

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

A Model for Selecting Theoretical Framework through Epistemology of Research Paradigms

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Abstract

Despite the importance of a theoretical framework in research, researchers face several challenges when selecting a theoretical framework for their study among which are a lack of agreement as to what constitutes a theory, a lack of a single theoretical framework that applies to all social science research, and selection based on personal conviction and interest rather than on the suitability of the theory to the research problem and the paradigmatic orientation of the chosen theory, which takes account of the epistemological assumptions. This study, therefore, aims to develop a model capable of enhancing the researcher's knowledge towards selecting an appropriate theoretical framework. The article is conceptual and dependent on logical arguments by presenting four paradigms alongside their epistemological standpoints. I argued the epistemology of research paradigms and their theoretical lensing using conceptual analysis to analyse the concepts and make sense of them. The study concludes that hypothesis, statistical/mathematical postulations, projections via research questions, and models are better to underpin studies under the positivist/post-positivist paradigm. Descriptive and analytic theories are better used when working within the interpretive paradigm. While transformative paradigm is best to be underpinned within critical theory, postcolonial theories and postcolonial indigenous paradigms are dependent on Indigenous Knowledge System.

Keywords: *paradigms; epistemology of paradigms; theoretical framework; selection model*

Introduction

Research is an important tool for acquiring new knowledge where researchers systematically study a topic and draw conclusions based on findings. Therefore, selecting an appropriate theoretical framework to underpin the study when conducting research is essential. However, choosing an appropriate theoretical framework for social science research can be daunting for many scholars, especially the upcoming ones. Theoretical frameworks provide the lens through which researchers view and interpret their data and formulate hypotheses or propositions to be tested during the research process (Kivunja, 2018; Osanloo and Grant, 2016). Consequently, the theory or theories selected by the researcher will profoundly impact the research findings because they help make sense of observations and experiences and guide researchers' thinking about how to best study a phenomenon (Elliott and Higgins, 2012; Rogers, 2016). Therefore, selecting an appropriate theoretical framework is crucial and not negotiable to any social science research project because, according to Angeles *et al.* (2014), it enhances understanding of a complex issue and designing an effective research strategy.

Despite the importance of a theoretical framework in research, researchers face several challenges when selecting a theoretical framework for their respective studies. The lack of agreement among scholars about what constitutes a theory (Tasca *et al.*, 2010) means there is no single theoretical framework applicable to all social science research studies (Imenda, 2014; Van

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der Waldt, 2020). My experience as a postgraduate supervisor also showed that the selection of a theoretical framework is often based on personal conviction and interest rather than on the suitability of the theory to the research problem and the paradigmatic orientation of the chosen theory, which takes account of the epistemological assumptions. Notwithstanding these challenges, the selection of an appropriate theoretical framework is essential to the success of any social science research study. Therefore, it is important for researchers to carefully consider all factors when selecting a theoretical framework for their study. That is, the decision should be based on a careful evaluation of the suitability of the theory to the research problem, the paradigmatic orientation of the theory, and the epistemological assumptions of the theory in relation to the chosen paradigm. By considering all these factors, researchers can increase the chances of selecting a theoretical framework that will lead to successful and uncompromising social science research.

Researchers must be clear about the theoretical orientation they are bringing to their study. The chosen framework will underpin the research and determine what is included or excluded from the analysis. For example, a qualitative study may focus on understanding a particular event from the perspective of those who experienced it (Hennink *et al.*, 2020; Pathak *et al.*, 2013; Silverman, 2020). In contrast, a quantitative study may aim to measure the prevalence of a certain behaviour within a population and in numerical order (Goertzen, 2017; Hoy and Adams, 2015; O'Dwyer and Bernauer, 2013). Each approach has its own strengths and limitations. It is important for researchers to select the theory that resonates with the adopted approach best suited to their research problem. This study aims to provide an uncomplicated framework for theoretical framework selection in social research. Doing so will provide a guide for conducting social research within the purview of qualitative and quantitative studies.

Based on the above discussion, the study seeks to explore how an appropriate theoretical framework can be selected in social science research using the epistemology of paradigms. In this paper, the study will present different research paradigms and their epistemological worldviews while also arguing for the link between the epistemology of research paradigms and their theoretical lenses. Finally, a model is developed to enhance researchers' knowledge of selecting theoretical frameworks in social research.

