

Pragmatism in Action: A Practical Framework for Navigating Research Paradigms

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Abstract

This article discusses pragmatism as a research paradigm, clarifying the philosophical orientation underpinning the approach, its principles, and methodological implications. From the perspectives of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, pragmatism is described as a committed, social, and adaptive framework concerned primarily with practical consequences, its contextual relevance, and the integration of theory and practice. This article emphasizes problem-solving, pluralism, and using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods to engage with real-world issues. More scholars are placing value in pragmatism as a paradigm; however, scholars often have difficulty engaging with pragmatism due to its malleability and potential for vagueness. The article explores and discusses these barriers by providing foundational principles, methodological uses, ethical considerations, and advice on navigating pragmatism in research practice. Throughout the article, we are attempting to provide a concise but practical guide for scholars on approaching study designs that are rigorously developed and rigorously practical, thereby establishing pragmatism as a principal paradigm to advance knowledge and practice.

Keywords: Knowledge construction; mixed methods; pluralism; pragmatism; research methodology; research paradigm

1. Introduction

In the dynamic arena of research paradigms, pragmatism has become a significant and adaptable approach beyond simply categorizing qualitative and quantitative methods (Biesta, 2021; Yvonne Feilzer, 2010). Drawing from the philosophical lines of early American philosophers, such as Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, pragmatism can provide an approach that emphasizes practical outcomes, contextual pertinence, and the relationship between theory and practice (Peirce, 1992; James & Olin, 1992; Dewey, 2018). Consequently, pragmatism opens up avenues of research that speak to theory while tackling real-world problems, providing significant value to modern scholars (Morgan, 2014).

Despite its growing popularity, many researchers grapple with incorporating pragmatic principles. Despite pragmatism's pragmatic appeal, scholars miss its initial, critical, flexible setting, which can lead to uncertain research design and application (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). This paper aims to provide a robust and comprehensive exploration of pragmatism as a research paradigm that specifies foundational ideas, key principles, attributes, and methodology for scholars in all fields.

Fewer studies have analyzed and used paradigms within research for the social sciences, focused squarely upon positivism, interpretivism, or constructivism. Not enough attention has been paid to pragmatism relative to these paradigms (Creswell & Clark, 2019; Goldkuhl, 2012). In addition, many contributions from scholars who have examined paradigms do not extensively present how pragmatism is a unique paradigm to consider for researching pressing and emergent social issues in particular (Biesta, 2021). Consequently, researchers are left with limited guidance on effectively employing pragmatism in their inquiries, resulting in potential misalignment between research objectives and methodological approaches.

This study addresses the following research question: *How can scholars effectively navigate the pragmatic paradigm in shaping their research inquiries and methodologies?* The objectives of this research include: (1) elucidating the core principles and characteristics of pragmatism; (2) examining the impact of pragmatism on research design, data collection, and analysis; (3) exploring ethical considerations associated with pragmatic research; and (4) providing practical guidance for researchers seeking to implement pragmatic approaches in their work.

This study is significant because it can help researchers understand pragmatism as a fruitful framework for real-world problems. This study adds to the literature on research methodologies by clarifying the concept and its application and stimulating researchers to engage more holistically in research by focusing on relevance to practice and social action.

This paper is divided into five sections. After this introductory section, Section 2 provides an overview of the principles and characteristics of pragmatism as a framework. Section 3 discusses how pragmatism can influence research methodology, such as research design, data collection methods, and analytical approaches. Section 4 deals with pragmatic approaches to research practice and considers issues, such as alignment to research questions, ethics, and some of the challenges involved. Section 5 concludes the paper, summarizing the key issues and providing highlights, emphasizing the significance of pragmatism research in today's contexts.

