

Extended Commentary:

Pandemic, Paradigm, and Philosophy in Social Science Research

At its most basic, social science research is the pursuit of information to answer questions about specific aspects of social life.¹ Philosophical considerations underlie all social science research,² and the philosophical foundations and the issues that emerge thereof deeply impact the way we carry out social science research within particular methodological frameworks using specific methods. *Methods* here refer to the range of techniques that are used to collect data or evidence of the social world, while *methodology* which provides the logical framework of research design concerns the research strategy as a whole.³ What methods to employ (i.e., techniques for acquiring data) and within which methodological framework or paradigm is dependent on the underlying philosophical foundations and assumptions.⁴ In speaking about the relationship between philosophy and social science research, Hughes (1990) writes “every research tool or procedure is inextricably embedded in commitments to particular versions of the world and to knowing that world...,”⁵ Thus, every research tool and method used whether a questionnaire, interviews or observations involves a certain conception of the world, and this is where philosophy plays a major role in social science research.⁶

The Covid-19 pandemic wreaked havoc and created disruptions across all aspects of social life and existing institutional systems. The Covid-19 restrictions on movement, the need for physical isolation, the closure of many educational and public institutions and the resulting shift from physical to virtual mode of communication to prevent the spread of the virus necessitated us to rethink, and strategize ways to deal with the consequences of the pandemic. In the fields of social sciences research—which have also been severely impacted due to the disruptions caused by the sudden shift from the “real” to the “virtual” mode—has forced

researchers to rely heavily on phone interviews, virtual interviews, and other secondary modes of data collections, which seem to be inadequate to conduct rigorous research. This sudden change from “real” or “physical” to “virtual” or “digital” has necessitated the need for a new research *paradigm* to be reflective of changed social realities.

To understand the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the practice and conduct of social science research, it is important to engage with the philosophical (ontology and epistemological) underpinning of social sciences research. Before attempting to engage with the philosophical foundations of social research, it is important to clarify certain terminologies.

What are Paradigms and Worldviews?

Paradigm is a term that was first introduced by Thomas Kuhn in his influential book “*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,” published in 1962, in which he argued that the development of science is driven by adherence to a paradigm.⁷ A paradigm supplies puzzles for scientists to solve and also provides tools for their solution, a crisis in science occurs when a particular paradigm is unable to solve a puzzle, also called anomalies. Following the crisis is a scientific revolution whereby the old paradigm is replaced by a rival one.⁸

When applied to social sciences, it means a set of basic belief systems based on ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions.⁹ A world-view or *weltanschauung*,¹⁰ is a “world outlook” that has philosophical origins, it means a conception of all that there is, philosophy itself is a worldview, a theory of everything. When the term world-view is applied to social sciences, a paradigm is considered a *worldview*, while a *worldview* may not always be a paradigm. A *worldview* defines for its holder the nature of the “world,” the individual's place in it, and a range of possible relationships to the world and its parts.¹¹ Further to establish the philosophical and theoretical foundations of social science research, Guba and

Lincoln (1994) argue that, “Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as a basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways.”¹²

Understanding Ontology and Epistemology in Social Sciences Research

There are three major social science research paradigms: positivist, interpretivist, and critical research. The theoretical and philosophical framework of each paradigm are based on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions.

Ontology is the theory about the nature of existence, it addresses questions about what can be known.¹³ Ontological questions are central to social research, all research is anchored to the basic beliefs about how the world exists, hence, the ontological question would be how much is the world objectively real? or is the world socially constructed? or is the unconscious related to the social world?¹⁴ More simply, ontology refers to the assumptions about how we see the world if we assume a “real” world, then how things really are, what can be known about it.¹⁵