Methodology

This study is conceptual, and its beauty is dependent on arguments. The researcher draws on extensive experiences and literature to develop a conceptual article. The article is based on several arguments, all supported by evidence. First, the author presents the available research paradigms alongside their epistemological standpoints. Secondly, I argue the link between the epistemology of research paradigms and their theoretical lensing, and lastly, I developed a model capable of enhancing researchers' knowledge of selecting appropriate theoretical frameworks in social research. I maintained a professional tone throughout the article and approached the subject matter with great care. As a result, readers are left with a greater understanding of how to select a theoretical framework for their social research projects. On the other hand, I employed conceptual analysis to analyse difficult concepts and languages that are ambiguous in nature (Pfadenhauer *et al.*, 2015). This assisted me in ensuring that the tone of the study is clear, easy, and understandable to anyone, irrespective of their level of research experience. It is important to note that using ambiguous terms can often lead to misunderstanding and confusion (Kaur, 2017); hence I desisted from using ambiguous words and statements. As such, it is essential to carefully consider the concepts and terms used in any research study. By using conceptual analysis, I improved the clarity and precision of my argument by providing a more comprehensive and accessible analysis. Overall, this helped to improve the overall quality of the study.

Presentation of Research Paradigms

Before one can make sense of any argument on the appropriate selection of theoretical framework in research, one must first unpack the paradigms and their epistemologies that housed the theories' use. In this study, cognisance is placed on four research paradigms, namely, positivist/post-positivist paradigm, interpretivist/constructivist, transformative/critical, and postcolonial indigenous paradigms. I am aware that scholars argued for the existence of other paradigms, such as pragmatism (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019; Morgan, 2014), but this was ignored in this study because it was not clear what makes it different from transformative paradigms. This is evident in the argument that the pragmatism paradigm combines the tenet of both positivism and interpretivism to investigate problems which suggests a mixed-method approach (Florczak, 2014; Morgan, 2014). In the same vein, the transformative paradigm also draws from positivism and interpretivism with mixed-method tendencies (Chilisa, 2019; Mertens, 2007).

Positivist/post-positivist paradigm

The positivist/post-positivist paradigm is one of the dominant paradigms in the social sciences. Its assumption is based on the belief that there is an objective reality that can be studied and measured (Hasan, 2016; Howell, 2013). Auguste Comte coined the term "positivism" to indicate a rigorous empirical method in which claims about knowledge are based directly on experience; it emphasises facts and the causal relationships between them (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). The positivist/post-positivist paradigm has been very influential in shaping the way social scientists conduct research with a focus on quantitative methods, such as surveys and experiments, which are seen as the best ways to collect data about objective reality (Antwi and Hamza, 2015; Clark, 1998; Kumatongo and Muzata, 2021). The positivist/post-positivist paradigm is a quantitative worldview to research that believes reality is one and static and focuses on measurable facts and observable phenomena (Davies and Fisher, 2018). The positivist/post-positivist paradigm is often used in the natural sciences, as it allows for experimentation and data collection that can be analysed using statistical and mathematical postulations (Crook and Garratt, 2005). It believes that an individual scientist has the ability to be objective and look at the world as it "really" is. This paradigm is used in research to discover laws that govern the universe and is mostly used to test and generate hypotheses.

However, this paradigm has been criticised in recent years for its emphasis on quantification and lack of attention to qualitative methods (Corry, Porter, and McKenna, 2019). In the same vein, the paradigm is often criticised for its lack of flexibility and for not considering the complexities of human behaviour; hence, often seen as being reductionist in nature (Giddings and Grant, 2007). Critics have also argued that the positivist/post-positivist paradigm is too reductionist and does not consider the complex reality of human social life (Uduma and Sylva, 2015). Despite its criticisms, the positivist/post-positivist paradigm remains one of the dominant approaches in the social sciences focused on testing hypotheses and collecting data that can be objectively analysed and quantified. Based on this, I argue that positivism is a school of thought that emphasises the importance of science as the only source of genuine knowledge. It believes that natural sciences' approaches, methods, and procedures are the best model for studying society.

Interpretivist/constructivist paradigm

The interpretivist/constructivist paradigm is a way of understanding the world that emphasises the role of interpretation in understanding reality. This approach has its roots in Edmund Husserl's phenomenological theory, which focuses on the study of human consciousness and self-awareness (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). The interpretivist paradigm posits that there is no single objective reality, but instead that our understanding of reality is shaped by our individual perspectives (Tuli, 2010). This means that knowledge is not something that can be measured or quantified objectively but instead is constructed through our interactions with others. The interpretivist paradigm has been increasingly influential in the social sciences, as it provides a

way to understand human behaviour that is not limited by the conventional positivist approach. This paradigm shift has been particularly important in fields such as sociology, anthropology, education, and psychology, where the interpretivist approach has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of human behaviour (Burrell and Morgan, 2017; Nader, 1988; Phothongsunan, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005; Wilson, 2017).

