

Pragmatism: An Essential Philosophy for Mixed Methods Research in Education

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatism stands out as an innovative philosophy guiding actions to address nagging social situations. This is a belief and stance that falls within the positivist and constructivist continuum and adopts practical strategies to mitigate dysfunctional circumstances in human livelihood. This desktop study is a focused discussion of epistemological, ontological and methodological foundations of pragmatism. The study interrogates the concept of pragmatism and its connection to notions of knowledge, meaning, and truth. As a research paradigm, pragmatism views knowledge as an objective reality that exists in the world but that such reality can only be realized through human experience. The philosophical basis of pragmatism is also discussed in the study, which considers human experience to be central in informing actions that are key in addressing challenges in a systematic manner. Furthermore, the methodological challenges of pragmatism and a critical review of pragmatism, are provided in an endeavour to optimize the use of pragmatism in educational research.

Keywords: Epistemology, Paradigm, Philosophy, Pragmatism, Research methods

CONCEPTUALISING PRAGMATISM

Pragmatism is a philosophy that strives to unveil practical knowledge. This is the knowledge that is presumed to work in a particular situation. The gained knowledge is evaluated in terms of its ability to solve everyday life problems rather than its universal applicability. The knowledge of concern should have immediate and practical utility such that it explicates people and the society from oppressive and debilitating circumstances. This renders pragmatism a useful tool for individuals and groups that conduct some form of action research.

Pragmatism is easily conceived as a philosophical stance for doing instead of a theory *per se* (Clarke & Visser, 2018). It is not a conjoining of opinions and ideas about a certain concept but a guiding method for delivering action. Pragmatism is about the belief or way in which individuals should execute business when engaged in certain forms of inquiry (Cara, 2017). In education, it shapes the way in which principals,

accountants, teachers and administrators carry out their duties. It is a window through which the meaning of concepts is conceptualized in regard to their practical consequences. Concepts in pragmatism are contextual in nature. This means that they assume different meanings for different people that are in various situations. Clearly, the meaning of concepts and the value that is attached to them is hinged on their perceived ability to address real practical problems. It is, therefore, this tenet that denotes the application of this philosophical position in social research to be complete.

Essentially, knowledge in pragmatism is viewed as contextual property that evolves through practices of everyday experiences, and is measured by its practical deliverables (King, 2022). It is in this regard, that the notion practical knowledge is made more suitable in pragmatism because it exposes the constructive creation of knowledge regarding its ability to solve problems. Similarly, action researchers see the development of knowledge as part and parcel of transactions in the society instead of treating knowledge generation in a monopolistic fashion of academics and social scientists. Truth in pragmatism is also contextual (King, 2022). This is because human beliefs and knowledge about scientific concepts become true as long as they have practical significances. Truth is provisional and relative. It is an outcome of applying acquired knowledge in real or practical settings. Truth is conceived through its pragmatic use in ongoing experiences. It is not defined in relation to the objective qualities of concepts. Cara (2017) notes that truth is the outcome of inquiry. This is the reflective and iterative process of addressing real problems. The process demands that consensus should be established, both about the means and ends to achieve the organization of knowledge, ideas and action.

PRAGMATISM AND KNOWLEDGE

The way knowledge is acquired and explained in pragmatism is attractive in research, more so to action researchers. Pragmatists are opposed to the notion that knowledge exists independent of the knower (Gobo, 2023). This naturally has the effect of confining the role of the knower to that of an ordinary observer. In pragmatism, the acquisition of knowledge is dependent upon the occurrence of a real problem that calls for a concrete solution. In this case, participants should play very active parts to address a nagging problem. It is pivotal for participation and involvement to be committed and uninterrupted. The balance of power needs are not skewed in favour of any individual or group of participants in the team, but power has to be distributed equitably. In this thinking therefore, the development of knowledge becomes the process of solving an intermediate situation successfully. This involves the whole process of establishing the problem, collecting information about the problem, organizing, verifying and testing multiple options to resolve issues. Knowledge is basically experiential and meaningful knowledge is constructed from successful resolution of problems in given situations (Pratt, 2016). This view logically disputes the existence of pure *a priori* knowledge. The existence of knowledge is dependent on the context in which it resides. The implication is that there is no single process of inquiry to solve a problem. Multiple options exist to address a particular problem, but such options are informed by contextual circumstances. Allemang, et al (2021) argue that diverse inquiries may lead to similar practical outcomes or result in a suitable solution to a problem.

