

PRAGMATISM AND METHODOLOGY

Taking a pragmatist approach to methods and methodology that fosters meaningful, impactful, and ethical research, this book rises to the challenge of today's data revolution. It shows how pragmatism can turn challenges, such as the abundance and accumulation of big qualitative data, into opportunities. The authors summarize the pragmatist approach to different aspects of research, from epistemology, theory, and questions to ethics, as well as data collection and analysis. The chapters outline and document a new type of mixed methods design called "multi-resolution research," which serves to overcome old divides between quantitative and qualitative methods. It is the ideal resource for students and researchers within the social and behavioral sciences seeking new ways to analyze large sets of qualitative data.

ALEX GILLESPIE is Professor of Psychological and Behavioral Science at the London School of Economics and Political Science and Visiting Professor II at Oslo New University. He is an expert on communication, especially divergences of perspective, misunderstandings, internal dialogues, distrust, and problems in listening. He uses a variety of research methods and has developed several methodological tools.

VLAD GLĂVEANU is Professor of Psychology at Dublin City University, and Visiting Professor II at the Centre for the Science of Learning and Technology, University of Bergen. He is a leading expert in the fields of creativity, imagination, wonder, collaboration, and culture research, as well as the Founder and President of the Possibility Studies Network and Editor of *Possibility Studies & Society* (SAGE).

CONSTANCE DE SAINT LAURENT is Assistant Professor of Sociotechnical Systems at National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She works on trust in technology as well as on the impact of technology and societal changes on people and organizations. She has previously carried out research on social media, misinformation, collective memory, and representations of alterity, some of which has been published in the open access book *Social Thinking and History: A Sociocultural Psychological Perspective on Representations of the Past* (2021).

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Doing Research That Matters with Mixed Methods

ALEX GILLESPIE

London School of Economics and Political Science

VLAD GLĂVEANU

Dublin City University

CONSTANCE DE SAINT LAURENT

National University of Ireland, Maynooth



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-316-51614-0 — Pragmatism and Methodology
Alex Gillespie, Vlad Glăveanu, Constance de Saint Laurent
Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

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education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316516140

DOI: 10.1017/9781009031066

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Published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation

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When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009031066

First published 2024

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-1-316-51614-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-01378-9 Paperback

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For Alice, Arlo, Arthur, Lyla, and Zoé.

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Preface

There is nothing as practical as a good theory.

Lewin (1943, p. 118)

The idea that theory should be practical is both obvious and surprising. It is obvious because the avowed aim of science is to create knowledge to empower human activity (Bacon, 1620). However, theory is often associated with abstruse terms and obscure concerns (Tourish, 2020). Kurt Lewin's (1943, p. 118) maxim that "there is nothing as practical as a good theory" has gone from being cited about ten times a year in the 1990s to nearly fifty times a year recently (McCain, 2015). This upsurge betrays the challenge of creating robust and insightful theories in social science that are also useful.

Developing useful knowledge is challenging because theory that is *too* practical is quickly criticized for being unsurprising, lacking intellectual depth, and merely repackaging common sense. While it is easy to do something useful (e.g., help someone, cook a meal), it is much more challenging to create helpful knowledge. Creating useful knowledge entails synthesizing prior experience and applying it to an unknown future. It means going beyond what is already done, opening the future up to more purposive human action, and, in short, expanding human agency. In this sense, useful knowledge aims to empower human action, to make the consequences of human action expected, and to avoid unwanted surprises.

We propose that pragmatism, especially as developed by the early American pragmatists (Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, Jane Addams, William James, and George Herbert Mead), provides a helpful way to think about methodology in social research. It provides timely conceptions of epistemology, theory, research questions, and data that can address our current concerns. It can help us make useful knowledge that is neither naïvely realist nor impotently critical, and it can help us address the current challenges and opportunities of both big and small data.

There is an irony in the consequences of pragmatism. As an approach, it is avowedly against abstraction and abstruse theory. It argues for starting and ending with the problems of living. But the consequences of pragmatism have been mainly theoretical and philosophical rather than practical. Despite pragmatism contributing to diverse domains (Allemang et al., 2022; Ansell & Boin, 2019; Craig, 2007; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020) and being foundational to mixed methods research (Morgan, 2014a), there have been few systematic attempts to translate the philosophy of pragmatism into a consistent methodology. This book aims to bridge this gap in pragmatist scholarship by outlining the consequences of pragmatism for social research.

From a pragmatist standpoint, knowledge should be effective, insightful, and emancipatory in its consequences. We have written this book not to contribute to pragmatist philosophy but to develop pragmatism's fruitful consequences for social research methodology. Traditionally, methods in the social sciences have been caught between realist (often quantitative) and relativist (often qualitative) tendencies. We use pragmatism to chart a course between these extremes and to produce knowledge that is both useful and critical. To this end, the book provides an end-to-end pragmatist approach to knowledge creation, spanning epistemology, theory, question creation, and the nature of data, methods of analysis, and ethics.

