The Pragmatic Stance Of Researchers In Management Sciences: A Methodological Perspective.

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Abstract

The methodological approach adopted by researchers in management sciences is fundamental in shaping the knowledge generated. The pragmatic stance has gained prominence as an epistemological orientation that transcends traditional philosophical dichotomies by integrating diverse research methods to address complex organizational phenomena.

This paper explores the epistemological and methodological foundations of the pragmatic paradigm in management sciences. By examining its theoretical underpinnings, methodological flexibility, and implications for research design, we highlight how pragmatism enables researchers to bridge theory and practice effectively. The approach adopted is qualitative, relying on secondary data sources and critical literature synthesis to construct a conceptual and reflective analysis.

Our analysis underscores the significance of methodological pluralism, practical relevance and reflexivity in adopting a pragmatic research posture in management science research.

Keywords: Pragmatism, Epistemology, Management sciences, Mixed methods, Research methodology, Reflexivity.

Introduction

The field of management sciences is characterized by its inherent complexity and dynamic nature. Researchers in this domain are often faced with the challenge of selecting an appropriate epistemological stance that can accommodate the multifaceted nature of organizational phenomena. Over the years, various paradigms, including positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism, have shaped the methodological orientations within management research (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000). However, these paradigms often present rigid dichotomies that may not fully capture the nuances of contemporary management issues.

Pragmatism has emerged as a compelling alternative that offers methodological flexibility while ensuring practical relevance (Morgan, 2007). Unlike other paradigms that prioritize either objective reality or subjective interpretation, pragmatism integrates multiple perspectives to generate actionable insights. This paradigm acknowledges that knowledge is not static but evolves through iterative engagement with real-world problems (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

The pragmatic stance is particularly valuable in management research as it enables scholars to adopt mixed methods approaches, leveraging both qualitative and quantitative techniques to gain a holistic understanding of complex organizational issues (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Furthermore, it emphasizes reflexivity, encouraging researchers to remain aware of their biases and assumptions throughout the research process (Shannon-Baker, 2016).

This paper explores the epistemological foundations and methodological implications of pragmatism in management sciences. It argues that a pragmatic research approach allows for greater adaptability and relevance in addressing contemporary organizational challenges. By integrating insights from various studies, this paper highlights how pragmatism serves as a bridge between theoretical rigor and practical application in management research.

1   The epistemological foundations of pragmatism

1.1   Rejection of absolutism and the centrality of experience

Pragmatism, as an epistemological orientation, emerged in the late 19th century through the foundational works of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. This philosophical movement sought to overcome the rigid dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism by proposing an approach that integrates both perspectives based on their practical consequences (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). At its core, pragmatism asserts that knowledge is not an absolute or immutable entity but is instead constructed and continuously refined through experience and practical application (Dewey, 1938; Putnam, 1995). This epistemology acknowledges the constructed nature of knowledge while maintaining a commitment to

empirical inquiry and validation (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

One of the fundamental epistemological commitments of pragmatism is its rejection of foundationalism: the idea that knowledge must be grounded in indubitable principles. Peirce (1878) introduced the concept of fallibilism, which holds that our beliefs are always provisional and subject to revision based on new evidence. This notion contrasts sharply with the Cartesian quest for certainty and aligns with the scientific method's iterative nature (Misak, 2013). Pragmatists argue that knowledge should be evaluated based on its effectiveness in addressing practical problems rather than its correspondence to an independent reality (James, 1907). This idea, largely developed by philosophers like William James in his 1907 work, suggests that the truth of an idea or belief lies not in its alignment with an objective, independent reality, but in its practical consequences and concrete results. According to this view, what is "true" is what works well in a given context and helps solve problems. In pragmatism, scientific theories are not judged solely on their ability to reflect an objective and independent reality but on their effectiveness in solving practical problems.