Human contribution is crucial to the development of any form of knowledge. In this way, researchers always play active roles in the creation of the world of knowledge. They expend their thoughts and actions to make up the inquiry process of addressing problems. Pragmatism is opposing to dualism and does not make a distinction between knowing and acting (Gobo, 2023). This means that action is an indelible component in the process of knowledge acquisition. The actions that are made in solving problems are based on existing knowledge. However, this knowledge becomes new knowledge when subjected to the process of reflection. The new acquired knowledge becomes the starting point for dealing with problems that are acquired in future. It may also be rife at this point to view the inquiry process in light of the action research helix, which reflects the synchronistic nature of the actor, knowledge and action in the research process

(Pratt, 2016). In the pragmatist view, a claim to knowledge is the impetus to begin the process of problem solution and not the end in itself. The readiness of pragmatists to apply existing knowledge to address problems renders this group of philosophers well-disposed to tackle emergent and complex issues in the real world.

PRAGMATISM AND MEANING

Pragmatism can be perceived as an *interpretation of meaning* (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). The thrust of pragmatic is centered on delivering solutions to problems. This process of offering solutions to problems entails the application of beliefs, concepts and theories in a given situation. The successful resolution of problems is the source of satisfaction for researchers, and this gives meaning to the body of knowledge that is used to unravel the problem. Therefore, meaning in pragmatism is established through reflective practice and experience.

Reflection involves pondering the process of addressing the problem. It is concerned about reflecting on and about an unenviable situation and the measures taken to make things right. On the other hand, experience allows researchers to contribute meaning to their actions and to verify the truthfulness of those actions. Experience serves to notice the start of a problem, the options for potential solutions and the outcomes of acted choices. In pragmatism, experience is viewed as the result of interplay between objects and action. This is concerned about the change actions that are adopted and implemented to bring a shift or modification of the *status quo* (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Experience is also a concept pertaining to the creation of practical knowledge by engaging in problem solving activities. It is in this regard that pragmatists consider experience as in a state of constant flux. Experience allows for known knowledge to be used to solve problems, while at the same time new knowledge is created in the in the application of practical experience.

Pragmatists regard the meaning of any concept to be the outcome of its perceived practical utility. This meaning of a word, for instance should be understood in relation to habits that are linked to it. In this case, meaning is created for any belief, idea or concept that acts as a sign. Gobo (2023) contends that the idea of meaning that is applied to concepts can be similar to that of judging truth. This brings into the fore the notion of pragmatic truth. Peirce defines truth as the state of a belief that ultimately has to be agreed upon by all who investigate, making truth independent of the individual. Peirce's truth is ultimately achieved through endless *abductive inference*. Abduction, as opposed to induction or deduction, is a form of inquiry that starts with a problem and then iteratively rejects or verifies varieties of possible explanations, before arriving at the best explanation, which allows the *fixation of a belief* (Mitchell, 2018).

PRAGMATISM AND TRUTH

Pragmatists negate the notion of objective truth as knowledge, concepts and beliefs are fluid. They are incidental and contextual. In this philosophy, knowledge does not exist apart from the knower (Kellen, 2018). There is unison between the knower and the known. Knowledge also becomes true when it offers practical solutions that are meaningful. This leads to the consideration of pragmatism as an *interpretation of truth*. This is the truth that violates the common tradition of objective truth. Objective truth is rejected absolutely (Hampson & McKinley, 2023). The version of truth that holds in pragmatism is one that views truth as that which works. This means that something is true as long as it serves to achieve a purpose or attain a goal. Truth is embedded in human experiences and cannot be detached from both the context and the actor. The verification of truth is its relevance and application in a given setting.