Epistemology is a philosophical inquiry into how the world can be known, “it concerns natures, sources, and limits of knowledge,” and it involves “assertions and propositions about how the world can be apprehended.”¹⁶ Hence, the epistemological questions would be: how can knowledge about the social world be obtained? Under what conditions can we be certain of what we know?¹⁷ Other epistemological questions that follow would be what is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known? The answer to this question is not independent of the ontological question because it is the assumption about the nature of the world that is if we assume that there is a world out there that is “real” (realism), then our epistemological approach would be an objective, detached view of the world which is independent of our subjective beliefs, similarly, if our ontological assumption is that there is no

“real” world out there which is independent of us and that everything is dependent on us, then our epistemological approach to studying social reality would be subjective.¹⁸ The epistemological assumption would relate to for instance how researchers conceptualize the best way to apprehend social reality is clearly dependent upon what they believe about the nature of existence.¹⁹ Hence, it is the ontological perspective that determines the epistemological perspective or rather every ontological premise implies certain epistemological commitments which are the possibilities of producing valid knowledge.²⁰ The ontological premise about the nature of reality not only determines what can be known, and how it can be known (epistemology), but also about what should count as a social problem and also the nature of research ethics, practices of representation, as well as subsequent research and pedagogy that reproduces the field.²¹ It is the ontological and the epistemological assumptions which is then reflected in a particular methodological approach that one chooses.²²

Brief overview of the three existing Research Paradigms: Positivist, Interpretivist, and Critical Research

The positivist paradigm mirrors the methods used in natural sciences, the origins of which can be traced back to the enlightenment period. Positivism sought laws of social life that could stand as identical to the natural laws of the physical sciences.²³ The positivist approach also referred to as the “scientific approach” uses the method of science and was first popularized by Auguste Comte (1798-1875) through his work “*The Positivist Philosophy*” published in 1971. Comte’s primary concern was finding the truth about the social world.²⁴ The positivist always attempts to present a definitive knowledge about the world. The ontological assumption of positivism is that the world exists as an objective entity, at least in principle knowable in its entirety, epistemologically, the task of the researcher is first to accurately describe reality, and

then analyze the results.²⁵ For a positivist, the ontological assumption is that the world consists of social order, and the best way to study a social phenomenon is through observation of certain patterns or events or behavior and hence the best way to study is an objective approach (epistemology) independent of the person conducting the research. Philosophically, the strategies employed by the positivists are based on cartesian dualism which separates the knower from the known, the subject from the object, incorporated within is the classical empiricism, represented by the notion of neutrality in terms of what can be known. This separation between the knower and the known guarantees objectivity, which is central to any kind of science research.²⁶ The methodology of the positivist paradigm is the explanation of the relationships among various phenomena, holding a deterministic philosophy, the positivists identify causes that affect the outcomes.²⁷ Philosophical determinism is the view that all events are determined completely by previously existing causes. The philosophical assumption in positivism holds true more for quantitative research rather than qualitative research. In such a research, validity and reliability of results determine the quality of the research.

Of course, as with any paradigm, there are problems with positivism. The obvious one being that since positivism mirrors the natural sciences it fails to make a distinction between human beings and other natural objects of study.²⁸ Another important drawback is the lack of importance given to the context of research; positivists in their attempt to develop quantified measures of phenomena shred contexts from their meanings, thus removing value from research.²⁹

Following the many criticisms of positivism, positivism is replaced by the interpretive paradigm, which is essentially anti-positivist in terms of its ontological and epistemological assumptions and thereby its understanding and interpretation of human and social reality.