2. Understanding pragmatism: Principles and features

2.1. Definition and historical context

Pragmatism is a philosophical orientation emphasizing practical effects and tangible results to represent critical components of meaning and truth (Morgan, 2014). The term "pragmatism" was first used by Charles Sanders Peirce in the late 19th century, and Peirce is known as the, 'father of pragmatism.' Peirce believed that we should understand the meaning of concepts in terms of their practical effects and benefits. He believed an idea could not be valid without first showing its usefulness (Peirce, 1992). Peirce's work was followed by William James, who expanded on these notions of philosophy to include pragmatic philosophy and its applications in psychology, religion, and everyday life. James emphasized individual experiences and the subjective nature of truth. He explained that, 'truth is not static,' and is contingent upon how useful the truth is when applied to experiences (James & Olin, 1992). James famously stated, "The truth is what works," and he underscored the notion that the value of an idea is derived from its actual and practical outcomes. Lastly, John Dewey, also considered a pioneer of pragmatism, extended the meaning of pragmatism to include practical applications in education and social reform. Dewey framed experiential learning as a way of knowing and suggested that knowledge is demonstrated when learning actively engages with the world by solving real-life problems (Dewey, 2018). Dewey's ideas of democracy also connect back to pragmatism. Dewey called for democracy as an engaged process, and education should respond to problems that improve knowledge for the public good (Biesta & Burbules, 2004). Together, these key figures form the cornerstone of pragmatist thought, each contributing to its understanding as a philosophy rooted in action, inquiry, and the quest for practical solutions.

2.2. Core principles of pragmatism

Pragmatism is characterized by several core principles that differentiate it from other philosophical traditions:

- Practical consequences (the "cash value" criterion)

At the heart of pragmatism lies the assertion that the meaning of a concept or proposition is closely tied to its practical consequences. This "cash value" criterion suggests that ideas and theories should be evaluated based on their effectiveness in producing desirable outcomes or guiding behavior. In research, this principle encourages scholars to focus on actionable insights and the implications of findings for real-world applications.

- Interplay between theory and practice

Pragmatism blurs the lines between theory and practice, viewing them as interconnected rather than dichotomous. It posits that theories should be subjected to the test of practicality in real-world contexts, and conversely, that practice should inform and refine theoretical frameworks. This iterative relationship allows researchers to develop a more nuanced understanding of complex phenomena, where theoretical insights drive informed action and practical experiences shape theoretical evolution.

- Emphasis on problem-solving and real-world applications

Pragmatism champions a problem-solving orientation, urging researchers to identify and address pressing societal challenges. By prioritizing research questions that resonate with human experience and address real-world issues, pragmatism enables scholars to contribute meaningfully to advancing knowledge and societal betterment. This focus on applicability encourages interdisciplinary collaboration, as researchers draw from various fields to develop comprehensive solutions.

- Fallibilism

Pragmatism views truth as provisional and open to revision. Knowledge claims are never final but are continuously tested through inquiry and adjusted in light of new evidence and experience. This principle emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of knowledge within pragmatic research.

2.3. Characteristics of pragmatic research

Pragmatic research possesses several distinct characteristics that reflect its principles and the underlying philosophy of pragmatism:

- Focus on real-world problems

Research conducted from a pragmatic perspective is fundamentally oriented toward addressing real-world challenges. Scholars are guided by questions that seek to uncover solutions to pressing issues, whether in social policy, education, health care, or other fields. This emphasis on practical relevance fosters research that can inform decision-making and drive positive change.

- Flexibility of methodologies

One of pragmatic research's defining features is its inherent methodological flexibility. Pragmatism advocates using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods as appropriate for the research question. This flexibility enables

researchers to adopt an eclectic approach, integrating diverse methodologies to capture the complexity of social phenomena and gain a comprehensive understanding of the variables at play.

- Emphasis on temporal and contextual factors

Pragmatic research recognizes that knowledge is context-dependent and shaped by temporal factors. Researchers are encouraged to consider their inquiries' social, cultural, and historical contexts, acknowledging that findings may vary across different settings and over time. This focus on context enhances the validity of research outcomes and contributes to a richer understanding of the phenomena being studied.