Pragmatists argue against the existence of absolute truth (Capps, 2023). There is nothing in the form of absolute truth. This is because truth is impermanent and dependent on the context of interests. It is fluid and subject to change. This depends on the lens that people use to evaluate what is considered truthful. In other

words, truth is regarded as the best available knowledge to address an issue. It is knowledge whose utility value is confirmed by practical consequences. The process of inquiry in pragmatism is not to arrive at objective results, but to validate the truthfulness of the method used to solve a problem in a given location. The assumption is that there is no established truth that is always ready for application to solve problems (Kellen, 2018). Each problem of interest is considered new and unique, and thus requiring a fresh tool kit of ideas to resolve. In addition, truth involves the execution of an action that is informed by experience to obtain satisfactory outcomes, Truth is investigated based on human beliefs. In this case, experiences of the past are infused with the new experiences to shape and develop a fresh form of truth. Action that delivers satisfactory outcomes is perceived as the achievement of an objective through intentional practice (Mitchell, 2018). It is, therefore, critical to view truth as something that can happen at the level of an individual as a result of experience. It is not subject to an objective world, which is the world outside of the knower. An individual may be absolved to surmise that truth is not limited to people, time and circumstances. This notion presents truth as subjective and not necessarily verifiable by scientific experimentation.

The pragmatic interpretation of truth makes beliefs, scientific theories and ideas tools to denote things as true. In this understanding, truth exists so long as something helps the knowledge seeker to achieve satisfactory results from the engagement of already acquired knowledge or experience. In this regard, facts are only true when an individual experiences them practically in a given situation. In pragmatism, the tripartite connection among truth, experience and consequences is primary (King, 2022). The three concepts are strongly connected. Truth is regarded as a component of human experience. The application of experience in a specific environment is believed to deliver consequences. Naturally, these consequences are expected to take the form of desired outcomes, to realize the ultimate goal of improving human situation. Action research should not only be underpinned by scientific theories but need to include practical hands-on experiences to give meaning to future human actions. The process of inquiry in pragmatism is fundamentally experiential in nature as every situation is unique (Prasad, 2021). In this sense, it is important that experiences be meaningful to provide guidance for future actions.

PRAGMATISM AS A RESEARCH PARADIGM

Pragmatism as a research paradigm strives to disengage from the metaphysical arguments pertaining to concepts such as truth and reality. It however contends that there may be single or multiple realities in the world of inquiry (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011). Pragmatists accept that there is objective reality that exists in the world but that such reality can only be realized through human experience. The reality is objective and grounded in the environment. This reality is accessible through human perception and action. The major philosophy of pragmatism presents knowledge and reality as hinged on beliefs and habits, and these are socially constructed (Clarke & Visser, 2018). Social constructions take many forms. At times they tend to be more inclined to certain individuals or groups of people compares to others (Morgan, 2014).

In pragmatist thought, reality cannot be determined for life (Kellen, 2018). It is a normative concept. This implies that reality is based on the resistant and dominant belief that something works. In this regard, pragmatists argue that claims to knowledge cannot be divorced from the habits, beliefs and human experiences. Knowledge that is true and real is that which brings human good. It is about human success and development. Truth is that which yields positive consequences (Baker & Schaltegger, 2015). It is critical to note that pragmatists do not ignore other forms of philosophical argumentation. They take them seriously but realize that some forms of contestation can hardly be resolved. The most crucial aspect of knowledge and meaning to pragmatists, are that which are tied to human experience in particular settings.

The choice of reality in pragmatists depends on the way in which that choice produces desired results (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008). The reality of an object is based on perceived purpose. This is the conviction

that the use of an object will help to achieve a goal. Similarly, the beliefs that humans behold should be those that help them to attain their goals and fulfill their needs (Morgan, 2014).

Pragmatism can be viewed beyond just a philosophical or pragmatic position, but a set of philosophical tools that are critical to address a problem (Biesta, 2010). Pragmatism calibrates itself to solve practical problems in the real world. It is a useful stance for researchers that are practically disposed (Creswell & Plano Clark 2017). Pragmatism avails itself to researchers in various fields, inclusive of Education, with an inclination to deliver results that are of practical significance (Hothersall, 2019). The traditional philosophical notions of objectivity and subjectivity are refuted in pragmatism (Biesta 2010). It also forces the researcher not to uphold the division between post positivism and constructivism (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Pragmatists choose to use empirical perspectives compared to either idealistic or rationalistic (Morgan, 2014).