Interpretivist research is committed to the philosophy of social construction which posits a social world which is produced through meaningful interpretation.³⁰ Interpretivism is more humanist, constructivist than positivism. The purpose or *telos* of a proponent of interpretivism is to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the perspectives of the people who live in it.³¹ The two objects of investigation in interpretivism are the world of lived reality and the context-specific meanings as interpreted by the social actors. To understand the world of meaning one must interpret it, and interpretation is a process of meaning construction and to clarify how and what meanings are embodied in language and actions of social actors. This process of sociological interpretation of human action is called *Verstehen* (understanding).³² The ontological assumption in interpretivism assumes a kind of ontological relativism according to which there is no one absolute reality. Interpretivism assumes multiple, apprehend-able, and sometimes conflicting social realities (relativism and pluralism) that are the products of human intellects, but that may change as their constructors become more informed and sophisticated.³³ The epistemological assumption which draws from its ontological perspective of human and social reality is subjectivist and transactional, it removes the duality between the knower and the known, the duality is combined into a single entity and the resulting findings is based on the interactions between the interpreter (researcher) and that being interpreted (researched/respondent). Subjective interaction can access the realities that are in “respondents” minds.³⁴ The worldview that shapes this kind of understanding of social realities and human action is that the world does not exist independently of us and our knowledge of it. The methodology correspondingly involves the pursuit of understanding the phenomena from an individual perspective. Hermeneutics and dialectics to interpret and meaning construction are the research methods used by interpretivists.³⁵ According to interpretivists, quantitative research

methods are inadequate to understanding and interpreting social phenomena and thus they prescribe to qualitative research methods like ethnography, narrative analysis, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case study.

Problems with the interpretivist paradigm are that even though they are empathetic to individual meanings, given the multiplicity of meanings based on a variety of subjective experiences, generalization of the results to different organizational settings becomes a problem. Another obvious problem is that such kind of research is expensive, small-scale, and intensive³⁶ because of the prolonged research time needed to observe and describe the individualistic interactions. Yet another problem is that the researcher's own subjective individual opinion, belief, and bias may affect the way that the participants' experiences are interpreted which will influence the research outcome.

The third influential paradigm is the critical research paradigm which challenges both the positivist and interpretivist paradigm or worldview. The philosophical foundation for the critical research paradigm comes from the critical theory of German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, associated with the Frankfurt school of critical theory which brings together the ideas of Marx, Hegel, and Freud. Max Horkheimer first provided a definition of critical theory as “a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory oriented only toward understanding or explaining it,”³⁷ and this explains the emancipatory aspect of critical theory. It attempts to change the social, political, and cultural reality in order to emancipate the individual, it speaks of collective freedom and social transformation. It considers the researcher a transformational individual with a capacity to liberate people from their historical, mental, emotional, and social conditions.³⁸ The critical theory argues that social problems such as exploitation, suppression, alienation, violence faced by marginalized groups,

working-class men and women, racial, and ethnic minorities are a result of social structures and cultural assumptions, rather than from individuals. The critical social theorists' study and expose these social issues, giving participants a voice, raise their consciousness, and improve their lives³⁹ through which it achieves its emancipatory purpose. Critical theory is a critique of ideology and considers it to be an obstruction to freedom and liberation,⁴⁰ to be free one has to get rid of the illusion of ideology. The other perspectives of critical theory are Marxism, Queer Theory, and Feminism.⁴¹

The ontological assumption of critical theory is *historical realism*. It is an ontological position taken by critical theorists, who view reality as tangible and historically placed in social and institutional structures.⁴² A reality that was once plastic but over time became shaped by social, cultural, political, economic, and gender factors has become reified into structures.⁴³ The epistemological assumption is transactional and subjectivist, the knower is inextricably intertwined with the known, the distinction between the researcher and the object of study is removed. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), "The investigator and investigated object are interactively linked with the values of the investigator (and of situated "others") inevitably influencing the inquiry. Findings are therefore *value mediated*."⁴⁴ Creswell (2018) also maintains that knowledge is characterized as socially constructed and human perception as value-laden and prejudiced. The critical methodology is dialogical and dialectical.⁴⁵ The nature of inquiry in critical theory is transactional since it demands that dialogue be established between the researcher and the participant; the interaction between researcher and participant must be dialectical to transform ignorance into misapprehensions.⁴⁶ According to Cohen et al (2007), critical research is associated with two research methodologies such as ideology critique and action research. Ideology critique seeks to unravel the structures, the deeply vested interests of

these powerful, hegemonic structures to raise awareness of the marginalized people while action research is advocacy, it attempts to change the situation, and gives the researcher a “voice.”⁴⁷

