

A Brief Discussion of Research Philosophies for Higher Education Students

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A Brief Discussion of Research Philosophies for Higher Education Students

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ABSTRACT

Students developing their theses/dissertations can find it difficult to justify their methodologies from a philosophical perspective. The objective of this article was to provide guidance to higher education students and to help them to select the right philosophical framework for their chosen methodological approach. For this purpose, a simple and concise description of key research philosophies currently used for either qualitative, quantitative or mixed method research is provided.

1 | Research Philosophies

Some common research philosophies used by researchers, which can be adopted by higher education students, are presented in Table 1 (e.g., see Mkansi and Acheampong 2012; Ragab and Arisha 2018).

Quantitative and qualitative analyses have traditionally been associated with positivism and interpretivism, respectively. The positivist philosophy postulates that social phenomena can be studied in the same way as physical phenomena (Sale, Lohfeld, and Brazil 2002): There exists an objective reality that can be theorised and studied by means of hypotheses. On the contrary, the interpretivist philosophical approach argues that the social world is constructed by humans through social interaction, leading to multiple valid realities related to a phenomenon. This philosophy supports studies aiming to understand individual experiences, subjective meanings and contextual differences (Baškarada and Koronios 2018).

Within the context of these philosophies, the feasibility of mixing quantitative and qualitative research techniques has been debated over a long period. The main argument against mixing these approaches is that it is not possible from a philosophical point of view because positivism and interpretivism correspond

to contradictory philosophical positions. For example, context-free generalisations from qualitative analyses are not possible as suggested by the quantitative approach (Irshaidat 2022).

Despite this disagreement, the mixed method approach has been accepted by the academic community because mixing qualitative and quantitative analyses has been facilitated by the adoption of postpositivism in quantitative research. Postpositivism also assumes an objective reality that can be theorised by means of logical reasoning. However, in this paradigm, this reality cannot perfectly be identified from empirical analysis because empirical techniques themselves are subjective, and analyses developed from them depend on the perception and empirical approach adopted by the researcher (Sale, Lohfeld, and Brazil 2002; Panhwar, Ansari, and Ali 2017). This is what facilitates the mixing of quantitative and qualitative research: Both approaches provide different incomplete but complementary perspectives of the same phenomenon.

Although the adoption of postpositivism and interpretivism are considered the appropriate philosophical combination for qualitative and quantitative mixed research by some researchers (Irshaidat 2022), these philosophies differ significantly concerning the nature of the objects of research. This has led to the adoption of pragmatism as the relevant philosophy. It argues both

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TABLE 1 | Common research philosophies suggested by researchers.

| Research approach | Philosophy |
|-------------------|--|
| Quantitative | Positivism and postpositivism |
| Qualitative | Interpretivism |
| Mixed method | Pragmatism, realism and postpositivism |

TABLE 2 | Practical applications of the revised philosophies.

| Philosophy | Practical applications |
|----------------|---|
| Positivism | To identify relationships through quantitative approaches (e.g., causality and correlation) |
| Postpositivism | The use of several methodologies to get less bias and more objective results |
| Interpretivism | To create theoretical generalisations from qualitative data |
| Pragmatism | To interrogate the meaning of research data by examining its practical consequences |
| Realism | To explore event patterns and people's perceptions to theorise about the real world |

that the mind-independent physical world and the constructed/psychological world exist, implying that reality is complex and multiple. Therefore, because pragmatism views reality as both singular and plural, methods should be combined on the basis of their practical utility ignoring paradigmatic conflicts (Dawadi, Shrestha, and Giri 2021; Shan 2022).

The advantage of adopting pragmatism is that it is not determined by philosophical paradigms, and this is why it has gained significant acceptance within the mixed methods academic community. Nonetheless, pragmatism has been criticised by Maxwell and Mittapalli (2010) who argue that this approach underestimates the actual influence of philosophical assumptions on research methods. These researchers propose realism (i.e., the view that entities exist independently of our awareness or knowledge of them), as the philosophical basis for mixed method research. This is because realism is compatible with the essential methodological characteristics of both qualitative and quantitative research: It permits an integration of realist ontology (there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions and theories) with a constructivist epistemology (our understanding of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoint).

Higher education students can adopt any of the philosophies presented in Table 1, formally justifying their selection using some of the ideas presented in this article.

By way of conclusion, Table 2 proposes some possible applications for the revised philosophies discussed in this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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