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF PRAGMATISM

The epistemological thrust of pragmatism is that knowledge is based on experience. The way humans perceive the world is influenced by experiences in the social world. The knowledge that each individual creates from experience is considered unique. This is because of the unique set of biological, behavioral and environmental forces that constitute a human being. Admittedly, most knowledge is socially created and shared. It is from the collective experiences of people. This knowledge also cannot be viewed as reality as it is created for the purpose of improving human livelihood (Morgan, 2014).

Pragmatist epistemology is related to Dewey's theory of inquiry. This is akin to the traditional concept of epistemology. Inquiry is deemed an exploration to understand an aspect of reality and to create new knowledge to modify that reality. It is meant to improve human situations through making their practices systematic. Goldkuhl(2012) contends that inquiry is aimed to create knowledge to institute change and development. It is the guided transformation of an issue using organized knowledge and logical action. According to John Dewey, the inquiry has to infuse experience to ensure action is well channeled to address a challenging situation (Biesta, 2010). The inquiry focuses on the connection between human actions and their consequences. This is critical as it allows humans to control their actions to enable outcomes to be, somehow, predictable. The benefit of this stance is the affinity to think in an intelligent manner and to streamline actions for the attainment of desired outcomes (Biesta, 2010). It also inspires a calculated response in uncertain settings. Clearly, this requires a pragmatist to plan intelligently best actions to take in a problematic situation, given the pros and cons of the available options.

Dewey's concept of experiential learning is central to pragmatists. This is also referred to as habits (Biesta, 2010). In practice, humans are capable of establishing a close coordination with the environment. This process of developing a coordinated human-environment relationship leads to the formation of habits. The tendency is that human habits continuously shift in response to changes in the environment. This means that human beings remain in an unending cycle of learning. At the end, people tend to acquire a set of complex but flexible habits to action in the everchanging life situations (Biesta, 2010). This proposition is applicable to research, wherein research is viewed as just one form of inquiry. This involves making decisions to ensure that actions done deliver consequences that relate to the goals of research. However, the practice of research requires extended amounts of conscious decision making and focused attention. Researchers using pragmatism take care to think about the designs and the conduct of research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). They use their beliefs and experiences to predict the likely consequences of adopting available choices regarding theoretical frameworks, research methodology, strategy and procedures (Maarouf, 2019). The choices are influenced by the philosophy or community of practice within which a particular researcher operates. The selected methodological pathway is also assessed based on the research questions and purpose

of the study (Maarouf, 2019). It is critical for pragmatist researchers to be sure that the methodology, philosophical beliefs and existing literature are helpful to achieve desired outcomes.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF PRAGMATISM

There is a tendency in social research to place more emphasis on ontology and epistemology rather than methodology (Clarke & Visser, 2018). It can be argued that pragmatism should be at the centre of methodological concerns because methodology works to connect philosophical issues that are abstract to mechanical methods. In fact, there is a feeling that pragmatists should study both methodology and epistemology. Methodology is considered, at this juncture to be related to research itself. On the other hand, epistemology is focused on beliefs which guide the way in which research is conducted. Methodology can be viewed as a tool to connect thoughts about the nature of knowledge and how it is produced instead of attempting to separate philosophical loops from the research design or plan (Miller, 2021).

Pragmatists hold that the process to acquire knowledge is a continuum instead of two poles that are in opposition and mutually exclusive (Hampson & McKinley (2023). This is unlike the positivists that believe in objective knowledge that is acquired through examining scientific evidence and testing hypotheses. In the same thinking, constructivists contend that knowledge is relative, and reality is complex. This complexity emanates from the diversity of human nature and the geosocial context within which human behaviour is practiced. Pragmatism exists between the two poles of objectivity and subjectivity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). It is situated somewhere, at the center of paradigm continuum in regard to the mode of inquiry. Pragmatism neither supports deductive nor inductive reasoning. Furthermore, pragmatism is not aligned to quantitative and qualitative methods and approaches. It is unlike positivism which is tilted towards quantitative methods and deductive reasoning or constructivism with its affinity for qualitative approaches and inductive reasoning. Pragmatism offers a flexible and reflexive approach to research design (Feilzer, 2010). In this stance, the pragmatist researcher is at liberty to select the research design and methodology which best address the research purpose. Pragmatism is associated with abductive reasoning which allows the process to move back and forth between inductive and deductive zones. This possibility enables the researcher to actively create data and theories in the field of study (Goldkuhl, 2012).