Dewey (1938a) further developed the epistemology of pragmatism by emphasizing the role of experience and inquiry in the construction of knowledge. He proposed an instrumentalist view, where knowledge serves as a tool for problem-solving rather than as a mere representation of reality. This perspective aligns with contemporary constructivist theories in education and social sciences (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Garrison, 1994). Inquiry, in the Deweyan sense, is an active process that involves hypothesis testing, experimentation, and reflection: a model that remains influential in educational research and pedagogical practice (Joas, 1996). Dewey's instrumentalist view and his emphasis on experience and inquiry laid the groundwork for contemporary constructivist theories in the social sciences, such as those articulated by Piaget, Vygotsky, and later scholars like Biesta & Burbules and Garrison. These theories share a common belief that knowledge is constructed by individuals through interaction with their environment, rather than being passively received from an external source.

Pragmatism offers a powerful framework for management science research, stressing the importance of practical application, active inquiry, continuous learning, and reflective thinking. Management knowledge is not static; it evolves through the practical testing of ideas, ongoing reflection, and adaptation to real-world challenges. This approach fosters a deeper, more engaged learning process that drives innovation and problem-solving in management practices.

1.2   Truth as a function of practical consequences

The pragmatic theory of truth, articulated by James and Peirce, holds that truth is not an inherent property of statements but is instead determined by their practical effects and success in guiding action.

James (1907) famously argued that *"The 'true' is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the 'right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving".* He also stated that *"the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief"*. Truth is, thus, not an absolute, but rather what proves useful in our process of thinking, while rightness is defined by what is effective in guiding our behavior. In essence, James (1907) encapsulates these ideas by asserting that *"truth is what works"*. This emphasis on utility distinguishes pragmatism from correspondence theories of truth, which assume a one-to-one relationship between statements and reality (Haack, 1976). For James (1907), the truth of a belief or proposition is determined by its ability to guide action successfully. If a belief helps an individual achieve practical success, adapt to their environment, or navigate challenges effectively, it is considered "true". This idea stresses that truth is evaluated based on the outcomes and benefits it provides in real-world applications, not whether it corresponds to an abstract, objective reality. For example, if believing in a specific business strategy results in increased profits and customer satisfaction, the strategy is considered "true" in a pragmatic sense, even if it may not align with all theoretical models or universal laws. Its "truth" lies in its practical utility and effectiveness.

Peirce (1898) contributed to the pragmatic theory by emphasizing that truth is something that emerges through a process of inquiry. According to him, the truth of a belief is not immediately apparent, but is discovered through scientific inquiry and ongoing testing. In Peirce's view, beliefs and propositions are open to revision based on new evidence and continued practical testing. His famous "Community of Inquiry" concept suggests that, while individual experiences can offer immediate benefits, the ultimate validation of truth occurs within a community that tests, refines, and agrees upon the best way of thinking about and acting on the belief. Over time, the community converges on beliefs that consistently produce successful results across different situations, and these beliefs are thus recognized as true.

Thus, both Peirce and James emphasize the dynamic, evolving nature of truth, where beliefs are continuously tested and refined through experience and practical consequences, ultimately forming a collective understanding that aligns with real-world success.

2   Methodology

This article is grounded in a conceptual and reflective research design that aligns with the pragmatic paradigm it seeks to explore. The objective was not to conduct an empirical case study but to offer a methodological and epistemological analysis of pragmatism as a research stance in management sciences. As such, the approach adopted is qualitative, relying on secondary data sources and critical literature synthesis.

The construction of the article involved several stages. First, a comprehensive review of existing literature was undertaken, focusing on foundational philosophical texts, seminal works in pragmatism (Peirce, James, Dewey), and recent methodological contributions in the field of management sciences. Key databases such as JSTOR, Science Direct, and Google Scholar were used to identify relevant peer-reviewed sources, emphasizing works that discuss the practical applications of pragmatism in research design and epistemology.

Second, a thematic analysis was applied to extract recurring conceptual patterns related to pragmatism's implications for knowledge production, truth, inquiry, and methodological pluralism. Particular attention was paid to how pragmatism is operationalized in management science literature, through methods such as action research, mixed methods, and case studies.

Finally, reflexive analysis was used to situate the author's own position as a researcher within this paradigm. This approach was adopted to acknowledge the author's own positioning within the paradigm and to ensure transparency in the construction of this conceptual analysis.