In contrast to other paradigms, pragmatism emphasizes utility over fixed positions: positivism seeks universal truths through objective measurement (Creswell, 2014; William, 2024a), interpretivism highlights subjective meaning-making (Schwandt, 1994), constructivism stresses the socially constructed nature of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1988; William, 2024b), while pragmatism prioritizes “what works” in solving problems (Yvonne Feilzer, 2010; Morgan, 2014). This comparative lens helps scholars situate pragmatism within the broader research paradigm landscape.

In summary, pragmatism is a powerful research paradigm that emphasizes the practical implications of ideas, fosters a synergistic relationship between theory and practice, and champions a flexible, context-sensitive approach to research. Understanding these principles and characteristics equips scholars to effectively navigate the complexities of pragmatic inquiry and harness its potential to address contemporary challenges.

3. Pragmatism's impact on research methodology

Pragmatism significantly influences research methodology by highlighting the importance of practical outcomes, contextual understanding, and the integration of diverse approaches to inquiry (Biesta, 2021; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). This section examines how pragmatic principles shape research design, data collection methods, and analytical frameworks, ultimately providing researchers with a robust toolkit to address complex questions effectively.

3.1. Research design in pragmatic inquiries

Pragmatic research design favors adaptability and flexibility, adjusting approaches to the context of the research question and context (Creswell & Clark, 2019; Morgan, 2014), unlike adherence to one methodology, often dictated through traditional paradigms. A pragmatic research design privileges research questions that may accommodate multiple, potentially mixed, methodologies (Shannon-Baker, 2016).

Pragmatism embraces mixed methods, allowing researchers to exploit the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This pluralist position contrasts paradigmatic positions that privilege methodological traditions, reflecting the pragmatic position that the research question should determine the inquiry, not the methodology (Yvonne Feilzer, 2010; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This blends multiple methodologies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex problems or phenomena and triangulation of data sources, to gather a more informative understanding of the broader research problem. For example, a researcher exploring education interventions could start working with qualitative interviews to learn about student experiences and then use a quantitative survey to understand the broader impact of the intervention better. This approach captures a fuller picture of the experience of humans while also providing the opportunity for generalized conclusions.

In addition, pragmatic research design offers conditional adaptive strategies (Biesta, 2021). These approaches allow researchers to adapt the study to changing conditions or findings that emerge as the research unfolds. This understanding of a fully emerging design approach is tied to the adaptive approach of anticipating and responding to the complexities that create and shape social realities. This is responsive to the challenges of our time.

3.2. Data collection techniques

Pragmatic research values diverse data collection methods, recognizing that the choice of techniques should stem from the nature of the research question and the study context (Creswell, 2014). The emphasis is on selecting the most effective tools to capture relevant data, regardless of whether they are traditionally qualitative or quantitative in nature.

- Qualitative methods

Pragmatic researchers typically utilize qualitative methods like interviews, focus groups, observations, or ethnographic investigations because these methods provide deep insights about participant experiences and meanings (Morgan, 2014). For instance, a semi-structured interview could explore differing viewpoints and develop a deeper understanding to inform practice across social work or community development (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

- Quantitative methods

On the other hand, quantitative methodologies such as surveys and experiments are essential in a pragmatically designed study since these methods help collect data that can be analyzed quantitatively. These methods allow researchers to describe patterns, correlations, and broad claims representing a larger population (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). For instance, a quantitative survey evaluates the effectiveness of a public health program, potentially leading to sound statistical evidence supportive of informing program implementation.

- Mixed method approaches

Pragmatism promotes implementing a mixed methods approach, which involves blending data collection by utilizing qualitative and quantitative approaches to reach a more holistic understanding of the research problem (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). By utilizing mixed methods, a researcher can obtain a more holistic understanding of the problem while ensuring the data represent diverse perspectives and contexts (Shannon-Baker, 2016). For instance, an educational researcher may analyze test score results while engaging in semi-structured interviews with teachers and students for additional perspectives and context surrounding the factors contributing to student performance.

