

**Level: Master 1 (LS)**

**Module: Methodology in Social Sciences**

# Research Paradigms

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# Research Paradigms

Social sciences explore the distinct aspects of human behaviour. They deal with social relationships and the functioning of society.

# Research Paradigms

Social science research not only speaks to particular social conditions; it reflects the social conditions of a society and the theories that dominate at the time. Because there is no unidirectional progress in social and societal development, the theoretical and methodological apparatus available to social scientists change as they too are shaped by historical, structural and cultural contexts (Alasuutari et al., 2008, p.3).

# Research Paradigms

The approaches to research in the domain of social sciences have witnessed a development leading to the application of different research paradigms.

# Research Paradigm

A paradigm is a general framework that constitutes a guide for research. It is a philosophy of science that focuses on the following issues: ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology.

## Research Paradigm

**Ontology** refers to the nature of reality that is understood and discovered by research.

**Epistemology** is an important foundation for research. It refers to knowledge. In research, epistemology means what researchers will know about the world.

**Methodology** implies the set of methods and strategies used by the researcher.

**Axiology** is concerned with ethics.

## Research Paradigm

**A paradigm** is related to three fundamental questions of research: the ontological question, the epistemological question and the methodological question. The ontological question refers to the question of 'What'; it concerns the nature and the form of social reality; it deals with the nature of the phenomenon that has to be studied. The epistemological question regards the relationship between the 'Who' and 'What' and the outcome of this relationship. The methodological question refers to the type of methods and tools used to achieve research.

## Research Paradigm

The notion of paradigm was explained by Kuhn (1962) who claims that a paradigm helps to guide research through the specification of the studied object, the formulation of hypotheses and the identification of the suitable research instruments.



## Research Paradigm

Kuhn (1962) argues that science develops throughout three periods: the period of pre-science (no clear paradigm), the period of normal science (one paradigm) and the period of scientific revolution (a new paradigm replaces the old one). He adds that the researcher has the task of puzzle solving within a paradigm.

# Research Paradigms

It is believed that the philosophy of science turns around two main paradigms: positivism and interpretivism. Then, the development of research methodologies has led to the existence of other paradigms including pragmatism, the transformative paradigm and complexity theory.

# Positivism

**Positivism** is based on the idea that knowledge is objective. It is considered as a philosophical foundation of the natural sciences but August Comte claimed that positivism could be applied in social sciences.

## Positivism

Positivism appeared by the end of the 19th century but in the period that lasted between the two world wars, this paradigm was called neo-positivism (logical positivism or logical empiricism or scientific philosophy). By the 1970's, the term postpositivism (post empiricism or critical realism) started to be used. Positivism includes the following methods: the experiment and the survey. It is based on the use of statistical methods of analysis.

## Positivism

Within the social sciences, positivism is based on the following characteristics: concerning ontology, social reality is knowledge. For epistemology, it relies on objectivity to reach true results. Regarding methodology, research tools involve observation and quantitative techniques. Therefore, the positivist researcher looks for quantitative data and generalization through an objective analysis.

# Interpretivism

**Interpretivism** rejects the ideas of positivism. This paradigm is also called anti-positivism (Hermeneutics or constructivism). It appeared in the 19th century to advocate the methodology of interpretation

## Interpretivism

Interpretivism has the following features. Regarding ontology, individuals construct different realities leading to different interpretations. For epistemology, hermeneutics is based on subjectivism which leads the researcher and the studied object to be interdependent.

## Interpretivism

Interpretivism involves a set of research methods including phenomenology, ethnography, the historical method and the case study. The methodology of this paradigm relies on the use of qualitative research tools, induction and interpretation.



# Pragmatism

By the beginning of the 20th century, researchers believed that interpretivism could not achieve important results within the social sciences. Thus, a combination of positivist and interpretivist methodologies had to be adopted. As a result, a group of American thinkers including William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey advocated the idea of the pragmatic approach to research or the use of mixed methods. This gave the birth to a new paradigm called pragmatism.

## Pragmatism

**Pragmatism** mixes the ideas of positivism and interpretivism. In pragmatism, ontology is based on a social reality that is knowable and constructed. Regarding epistemology, it relies on subjectivism through the interpretation of data collected via practical research. The methodology involves the use of qualitative and quantitative research tools. Regarding axiology, the researcher has to follow research ethics using both his objective and subjective point of view.

# The Transformative Paradigm

**The transformative paradigm** which is called the post-modern or emancipatory paradigm attempts to supply data about the causes of a problem to make the necessary changes. It comprises critical theory and feminist theory. Critical theory aims at reaching emancipation and equality by understanding the problematic situation while feminist theory concerns the effect of gender on the studied phenomenon. In the domain of social sciences, the transformative paradigm helps to deal with issues of social change and autonomy.

# Complexity Theory

**Complexity theory** which is also called complexity science relies on a pluralistic methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative methods. It focuses on the study of complex systems. In the domain of social sciences, this paradigm enables the investigator to explore complex social phenomena.

# Research Paradigms

What distinguishes the social sciences today is a positive orientation toward engaging in different types of research Practice...Because much of the craft of empirical social research cannot be classified as either qualitative or quantitative, an increased permissiveness toward mixing methods and questioning of the binary system formed by the terms 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' are welcome trends (Alasuutari et al., 2008, p.2).

# Research Paradigms

The methodology of the social sciences allows the researchers to adopt a specific research paradigm according to their purposes and needs. Nevertheless, the mixed method approaches seem to be more prevalent.

# References

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