3   Results: Methodological implications of the pragmatic stance

A pragmatic approach to research methodology embraces methodological pluralism, allowing researchers to adopt methods that best serve their research objectives. Unlike positivist paradigms that emphasize quantitative rigor or interpretivist paradigms that prioritize qualitative depth, pragmatism endorses a mixed-methods approach to leverage the strengths of both traditions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This methodological flexibility enables researchers to address complex organizational and social dynamics effectively, ensuring that research remains adaptable to real-world challenges making it a valuable approach for applied and interdisciplinary studies.

Rooted in the belief that knowledge should be evaluated based on its practical consequences, this research paradigm prioritizes methodological flexibility, integrating diverse approaches to generate meaningful insights. The selection of research methods is driven by the research question rather than rigid philosophical commitments (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This enables researchers to combine different epistemological approaches to generate

comprehensive insights. Mixed methods research is commonly adopted to enhance the depth and breadth of analysis (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). This approach facilitates a holistic understanding of research phenomena, enabling triangulation and corroboration of findings.

Pragmatism fosters interdisciplinary research by encouraging the integration of multiple perspectives and methods to address multifaceted problems (Morgan, 2007). This makes it particularly valuable for applied fields such as business management, politics, education, healthcare, and social policy. Pragmatist research prioritizes actionable insights that can inform decision-making in professional and policy contexts (Maxcy, 2003). This commitment to applied research aligns with the pragmatist view that knowledge should be evaluated based on its usefulness. This paradigm encourages researchers to continuously refine their theoretical and methodological choices based on empirical findings (Shannon-Baker, 2016). This iterative process ensures that research remains contextually relevant and responsive to emerging complexities.

4   Discussions

4.1   The value of pragmatism in management science

Pragmatism offers a valuable epistemological and methodological framework for research in management sciences, particularly in contexts characterized by complexity, change, and practical decision-making.

In management science, pragmatism can be applied to decision-making processes, strategies, and practices that prioritize practical outcomes over theoretical models. Pragmatists in management focus on what works best in the real world, adapting theories and tools as needed to solve specific business problems.

In a business context, companies often face complex decisions about which direction to take, whether to adopt new technology, enter new markets, or restructure their operations. A pragmatic approach to decision-making would focus on the effectiveness of the strategy in addressing the company's current challenges rather than strictly following theoretical models or adhering to traditional business strategies. For instance, a company may decide to implement a new software tool for a project management. While the traditional theory might suggest a careful, step-by-step approach with a detailed analysis of the tool's long-term benefits, a pragmatic manager might focus more on how the tool can immediately solve pressing issues, like improving team collaboration and meeting deadlines more efficiently. The manager might be more concerned with the software's practical application and how well it works for the team,

rather than whether it aligns with the latest academic theory on project management tools.

In managing organizational change, a pragmatic approach would involve focusing on what is practically achievable within the organization, rather than adhering strictly to theoretical frameworks like Lewin's Change Model (1947) or Kotter's 8-Step Process (1996). A pragmatic manager might modify or blend these theories, depending on the company's specific needs, culture, and available resources. For example, if an organization is undergoing a merger, instead of rigidly following a set change management model, a pragmatic manager might adapt the process, incorporating lessons from previous successful mergers or applying new methods based on current market conditions and the unique challenges the company faces. The success of the approach would be measured by how effectively it minimizes disruption and helps employees transition smoothly, not whether the process exactly follows a predefined theoretical path. This could mean adapting or even challenging established theories and frameworks to achieve practical, real-world results that solve organizational problems and address the immediate needs of the company.

Pragmatism justifies methodological diversity in management research, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of organizational phenomena through the integration of multiple data sources and triangulation (Feilzer, 2010). This approach ensures both theoretical rigor and practical relevance.

Across various fields of business research including strategic management, organizational behavior, innovation management, leadership, and entrepreneurship, scholars increasingly adopt pragmatic and mixed-method approaches to capture the complexity of organizational phenomena. For example, in strategic management, Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) combined statistical analysis with qualitative case studies to examine decision-making. In organizational behavior research, Denison (1996) integrated surveys and ethnographic methods to explore workplace dynamics. Likewise, Van de Ven (2007) employed both experimental and interpretive approaches to assess technological innovation, while Yukl (2013) blended quantitative metrics with qualitative insights in leadership studies. Entrepreneurial research also reflects this pragmatic orientation, as seen in the work of Neck and Greene (2011), who combined econometric models with field studies to better understand startup ecosystems.