In each situation above, it is also important to recognize that pragmatism does not have preferred methods. It encourages researchers to utilize tools best suited to examine the practical problem (Yvonne Feilzer, 2010).

3.3. *Analysis approaches*

The analytical frameworks employed in pragmatic research emphasize practical implications and contextual understanding (Biesta & Burbules, 2004). Pragmatic researchers adopt diverse analysis approaches that align with their methodological choices and research objectives, ensuring that interpretations are relevant and actionable (Morgan, 2014).

- Qualitative analysis

Qualitative analysis in a pragmatic framework often involves thematic, narrative, or grounded theory approaches, allowing researchers to derive meaningful patterns and themes from qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). Such analyses enable exploring complex ideas, motivations, and social dynamics embedded in participants' responses. For instance, a researcher studying community resilience might analyze interview transcripts for recurring themes related to coping strategies and community support (Shannon-Baker, 2016).

- Quantitative analysis

When using quantitative data, pragmatic researchers typically use statistical methods to analyze relationships, trends, and effects (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Techniques such as regression analysis can be employed to assess the impact of specific interventions on outcomes, providing concrete evidence to guide decision-making and policy development. For example, evaluating the effect of a new teaching method on student performance through statistical analysis can yield insights crucial for educational practice.

- Integrated analytical approaches

The distinctive feature of pragmatic research is its ability to implement integrated analytical methods using qualitative and quantitative data (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). For example, a study examining the effectiveness of a health education program could analyze survey data collected from program participants, alongside qualitative interview data from participants, to learn more about how they perceived the program's impact. By integrating descriptive analysis of survey data with participants' qualitative responses, data sources add depth to the understanding of how effective the intervention was and a more nuanced interpretation, and program stakeholders and others integrate a richer understanding of the program, thus providing an opportunity for improvement.

To conclude, pragmatism offers new and potentially powerful ways of approaching research methodology by promoting a flexibility of inquiry, responding to different contexts, communities, and research questions. Pragmatism offers opportunities to focus on practical outcomes and a diversity of methods, and integration across analytical, qualitative, and quantitative analysis that makes it potentially address complex problems faced by society and the products of meaningful construction of knowledge. In this respect, a pragmatic approach is additive to the research situation. Also, it offers an opportunity to expand the relevance and usefulness of findings in ways that meaningfully connect in our world.

4. **Navigating the pragmatic paradigm in research practice**

As researchers increasingly turn to pragmatism to guide their inquiries, navigating this paradigm effectively becomes essential for achieving meaningful and impactful results. This section explores key aspects of applying pragmatic principles in research practice, including aligning research questions with pragmatic approaches, addressing ethical considerations, and recognizing the associated challenges and limitations.

4.1. *Aligning research questions with pragmatic approaches*

The initial step in pragmatic inquiry involves aligning questions with practice needs, ensuring the questions are relevant and actionable. It is vital to narrow the focus of inquiries to be absolutely practical and relevant from the position of problems in practice.

Pragmatic questions emphasize problem-solving and practical ramifications of inquiries. For example, in education, a researcher might ask, "What are the impacts of a new teaching strategy on student engagement and learning outcomes?" Not only does this question have a practical concern, but it also invites examination of various methodologies to study the question to get a complete picture.

Additionally, researchers must be flexible with their questioning, as the research continually advances. Pragmatic research allows for iterative questioning, as data is being collected and analyzed, new insights can emerge and suggest that the researcher modify or extend their original inquiry. This flexible position to research will provide

a more fluid and possible natural interaction with the complexities and nature of the social inquiry, enhancing the relevance of findings.

4.2. Addressing ethical considerations

As with all research disciplines, ethical considerations are significant in applying pragmatic paradigms. Pragmatism inherently acknowledges that ethical issues are integral to the research process, especially with studies that include human subjects. Researchers must address a set of ethical challenges throughout their research.