We are social and cultural psychologists focused on studying human activity in context, enabled by both knowledge and technology. Indeed, we use this basic orientation to understand social research activity as also being enabled by knowledge (e.g., theories, epistemology, research questions) and technology (e.g., questionnaires, interview techniques, and computational algorithms). While many of our examples pertain to social and cultural psychology, the ideas presented are broader and, we believe, have applicability across the human sciences. Specifically, this book aims to contribute to three broad debates.

1) *Rehabilitating the value of useful knowledge.* The so-called paradigm wars in social science have had consequences beyond academia, providing resources for “post-truth” politics. The paradigm wars related to debates between realism and relativism (often termed “constructionism”), focusing on the extent to which scientific knowledge is true versus being a human construction (Bryman, 2008). Unhelpful oppositions were created: science versus critique, realism versus relativism, and objectivity versus subjectivity. Nuanced arguments on both the realist side (Hacking, 1999) and the constructionist side (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) were oversimplified. Extreme and unrepresentative positions emerged on both sides. On the

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realist side, qualitative analysis was shunned as unscientific, and on the constructionist side, quantitative analysis was resisted as naïve, uncritical, or even oppressive. Nevertheless, despite being uncommon positions, these extremes undermined science within the public domain (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005) and sowed seeds of doubt that enabled inconvenient facts to be dismissed and “alternative facts” to thrive (Cooke, 2017, p. 211).

A pragmatist approach to social research acknowledges the stubborn resistance of facts and also the subjectivity and contextuality inherent in all knowledge. We argue that this approach can provide both the basis for creating common ground around effective knowledge while also avoiding science as an ideology beyond critical questioning.

2) *Mixing methods.* The paradigm wars drove an unhelpful wedge between qualitative and quantitative methods that had previously worked synergistically (Morgan, 2007). It was argued that qualitative and quantitative methods pertained to fundamentally different, incommensurable, epistemological frameworks (Filstead, 1979) and were “competing paradigms” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). While separating qualitative methods from quantitative methods enabled qualitative methods to mature independent of a quantitative framing, it had the unfortunate consequence of undermining mixed methods research. Indeed, it even became seen as potentially philosophically naïve to try and combine them (Denzin, 2012).

A pragmatist approach argues that qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined and, moreover, that they *should* be combined. Quantitative methods provide breadth, and qualitative methods provide depth. If both add value, why choose one over the other? The choice is false: It is more rigorous to have both breadth and depth. Together, they can make social science more robust, insightful, and emancipatory. Moreover, we will argue that mixed methods research is necessary for addressing the challenges and harnessing the potential of big qualitative data.

3) *The challenge and potential of big qualitative data.* Qualitative research in psychology and related disciplines is at a crossroads. On the one hand, the field has substantially increased in terms of its thematic reach – the number of studies, journals, and textbooks. However, we are living through a qualitative data explosion, with an exponential growth of digitally recorded but unstructured text, image, audio, and video data. While these data are often termed “big data,” they are also “qualitative data.” Thus, somewhat ironically, at the extreme end of quantification (i.e., big data) is qualitative data (i.e., digital text, image, video). To tackle the challenges of these data, and to make the most of the opportunities they offer for social research, we need to integrate data science (i.e., quantitative and

computational) techniques with qualitative research techniques (Bazeley, 2017; Chang et al., 2021).

A pragmatist approach suggests a novel way of mixing big data and qualitative research techniques. We will argue not only for mixing qualitative and quantitative methods side by side but also for what we call multi-resolution research, where the same data are analyzed both qualitatively (to zoom in on details) and quantitatively (to zoom out on patterns). Such analysis is possible only by reconceptualizing raw data as affording a bidirectional transformation into both qualitative and quantitative forms. Such bidirectional transformations enable a continual moving back and forth between qualitative and quantitative facets *of the same dataset*.

Overall, we argue that a pragmatist approach to methodology can address the challenge of creating useful knowledge, enhance the rigor and creativity of research, foster deeply integrated qualitative and quantitative methods, and avoid overly simplistic oppositions between realism and relativism. Pragmatism's guiding insight is to consider the consequences of knowledge. This enables a realist-type analysis of the effectiveness of knowledge combined with a constructionist-type critique of who benefits from that effectiveness. The chapters in the book step through pragmatism (Chapter 1), epistemology (Chapter 2), theory (Chapter 3), research questions (Chapter 4), data collection and curation (Chapter 5), mixed methods research (Chapter 6), multi-resolution research (Chapter 7), ethics (Chapter 8), and the role of social research in enhancing human possibility (Chapter 9). The aim is to propose pragmatism as a coherent, flexible, and robust framework for creating useful knowledge that can enhance society.

Finally, in preparing this book, and in the many years of discussion that led to this book, we would like to acknowledge the intellectual support of our colleagues, including Flora Cornish, Kevin Corti, Ioana Literat, Mark Noort, Tom Reader, and Tania Zittoun. This book has been supported financially by two grants from the Swiss National Science Foundation (51NF40-205605 via “nccr – on the move” and P400PS-180686).