The interpretivist paradigm is not without its critics, however. Some argue that this approach leads to a relativistic view of reality, where anything goes and there is no objective truth (Romm, 2015). Others contend that the interpretivist approach is too subjective and fails to capture the complexity of social phenomena (Savin-Baden and Fisher, 2002). Nevertheless, I argue that the paradigm provides a valuable perspective for understanding the social world from varying perspectives of life. That is, it provides a valuable way of understanding the social world from multiple perspectives, which often use qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, to understand how people make sense of their social experiences. This approach can be particularly helpful in understanding how people experience and make meaning of difficult or sensitive topics.

Transformative/critical/emancipatory paradigm

The transformative/critical/emancipatory paradigm is a research worldview influenced by diverse ideas and theories, with a common aim of liberating and transforming communities through group activity (Armstrong and McMahon, 2013; Mertens, 2017). This paradigm emerged as a response to the traditional, positivist and interpretive approaches to research, which often fail to address the needs of marginalised groups (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). This paradigm aims to empower those who are typically excluded from the dominant knowledge system to create social change. While there is no one unified way to conduct transformative research, there are some common themes and approaches that researchers in this paradigm often take. Firstly, transformative researchers strive to build relationships of trust and mutual respect with their participants (Armstrong and McMahon, 2013). Secondly, they view research as a co-learning process in which both the researcher and participants learn from and with each other (Cooper, 2014; Hurtado, 2015). Third, they see knowledge as socially constructed and emphasise the importance of context in understanding research findings (Mertens, 2007). Finally, transformative researchers aim to use their work to promote social justice and emancipate the life of the researched (Dill and Kohlman, 2012).

Based on the above, I can argue that the transformative research paradigm is more than just finding answers to questions. It is about listening to the people affected by the problem under investigation and involving them in finding a solution to the problem. This approach is based on the belief that those closest to the problem are often the best equipped to find a lasting solution. Therefore, transformative research is flexible and responsive because it integrates both the positivist and interpretivist points of view (Mertens, 2007). That is, it finds solace that gives room for mixed-method research. Its beauties also dwell in utilising participatory and collaborative ways to solve problems. That is, the paradigm is about working with people, not just researching them. This approach has the potential to create real, lasting change.

Postcolonial indigenous paradigm

The postcolonial indigenous paradigm is a worldview that emphasises the disempowered or previously exploited social groups (Chilisa *et al.*, 2017). It offers a method for assessing indigenous knowledge systems and ideas (Chilisa, 2019). That is, this paradigm shift has important implications for research, as it challenges the dominant Western perspective and gives voice to those who have been traditionally marginalised.

This paradigm is based on the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed and that there is no single universal truth. Instead, knowledge is relative and contextual, shaped by one's culture, history, and experiences (Chilisa and Phatshwane, 2022). This paradigm recognises the

validity of indigenous knowledge systems and their contributions to understanding the world (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). It is most suitable to conduct research with previously or currently disadvantaged groups of people or indigenous peoples who have long been oppressed and discriminated against by the dominant Western culture. The Postcolonial Indigenous paradigm provides a much-needed perspective that gives voice to these marginalised groups (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012) to achieve a more just and equitable world.

Epistemology of the Paradigms and their Theoretical Assumptions

This section discusses the epistemologies of all the identified paradigms and the potential theoretical underpinnings relevant when researchers select an appropriate theoretical framework for their studies. A point of note is that this study understands that paradigms have four major assumptions, namely, ontology, axiology, epistemology, and methodology, but in this study, the focus is placed on epistemology because it is a characteristic that majorly explores the tendency of knowledge and knowing which is connected to how theoretical framework should be viewed. This is discussed under the following sub-headings; positivist/post-positivist paradigm and potential theoretical assumptions, interpretivist and potential theoretical assumptions, transformative and potential theoretical assumptions, and postcolonial indigenous paradigm and potential theoretical assumptions:

Positivist/post-positivist paradigm and theoretical assumptions: The positivist paradigm is built on the assumption that knowledge is derived from observing and measuring the natural world. This approach to knowledge is based on the scientific method, which positivists believe is the only reliable way to gain accurate knowledge about the world (Rowbottom and Aiston, 2006). Positivists use hypotheses testing and propositions to develop their understanding of the world. They believe that these methods allow for strict control over variables and enable researchers to draw clear conclusions from their data (Shanks, 2002). Positivists also argue that scientific theories can be generalised to other contexts and situations (Hernández-Campoy, and Schilling, 2012; Smith, 2018; Yarkoni, 2022). According to Chilisa and Kawulich (2012), different schools of thought are developed within the positivist paradigm, namely realism, idealism, and critical realism. Realists argue that an objective reality exists independent of our perception of it, while idealists contend that reality is a product of our consciousness.