Pragmatic researchers should engage in reflexivity, or critically reflect on their biases, assumptions, and role in the research. This reflexivity produces self-awareness that can engage explicit discussions on how the researchers' positionality may or may not impact the study. For instance, a researcher reviewing a social intervention would know how their identity, personal background, and beliefs may affect the data collection process and results.

Additionally, some ethical principles to consider in research are respect for autonomy, beneficence, and justice, while recognizing that no research is void of ethical implications. Researchers should ensure that participants have a proper understanding of the research to provide informed consent. They must minimize the potential for harm to the participants while maximizing benefits and distributing equitable treatment for all participants. Pragmatic researchers help validate their work by providing accountability to the ethical foundations.

4.3. Challenges and limitations of pragmatism

While pragmatism is a versatile, pragmatic, and adaptable strategy for research, there are challenges and limitations in the uptake of a pragmatic approach. The challenge of conceptual ambiguity concerning what it means to be a "pragmatic" researcher is important. The variations in understanding of principles of pragmatism may cause researchers difficulties, particularly regarding the design and delivery of the research, as the understanding of principles will vary.

Using mixed approaches does offer flexibility; however, aligning data from multiple methods introduces challenges to contextualising qualitative and quantitative data. The difficulties that arise from reconciling inconclusive data from multiple paradigms will contribute to complexity in the analysis and diminish clarity in the presentation and conclusions.

Another pivotal consideration is the trade-off between paying attention to audited accounts of undertakings and a rich perspective in a pragmatic study. On the one hand, mixed methods facilitate densely populated inquiry, but the depth and breadth of both qualitative and quantitative outcomes can be sacrificed for superficial accounts of research rather than rich narratives of qualitative and quantitative experiences of the conduct of research.

Challenges are also associated with bringing pragmatic research to acceptance in more traditional academic communities. In a context where researchers can adopt strict positivist and/or interpretivist frameworks for their research, researchers may have to justify or defend their work to peers and institutions that regard either positivist or interpretivist paradigms as standard and who strive for methodological orthodoxy.

In summary, successful engagement with the pragmatic paradigm in conducting research involves a continued alignment of research questions with practical relevance, an ongoing commitment to ethical priority, and an understanding of the realities of the challenges posed by research. When researchers consider important pragmatic principles, they can mobilize pragmatic advantages to address complicated social issues, enable innovative solutions, and contribute to meaningful participation in knowledge advancement across multiple domains. As a dynamic and engaged perspective, pragmatism offers a distinct and applied understanding of the research process. It enables scholars to conduct meaningful research inquiries on the complexity of everyday lives, interactions, participation, and systems.

To engage in pragmatism, the researcher can apply four guiding steps: (1) identify the practical problem or issue they seek to address, (2) select methodology based on the usefulness or practicality for the research question, (3) maintain a reflexive position towards the assumptions and positionality, and (4) engage in ethical engagement throughout the process. This guide serves as a simple checklist for implementing the proposed principles of pragmatism in practice.

5. Conclusion

Pragmatism is an important research paradigm for researchers interested in reconciling epistemological frameworks with social significance in research. Pragmatism advocates for practical research, research with multiple methodological evaluations, and reflexive researchers; this way, research can be rigorous and socially practical. As demonstrated in this paper, engaging practically with pragmatism includes alignment of the investigative question and social issue, relevant reflexivity, and ethical considerations. Nevertheless, issues such as vagueness of concepts, mixed methods, and consideration of practicality are addressed in pragmatism via focus on plausible solutions, coherence, and orivity within context. As we look to the future, it is important to explore pragmatism across disciplines and countries to further our understanding of its role in addressing complex problems. For the researcher, historically situated in the act of researching as a discourse, it is not merely about method but an act of inquiring, a responsive action, which is human.

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