ask a question?
2. Ditto for answer.
Q and A as parts of a whole (holistic view)
Q token v. Q performance, etc.

6.5 Erotetic Discursive Practice

EDP as production of data rather than discovery of truth

6.6 Replication

Goal is replication. Compare: blood work, e.g. measuring cholesterol. The measuring apparatus reacts to the sample, not the other way around. For EDP, respondent reacts to the question, so the question is analogous to the blood sample. The response is a kind of measurement of the question, not the other way around.

Replicability means same setup, same experimental conditions; in EDP this means replication of conceptual structure, which is accomplished by the dialog preceding the question. Traditionally, "ask

the same question”; in practice this is impossible, since what counts is not the question text but respondent’s grasp of the sense. So the ”experimental setup” should be viewed as the work of teaching the respondent what the sense of the question is. Survey interviewing is essentially interventionist, but this is not necessarily a bad thing, since lab experiments are too - they ”intervene” to set up experimental ”initial conditions”. The difference is that setting up initial conditions (”same meaning”) in question asking means tutoring the respondent.

6.7 Myths and Mythologies

- The Myth of Question Independence says that the meaning of a question is independent of context. But the meaning of a question is always dependent on what came before it.
- Myth of Autonomy. Interviewer and Respondent.
- Myth of Error

6.8 Dopes

Garfinkel’s dopes - cultural, judgmental, psychological

Dehumanization. Orthodox Survey Research (OSR) dehumanizes participants. The R is a sampling unit. The mythology of OSR measurement treats the human R as a natural object to be measured rather than a person.

Appendices

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