Pragmatism as a Research Paradigm

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Abstract: A paradigm is a worldview, a set of beliefs, values, traditions, and conventions that shape our understanding of how we know what we know and what knowing is. With this definition in mind, the purpose of this paper is to point out the added value of articulating the research paradigm of a mixed methods case study that examined the preparedness of university graduates for today's job market. The paper intends to examine how the exploration of participants' worldviews of the phenomena under inquiry lends itself to pragmatism, a paradigm that underpins the philosophical premise of mixed methods research (MMR). The discussion demonstrates (1) how pragmatism as a research paradigm informs the chosen mixed methods design, and (2) how the chosen research paradigm, pragmatism, values multiplicity of worldviews that enrich the development of viable solutions for the problem under inquiry. Articulating the research paradigm that informs the overall design of a study is oftentimes marginalized especially in case studies. This paper intends to explain the value for highlighting the philosophical paradigm of case studies.

Keywords: Pragmatism, Mixed methods research, Paradigm, Methodological pluralism, Case study

1. Introduction

A paradigm is a set of conventions that profile our understanding of how we acquire knowing. Articulating the research paradigm that guides a study explains the rationale that supports its chosen methodology. What derives a research paradigm is the theoretical/conceptual framework of the study. Therefore, there should be consistency between the conceptual framework and research paradigm.

2. Types of Research Paradigms

2.1 Positivism

Positivism emphasizes that we know what we want to know through objective and empirical observation. Investigating problems requires the analysis of observable facts to generate objective knowledge. Positivists value quantitative analysis of observable data that depend on testing hypotheses and identification of causal relationship between variables (Park, et al., 2020).

2.2 Constructivism/Interpretivism

This school of thought emphasizes that we understand the world and its problems through the subjective and socially constructed nature of knowledge. Constructivists view the researcher as an active participant in interpreting the constructed knowledge of participants. That is, knowledge is not to be discovered but individually constructed. Each individual constructs and reconstructs his own views in accordance with his/her own background knowledge and experience (Elander and Cronje, 2016). Constructivists believe that it is important to contextually understand a research phenomenon through the perspectives and experiences of its stakeholders who construct their meaning within specific contexts. Constructivist researchers normally value qualitative research methods (Lee, 2012).

2.3 Pragmatism

Knowledge, according to pragmatists such as John Dewey, is to be acquired by the action that takes place between man and his environment. This type of knowledge is changing, dynamic, developing, and oriented toward its consequences in human nature. Maintaining that all our human experiences, such as fears, hopes, and etc, are deeply rooted in nature, Dewey asserts that both nature and experience are intertwined and reflect each other.

2.3.1 Pragmatism as a research paradigm

As a research approach, pragmatism emphasizes that we understand the world and solve its problems through the application of subjective and objective methods. Pragmatist researchers are flexible and practical in finding viable solutions to the phenomenon under inquiry. They recognize the importance of having multiplicity of perspectives and worldviews in solving research problems. Pragmatism derives pluralistic mixed methods research (MMR). Also, pragmatists value both the objective quantitative worldview and the subjective experience of stakeholders. They situate the research problem within its specific context (Foster, 2024).

2.3.2 *Pragmatism and mixed methods research*

It is important to note that what derives a research paradigm is the nature of the research objectives and questions. For example, if the research question centralizes the perceptions and lived experiences of your participants in assessing and addressing the problem under inquiry, pragmatism in this case would be appropriate (Liu, 2022). A pragmatist view would provide you with the opportunity to gather both subjective qualitative data and objective quantitative data. Pragmatism supports the mixing of research methods to get an in-depth understanding of the research problem and its solution. Pragmatism values individuals' views and life experiences (Kaushik and Walsh 2019).

The nature of the research questions with a focus on methodological pluralism would match a pragmatic view of the world which "… is typically associated with mixed methods research. The focus is on the consequences of research, on the primary importance of the question asked rather than the methods, and multiple methods of data collection inform the problem under study" (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007, p.23).

From a pragmatic viewpoint, the nature of the research questions derives the research methods. For example, if the research questions of the study put a premium on the constructed lived experiences of the research participants in addressing the problem under study, pragmatism would be suitable. The suitability of pragmatism as a guiding philosophical research paradigm in this case is significant as it "places high regard for the reality of and influence of inner world of human experience in action (and where) knowledge is viewed as being both constructed and based on the reality of the world we experience and live in" (Johnson and J. Onwighbuzie, 2004, p.18).