These examples illustrate how a pragmatic stance enables researchers to address complex management issues through the integration of diverse methodological tools. This methodological flexibility ensures that management research remains both contextually grounded and applicable to real-world challenges.

4.2 Pragmatism in management science research: Theory into practice

Pragmatism is often applied in management science research through methodologies that emphasize practical relevance, adaptability, and real-world problem-solving. Among the most common approaches are action research, case studies, surveys, and the development of management tools.

4.2.1 Applying action research

In pragmatic management research, action research stands out as a method that emphasizes direct engagement with organizational realities. Rather than focusing solely on theoretical models, the researcher takes an active role within the company, working collaboratively with practitioners to solve concrete problems (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). For instance, in a project aimed at improving employee engagement in a manufacturing firm, a management science researcher could implement strategies, monitor outcomes, and adjust interventions based on real-time feedback from staff and managers. This iterative and participatory process reflects the core of pragmatism prioritizing what works in context over rigid adherence to theory.

The success of such research is not judged by theoretical consistency, but by measurable improvements in areas such as employee morale, productivity, and organizational effectiveness. Recent studies have shown that employee morale is closely linked to leadership communication, recognition, and workplace inclusion (Ellis, 2024; Newman et al., 2020). As a result, the research evolves dynamically, guided by practical outcomes and continuous learning.

4.2.2 Practical use of case studies

In case study research, a pragmatic approach prioritizes the real-world effectiveness of resources and strategies. In the context of digital transformation, management science researchers using a pragmatic approach would indeed study how companies adapt digital tools to fit their industry-specific needs (Bharadwaj et al., 2013), organizational culture (Schein, 2010) and market conditions (Teece, 2007). Moreover, identifying key success factors like leadership decisions, employee engagement, and competitive advantages aligns with the pragmatic focus of producing actionable insights for practitioners. Case studies in this context serve to inform decision-making in real-world scenarios by offering practical, evidence-based guidance.

4.2.3 Pragmatic approach to survey research

In survey research, a pragmatic approach involves collecting data from diverse industries and contexts. For instance, when studying the impact of various leadership styles such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), transactional leadership (Bass, 1985;

Burns, 1978) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) on organizational performance, management science researchers might focus on how these leadership styles function in practice. This includes considering factors such as organizational culture (Schein, 2010), external market pressures (Kotter, 1996) and the unique challenges faced by each company (Yukl, 2013).

Thus, rather than comparing leadership effectiveness to idealized models, such studies emphasize practical outcomes, such as employee satisfaction (Judge et al., 2001), team performance (Burke et al., 2006) and overall organizational success (Yukl, 2013). The goal is to identify what works best in real-world settings, providing actionable insights for leaders across various contexts.

4.2.4 Evaluating management tools through a pragmatic lens

In pragmatic management research, the design and evaluation of new managerial tools prioritize effective utility over strict theoretical alignment. Instead of focusing on whether a tool conforms to established decision-making theories, its effectiveness is assessed based on its capacity to enhance managerial decision-making and improve service outcomes (Shollo & Galliers, 2016). For example, a management science researcher developing a decision-support tool for managers in a given sector might test its application across several companies, continuously refining the tool based on user feedback and the operational needs of each organization (Heavin & Power, 2018).

In line with pragmatic principles, success is gauged using practical indicators. This outcome-driven approach reflects a shift toward context-sensitive innovation, where managerial tools are shaped by how well they perform in practice rather than their alignment with theoretical frameworks. It also underscores the value of iterative testing and adaptability in developing solutions that are responsive to dynamic business environments.

4.3 Critiques of pragmatism in management sciences

Pragmatism resonates strongly with the increasing demand for impact-driven research in management sciences. By emphasizing practical outcomes and a "*what works*" mindset, this approach favors solutions that are contextually relevant, adaptable, and open to continuous refinement. As such, pragmatism has proven particularly well-suited to applied domains like strategic management, organizational behavior and public management. However, despite its strengths such as methodological flexibility and a strong orientation toward real-world problem-solving, pragmatism has also faced several critiques.