The problem with this paradigm is that the researchers are motivated politically and have an agenda, where they see themselves as ideologues when the whole process of research should be objective and not motivated by any desire or passion.⁴⁸ Hammersley (1995) argues that by performing research that is politically motivated or that which serves a political goal means an abandonment of the obligations of a researcher. In their defense, critical theorists argue that “what research isn’t politically motivated?”—all research caters to the interests of either one or the other groups, most often dominant groups—usually powerful white males.⁴⁹

Changed Social Realities

There is no doubt that the social realities have changed forever following the pandemic, with this changing reality, so also the way we understand reality *per se*. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, due to preventive measures taken by various governments and institutions across the world such as lockdowns, closure of schools, colleges, universities, businesses, banks have been abruptly forced to move their spheres and functioning from the “real world” to the “virtual world.”

The increasing digitization of reality resulting in the creation of newer virtual augmented and mixed realities have greatly impacted and challenged the way we understand, and conceptualize the very essence of reality.⁵⁰ The “real” has become the “virtual,” and the “virtual” the “real,” and sometimes these two realities coincide, making them indistinguishable. This then brings us back to the fundamental question of what is “real”? and what is “virtual”? which leads to further questions such as can the virtual create real outcomes? Is there an unambiguous and clear dividing line between the real and the virtual?”⁵¹ Although this process of digitization, and

creation of new virtual realities is not new, as it began much before the pandemic, the pandemic has exacerbated the already existing digitization process and has caused the creation of multiple virtual realities. Hence, such changed (social) realities calls for a new paradigm to look beyond the existing research paradigms and imagine ways of understanding and knowing changed social realities.

Conclusion

We must accept that the existing research paradigms are not adequate enough to provide answers to the many challenges posed by the pandemic ranging from issues such as collapse of the public health system, educational crisis, economic collapse, political and psycho-social distress and so on. The new paradigm that will determine the future of social sciences research would lie in its synthesis with digital technology as Jaron Lanier predicts, “As technology changes everything, we have a chance to discover that by pushing tech as far as possible we can rediscover something in ourselves that transcends technology.”⁵² Although the new paradigm may fail to find answers to the issues and challenges of changed social realities, it nevertheless opens up the possibility of understanding the limits of knowledge i.e., what can and cannot be known?

ENDNOTES

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⁴ May and Williams.

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¹³ Celine-Marie Pascale, *Cartographies of Knowledge: Exploring Qualitative Epistemologies*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2010).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Guba and Lincoln.

¹⁶ Pascale.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Guba and Lincoln.

¹⁹ Pascale.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Cynthia B. Dillard and Adrienne D. Dixon, "Affirming the Will and the Way of the Ancestors: Black Feminist Consciousness and the Search for "Good" [ness] in Qualitative Science," in *Qualitative Inquiry and the Conservative Challenge*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Michael D. Giardina (New York: Routledge, 2006), 227-254.

²² Henn, Weinstein, and Foard.

²³ Pascale.

²⁴ Henn, Weinstein, and Foard.

²⁵ Pascale, 14.

²⁶ May and Williams.

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²⁹ Guba and Lincoln.

³⁰ Pascale.

³¹ Thomas A. Schwandt, "Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry," in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1998), 221-259.

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³³ Guba and Lincoln.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Henn, Weinstein, and Foard,

³⁷ Ronnie Lessem and Alexander Schieffer, "From Hermeneutics to Critical Theory," in *Integral Research and Innovation*, ed. Ronnie Lessem and Alexander Schieffer (London: Routledge, 2016), 209.

³⁸ Guba and Lincoln.

³⁹ Creswell, "Designing Qualitative Study," 35-52.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Guba and Lincoln.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 110.
- ⁴⁵ Creswell.
- ⁴⁶ Guba and Lincoln.
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