Critical realism takes a middle ground, positing that there is an objective reality that we can only know through our own subjective experience. Each of these schools of thought has contributed to the development of different hypotheses within the positivist paradigm, informing its theoretical underpinning. In conclusion, the positivist paradigm is informed mainly by realism, idealism, and critical realism, which in most cases is a subject of one way of knowing through hypothesis testing and mathematical theorems. This article argues that research in this category may not need to be underpinned by argumentative or social theories. Rather, it could be enough when hypotheses, and statistical and conceptual modules, among others, are employed. However, this is not to say that it is wrong to adopt hypotheses, and statistical and conceptual modules. However, it is a needless effort as these also serve the position the theories serve in the research and that hypotheses, statistical and conceptual modules stand a better chance to better postulate research within the positivist/post-positivist paradigms. When two elements serve one purpose, one then asks why we must go through such time-consuming replication of purpose.

Interpretivist and theoretical assumptions: A few key epistemological assumptions underpinning the interpretivism paradigm are, firstly, that knowledge is subjective and constructed by individuals (Hiller, 2016) based on individual sentiments, differences, and social and environmental reality. This means that there is no single objective reality, instead, everyone creates their version of reality based on their own experiences, beliefs, and values. Secondly, interpretivists assume that reality is socially constructed, meaning that society shapes our understanding of the world around us (Maulana *et al.*, 2022). Finally, interpretivists believe that

research should be conducted in a naturalistic setting, as this allows for a deep understanding of the complexities of human behaviour (Walia, 2015). These epistemological assumptions have several important implications for research. Firstly, it means that researchers must be aware of their own biases and assumptions when conducting research, as these can influence their findings. Secondly, interpretivist research often relies heavily on qualitative methods, such as interviews and observation, as these allow for a rich understanding of the complexities of human behaviour. Finally, interpretivist research is often inductive in nature, starting with data collected from the field and then seeking to develop theories and concepts that explain this data.

One can then argue that using theories to underpin philosophy is fundamental in guiding how knowledge and the art of knowing are shaped. Appropriate theoretical frameworks are important in research as they provide a set of concepts and ideas that help explain and interpret phenomena. However, appropriate theoretical lenses for research under the interpretivist paradigm can be drawn from various disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, psychology, political science, and other theories that seek to understand, explain, and interpret social phenomenon. For example, the interpretivist worldview is based on the idea that reality is socially constructed, and that knowledge is produced through interpretation. Then some typical examples of theoretical frameworks that could be adopted are constructivist theories, sociality theories, hermeneutics theories, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenological theories. Selecting these or one of these schools of thought as a theoretical framework will assist the researchers in projecting the assumption of a true interpretive worldview throughout the study.

Transformative and theoretical assumptions: The epistemology of transformative research is based on dialectical understanding aimed at critical praxis (Romm, 2015). This paradigm shift emphasises the need to destroy myths and empower people to change society radically (Mertens, 2010). Transformative research takes an emancipatory approach, which focuses on potential theoretical assumptions to help individuals and groups achieve emancipation from oppressive social structures. Some potential theoretical assumptions that underpin this type of research include the belief that all humans have the potential to be transformers, knowledge is produced through social interactions, power is a central feature of social life, change is possible and desirable, and that research can contribute to social change. These assumptions challenge traditional ideas about knowledge, power, and change and provide a foundation for transformative research that can help to create a more just and equitable world. That is, the transformative paradigm has the potential to inform a wide range of theoretical assumptions. This is because it is informed by critical theory, postcolonial discourses, feminist theories, race-specific theories, and neo-Marxist theories. As such, these theoretical schools could provide a useful perspective for researchers investigating various topics within the transformative purview. Therefore, any theory with the potential to transform power relations, initiate social change, emancipate, and empower the marginalised groups, create knowledge socially, and participate is key in underpinning transformative research.