Pragmatism creates a worldview that influences the operation and conduct of the research. This articulates the shared beliefs among a research community. These beliefs help in the formation of the most important questions that researchers raise in the conduct of research and the most fitting research methodology to be adopted (King, 2022). This is based on the understanding that not all questions are important and not all methodologies are suitable. It is ultimately the choice of the researcher regarding which methodology to use, and those choices are influenced by research aspects such as personal history, beliefs, context and sociopolitical setting (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020).

Based on Dewey's theory of social inquiry, the methodological perspective of pragmatism demands that the problem under study be located within a specified context (Maarouf, 2019). This involves identifying genuine nagging problem that are an integral part of actual social situations. These have to be defined and inquiry or investigation triggered to address them. It is critical to note that a problem becomes legitimate for inquiry when it is socially situated. The inquiry should be situational, natural and embedded on problems (Shannon-Baker, 2016). There is also need for the inquiry to constitute an interrogation of theory and practice. The undertaking has to infuse evaluative components. Dewey's theory of social inquiry can be used to assess the loop holes of some inquiries. These include the fallacy of choosing the methodology without having a clear grasp of the problem. This implies that researchers should clearly define the various dimensions of the identified problem and investigate it from diverse perspectives guided by the objectives and purpose of the inquiry (Maarouf, 2019).

CRITICAL REVIEW OF PRAGMATISM

Pragmatism is a multifaceted philosophy which has been conceptualized and applied in different ways and professions (Putnam & Putnam, 2017). This is a doctrine that has attracted critical debate and known, in some circles as pragmaticism. It has arguably retained vibrancy in its relevance and usefulness in a multitude of fields. The conflict related to pragmatism as a philosophy, tool and doctrine provided sufficient ground for criticism. This is particularly so for academics that strive for certainty. Pragmatism viewed as lacking in explicitness and rigor. This makes it to be doubted as a process of scientific inquiry. In essence, it is touted as relativist in at its core. The concern is that pragmatism does not strive to establish certainty or absolute truth, which makes it difficult to judge whether something is better than another (Shannon-Baker, 2016). There is no absolute thinking in pragmatism. The “either or” dichotomy does not exist. Pragmatism is a non-dualist philosophy and rejects the object-subject categorization, which is a pre-determinant for certainty (Allemang, 2021). Pragmatists believe that subject and object cannot be separated and are therefore inter-subjectively linked. Inter-subjectivity refers to a state in which object and subject impact and shape each other in the everyday life. Pragmatism dismantles the object-subject separation, which further makes it hard to uncover objective or absolute certainty (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

In pragmatism, the concern for certainty is addressed through the systematic bridging of theories and experience. Truth is what is practical in given circumstances. It is determined by the ability of theories and forms of knowledge to solve problems (Putnam & Putnam, 2017). The theories are considered as tools that are judged to be true from their ability to solve a particular social problem. This process is rigorous because theories or scientific knowledge is mainly formulated in a precise and structured way. It is, however, difficult for one to be certain that the application of a given theory will yield acceptable solution to a problem, despite the fact that the same theory would have been verified many times (Prasad, 2021). This brings in another point, that theories are constantly subjected to testing, verification and falsification by the community of practice. The verification process naturally leads to experience and subsequent formalization of knowledge.