2.3.3 *Priority of the pragmatic researcher*

A pragmatic researcher prioritizes the practical implications of the research outcomes in solving the problem under investigation. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches provides pragmatist researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the problem within its context. The focus of a pragmatist is to come up with actionable knowledge that addresses the problem and provides guidance to decision makers. The main aim is to generate practical knowledge that is actionable, viable and relevant to real world challenges (Turyahikayo, 2021).

As a philosophy, pragmatism centralizes contextual, actionable knowledge, and the intersection between knowing, experiencing, and acting. For pragmatists, to know is to inquire and learn through an experiential process. As a philosophy, pragmatism facilitates the methodological pluralism of MMR. It informs the design of the MM study and guides an integrative approach that combines survey data with qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2003). The integration of both types of data, guided by the principles of pragmatism, enriches our understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry. Pragmatism, as such, positively impacts the MMR design where different methods complement and enhance each other conclusion (Shan, 2021).

3. Wy do we Need Knowledge of the Research Paradigm?

Knowledge of the research paradigm is indispensable for the development of a well-thought-out research. The knowledge of the conventions of a research paradigm makes the process of knowledge production and interpretations of the analyzed data meaningful. The process of meaning making that research produces requires a solid philosophical understanding of its discourse. We do require knowledge of the research paradigm that underpins a study to understand how a solution is being shaped and constructed (Feilzer, 2010).

Form a philosophical pragmatic perspective, our understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry can be facilitated through methodological pluralism and multiplicity of perspectives. The discourse of pragmatism makes it easy for us to be open to multiplicity of interpretations. The philosophical paradigm of the research is an enlightening force that comes into play and acts from behind, while we produce and interpret the MM discourse (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). Often, the more we experience multiplicity of views related to a specific issue, the more our worldviews expand. We are, then, always already developing, constructing, and reconstructing horizons of understanding the phenomenon under inquiry.

4. The Methodological Pluralism of MMR

Pragmatism, as a research paradigm, deepens our understanding of three types of knowledge: knowledge of ourselves, knowledge of others and knowledge of experiences in the world. From a pragmatic perspective, the three types of knowledge are interrelated and interdependent and contribute to our constructed beliefs and horizons of understanding. The methodological pluralism that MMR embraces allows us to be exposed to diverse

worldviews, while enriching our understanding of the act of discourse interpretation (Bibi, H., Khan, S. and Shabir, M. 2022).

Pragmatism allows Mixed Methods researchers to reflectively think about their biased interpretation and understanding of other people and the world at large. The pragmatic researcher is always open to experience various worldviews related to the phenomenon under investigation. This openness allows the interpretation of the quantitative data to be cross checked with the interpretation of qualitative data. It also allows the pragmatic researcher to reconsider the interpretation of both data sets thoughtfully and attentively. Pragmatic MM researchers hold themselves open, while discursive discourse goes back and forth between the two types of data. An in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry require es an exploration of the two horizons (the quantitative and the qualitative).

5.   Pragmatism and the Fusion of Horizons

For a pragmatic researcher, the point of understanding is a point where the quantitative horizon fuses with the qualitative one. It is a point where interpretation and understanding of one horizon yields a concurrent consideration of the other. As such, both horizons (the quantitative and the qualitative) co-exist in relation to each other. These divergent research horizons never erode one another. The pragmatist Mixed Methods researcher believes in the inevitable existence of both horizons. In fact, you can not erode, uproot or throw away one horizon for the sake of the other. Rather, pragmatism deepens the rationality of each horizon, making it worth taking into consideration.

6.   Key Takeaways

The gain we get from the pragmatic philosophy is that our constructed quantitative understanding of a phenomenon cannot be isolated from our constructed qualitative one. All in all, this paper endorses the vision that the philosophical understanding of pragmatism as a research paradigm yields a stance that honors exploring multiplicity of world views in solving problems. The pragmatic discourse of the research paradigm demonstrates that our understanding of the nature of research, in terms of theory and practice, has a lot to do with the process we follow in making sense of the world with its concerns and problems.

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