Scholars such as Rorty (1989) and Putnam (2008) have expanded pragmatist epistemology by

emphasizing its anti-essentialist stance and its alignment with democratic pluralism. However, critics argue that pragmatism's emphasis on utility risks reducing epistemology to a form of instrumentalism that prioritizes short-term efficacy over deeper ontological commitments (Habermas, 1987).

Critics of pragmatism in management science raise several concerns, particularly regarding its emphasis on utility and practical outcomes, which they argue can lead to instrumentalism. Instrumentalism is the idea that knowledge and decisions are valued only for their immediate effectiveness in solving problems, rather than for deeper philosophical or ethical considerations. According to Habermas (1987), this focus on pragmatic utility risks reducing complex phenomena, such as leadership and organizational behavior, to mere tools for short-term efficiency, without considering long-term consequences or the broader social and ethical implications. Habermas cautioned that by focusing on what works now, pragmatism might ignore deeper ontological and epistemological commitments, which are crucial for developing a robust understanding of truth, justice, and human flourishing.

Furthermore, scholars like Flyvbjerg (2001) have argued that pragmatism's emphasis on context-specific solutions may result in localization bias, where solutions to management problems are overly focused on specific, immediate needs without integrating broader theoretical frameworks or transferable insights across different contexts. This could potentially limit the applicability of management theories in more generalized settings.

Further criticisms come from Bourdieu (1990), who claimed that the pragmatist view of knowledge as a tool for practical outcomes overlooks the power dynamics inherent in organizational settings, where decisions are often shaped by vested interests and the distribution of power. According to Bourdieu, this omission neglects the critical role of social and cultural capital in shaping organizational practices, which pragmatism might reduce to merely pragmatic or instrumental actions. In *The Logic of Practice* (1990), Bourdieu doesn't reject the idea of being practical or context-sensitive (which is central to pragmatism). In fact, he shares pragmatism's concern for real-world relevance. But he insists that practical logic must be studied with sociological depth, not just empirical utility.

These critics highlight the tension between pragmatic flexibility and the need for deeper philosophical grounding in management science. They argue that while pragmatism's focus on practical effectiveness offers valuable insights for decision-making in management, it risks oversimplifying complex organizational issues, ignoring long-term ethical concerns, and underestimating the broader social forces that shape managerial practices.

5   Conclusion

Pragmatism offers a dynamic and context-sensitive epistemological framework that bridges the gap between objectivism and subjectivism. By foregrounding experience, inquiry, and practical consequences, it provides a robust alternative to both positivist and relativist epistemologies. Its ongoing relevance is evident in contemporary debates on knowledge construction, scientific inquiry, and democratic deliberation.

The pragmatic stance in management sciences enables researchers to address the complexity of organizational phenomena by integrating diverse methodological tools. This approach enhances both theoretical contributions and practical applications, ensuring that management research remains relevant in dynamic business environments. It provides researchers with the epistemological and methodological tools necessary to navigate the complexities of organizational research. By embracing methodological pluralism, reflexivity, and practical relevance, pragmatism bridges the gap between theory and practice. Reflexivity is a cornerstone of this research stance, requiring scholars to critically examine their epistemological assumptions, methodological choices, and the broader implications of their findings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). This process involves recognizing biases, adapting methodologies based on emerging insights, and acknowledging the ethical dimensions of knowledge production. Ethical reflexivity, in particular, underscores the importance of assessing research impact on stakeholders and ensuring that scholarly work aligns with societal and organizational needs (Saunders et al., 2009). Pragmatism's commitment to participatory and inclusive research fosters collaborations that prioritize mutual benefit and social responsibility (Tracy, 2010).

Future research should continue exploring the potential of pragmatic inquiry in fostering impactful and contextually grounded management studies. Researchers may further investigate the intersections between pragmatism and emerging epistemological paradigms, particularly in the context of digital knowledge production and artificial intelligence.

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