Postcolonial indigenous paradigm and theoretical assumptions: The epistemology of postcolonial indigenous research is indigenously relational (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). This means that knowledge is derived from the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) based on relationships. Several potential theoretical assumptions can be made in this type of research. First, it is important to understand that history and experience shape reality within this paradigm. Second, power relations play a significant role in social life and must be considered when studying any phenomenon. Finally, knowledge is not static rather; it is constantly changing and evolving. These are just a few potential theoretical assumptions that could be made in postcolonial indigenous research. The potential theoretical assumptions that revolve around critical theory, postcolonial discourses, feminist theories, race-specific theories, and neo-Marxist theories within indigenous knowledge system (IKS) are important to keep in mind when doing research with postcolonial indigenous research. These assumptions provide a foundation for understanding the role that power plays in society and how different groups are affected by it. Each of these

theoretical perspectives offers a unique way of understanding social inequality and how it can be addressed. By understanding the theoretical assumptions that underlie these perspectives, such research is at the vantage position to better understand the role that power plays in the world towards addressing injustice.

The proponent of epistemological assumptions of each paradigm presented above is summarised in the model below to enable readers understand better the argument made in the study.

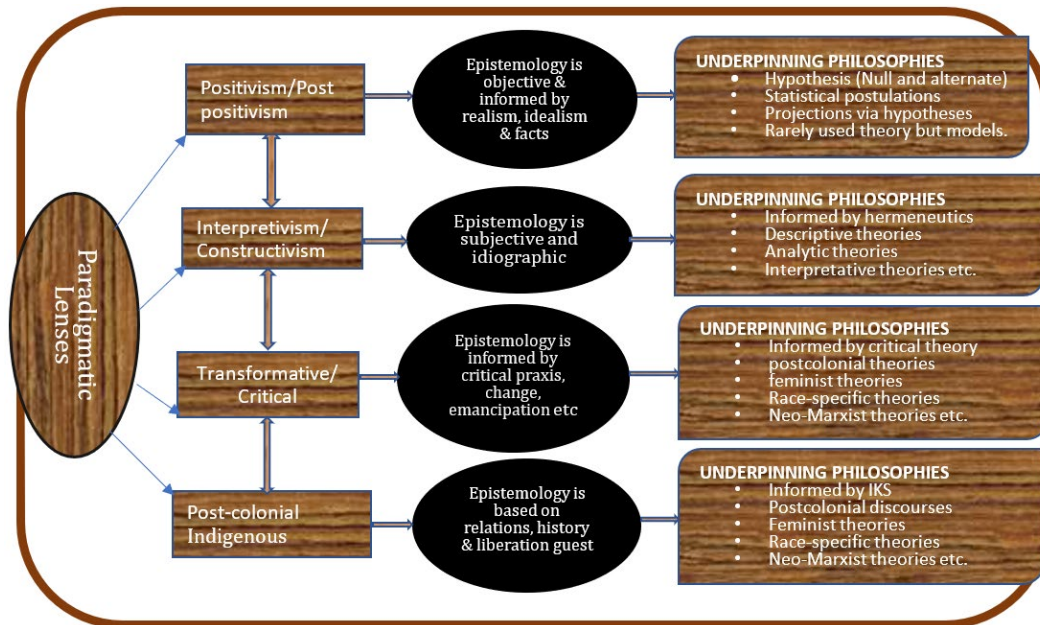


Figure 1: Theoretical selection model

The above model re-explains the major argument of this article. That is, for a researcher to select an appropriate theoretical framework for research work, the place of the epistemology of the selected research paradigm is imminent. This model points to the appropriate theoretical philosophies best suited to each paradigm based on their epistemological standpoints.

Conclusion

This study proposed a way to select an appropriate theoretical framework in social science research through the lens of the epistemology of paradigms. This was done by conceptualising four existing paradigm and their epistemological and theoretical links with developing a model capable of enhancing researchers' knowledge of selecting theoretical frameworks research. Based on the argument, it is safe to conclude that there may not be any need for social assumptions for research that is in the positivist/post-positivist paradigm but safe to indulge in the use of hypotheses, statistical/mathematical postulations, projections via research questions and models. The study also concludes that any theories that seek to describe an existing situation (descriptive theories) analyse situations, (analytic theories) and seek to interpret situations (interpretative theories) are better used when working within an interpretive paradigm. The study also concludes that the transformative paradigm is best underpinned by critical theory, postcolonial theories, feminist theories, race-specific theories, and neo-Marxist theories. At the same time, the postcolonial indigenous paradigm shares the same theoretical viewpoint as the transformative paradigm but has a concerted link with the indigenous knowledge system. This study is limited to the relationships between research paradigms and their theoretical alignment in social research. However, further arguments or analyses could provide readers with practical ways to match research problems with paradigms and methodology. If possible, examples of research problems that lend themselves to certain methodologies could be explored.

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