Critics of pragmatism point to the existence of challenges regarding the identification of problems that are socially situated (Prasad, 2021). The contextual and problem centered nature of pragmatism is believed to constrain its capacity to identify and analyze social problems that are structural. For instance, it is difficult to be clear as the reasons to explain the low performance of female students in a computer science course. The analysis of this kind of problem is made difficult because there are complex variables that coalesce to animate the problem. These include the historically engendered gender roles which puts male students at a place of dominance in regard to education. The organization of the workplace constructed roles and other cultural factors may come into effect to mediate academic performance of students. The critical concern is that members of a dominant social group or those that benefit from structural inequality would never complain about or support the institution of an investigation towards a search for social justice (Zapf, 2010).

Pragmatism is seen to raise methodological concerns when it comes to infusing issues of epistemology into research methodology. The decisions on the methods to be used in data collection become apparent. The problem occurs, for instance, when the problem has different layers which need to be measured or observed (Feilzer 2010). In this instance, there may be need to use a strategy that allows the adoption of multiple measures, methods, perspectives and researchers. The paradigmatic position of pragmatism enables to practice an independence of methods (Allemang et al., 2021). Researchers do not have to rely on particular methods but have to be eclectic in practice. This involves engaging methods that work, those that help to achieve desired goals. Studies that use pragmatism apply a diverse combination of methods to address research questions. They tend to intermix methods such as interviews, observations, document analysis and artifacts. These methods may be used in various degrees of combination as guided by research questions,

approaches, and theoretical frameworks (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2019).

Hampson and McKinley (2023) argue that methodologists are increasingly using pragmatism to justify a move towards method acceptability. This might entail the use of a single-method, multiple methods, or a mix of methods. This perspective raises, another concern, whether or not, pragmatism has connections with mixed methods research. In this regard, there are scholars that believe pragmatism provide a strong philosophical basis for mixed methods research (Biesta 2010). This invites researchers to conduct research that welcomes the use of more than a single paradigmatic tradition in the same inquiry (King, 2022). It is also critical that researcher engage with all applicable paradigms in a respectful dialogue in the course of an inquiry process. Furthermore, pragmatism does not detect that certain methods or mixing of methods thereof should be done. There are fundamentally no methods that are excluded in pragmatism. The possibility that any available method can be adopted in research is always high.

The thrust of pragmatism is mainly to address the research question, probe a phenomenon and test a theory using the most suitable research method (Feilzer, 2010). Hampson and McKinley (2023) concur that the research question in pragmatism is the most significant factor that influence the decision to mix qualitative and quantitative dimensions. In this thinking, the methodological choices are dependent on the adequacy of methods that help to answer research questions, and not the commitment of researchers to adherence to a particular paradigmatic philosophy. Essentially, this means that the research questions stand at an apex position over epistemological and ontological considerations. This perspective, to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2019), crafts the path for combining qualitative and quantitative research aspects. The primacy of research questions in pragmatism means that the research that attracts the use of qualitative and quantitative research is desirable, defeasible and required to address certain questions or set of questions (Capps, 2023).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We conclude that pragmatism is a methodological approach that stems from a recognition of a socially embedded problem that requires a systematic action to resolve. This undesired situation may be explicit or implicit, but with observable consequences in community life. It is important that the problem should escalate well enough to yield decisional consensus in regard to its effects. The observed challenge may require skills which may not be immediately available to researchers or those seeking to redress the anomaly. The natural thing then, would be to reflect on the nature of the problem using inherent beliefs, values and experiences. There may be need to rephrase the problem or topic for better understanding and framing. A clearer grasp of the presenting challenge allows thinking to be done on strategies to alleviate the issue at hand. This also paves way for the choice of a suitable design to mediate the process. It should be noted that a design influences the potential methods to be applied, and this may warrant a complete audit of preceding engagements. Once, this is done, the final step to implement an intervention strategy may further trigger a series of movements back and forth to ensure the problem well addressed. This process is described as abduction, involving reflections about possible action options and likely outcomes (Morgan, 2014). Pragmatists' researchers therefore, should always envisage the primacy of research questions as derived from context-based social problems, and the role these play in determining the selection of appropriate designs, methods and overall outcomes. Pragmatism constitutes a complex social system of problem solving which involves a delicate mix of the beliefs of researchers, communities, personal experiences and those of others affected by the problem.

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