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## RESEARCH APPROACH: AN OVERVIEW

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**Abstract:-**The paper attempts to explain different possible research approaches to pursue a research project. It starts with three important components of a research approach namely- philosophical world view, research design, and research methods. Research approaches are classified on the basis of work of Guba (1990), which puts it in to the categories of post positivism, constructivism, transformative and pragmatism. Further paper explains salient features and principals of these four world views. These world views are merged to form three approaches namely-quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Quantitative approach includes positivism and post positivism world view, qualitative approach includes constructivism and transformative world view and mixed method approach corresponds to pragmatism. Beside these approaches two more approaches has been discussed namely-Logical, theoretical research used in the field of mathematics and computer science and Participatory action research used in the field of management, sociology and anthropology. Paper finally ends with criterion for choosing a research approach. In concluding remarks author stresses that all the approaches are complementary to each other rather than opposing each other. No concept or phenomena can be studied by single approach, a combination of these is necessary to uncover the truth.

**Keywords:**research approach, post positivism, constructivism, transformative, pragmatism.

### INTRODUCTION

Research in simplest terms is searching for knowledge and searching for truth. In formal sense it is a systematic study of a problem attacked by a deliberately chosen strategy which starts with choosing an approach to preparing blue print (design) acting upon it in terms of designing research hypotheses, choosing methods and techniques, selecting or developing data collection tools, processing the data, interpretation and ends with presenting solution/s of the problem. Depending on the strategy the solutions may vary in scope, could be generalized over a person, a sample, limited population or population in general. When we say an approach we mean plans and the procedure for research that encompass the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The overall decision involves which approach should be used to study a topic. Reaching to this decision is guided by philosophical assumptions an approach brings to the study; procedures of inquiry (research designs) the chosen approach it necessitates; and specific research methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation as guided by the design.

### COMPONENTS OF RESEARCH APPROACH:

There are three basic components of a research approach- philosophical world view, research design and methods of research. When we chose a particular research approach it necessitates matching research design and methods as well. Philosophical world view originates from epistemology considerations, which determines a paradigm as per the philosophical orientation of a research approach. Research design refers to the overall strategy that one chooses to attack the problem which requires integration of different components of the study in a coherent and logical way, thereby, ensuring to solve the problem in efficient way. It constitutes the blueprint for the collection,

measurement, analysis of data, interpretation and reporting of conclusions. Research methods are ways to get information from the sample. When researcher describes his methods it is necessary to state how these will address the research questions and/or hypotheses. The methods should be described in enough detail for justification of choice and possibility of repeating by some other researcher or in other situation. Methods vary with discipline and nature of research problem. For instance when a researcher chooses quantitative research approach he needs to choose quantitative research design which specifies what, where, when, how much, by what means in terms of objective measurements (say experimental) and method could be manipulation of variables (analysis of effect of independent variable on dependent variable) how to conduct experiment or non-experiment will be techniques of the chosen research method. In this way we understand research approach has corresponding research design which calls for possible methods which in turn provide range of techniques to support the method. Figure 1 explains interconnection between three elements of three possible research approaches.



Figure 1: Interconnection: Philosophical worldview Design and Research method

Epistemological considerations clearly divide the approaches in to number of categories on the basis of nature and structure of knowledge. But there can not be an approach to all the possible philosophies which could present its distinct paradigm. These philosophies could be merged on common grounds and finally Guba (1990) gave four categories of world views. This classification is explained in table 1.

Table 1: Basic set of beliefs that guide research actions

Post Positivism	Constructivism
Determinism	Understanding
Reductionism	Multiple participant meanings
Empirical observation and measurement	Social and historical construction
Theory verification	Theory generation
Transformative	Pragmatism
Political	Consequences of actions
Power and justice orientation	Problem-centered
Collaborative	Pluralistic
Change oriented	Real-world practice oriented

Source: Guba, 1990, p.17, cited in Creswell, 2014, P.6

#### POST POSITIVIST WORLDVIEW:

It is out shoot of positivism which is normally called as scientific research, or empirical research prevailed in traditional research. Positivism gives too much emphasis on absolute truth to be found experimentally using exact measurements, which is challenged in social science domain. Positivism only suits to physical sciences where one

deals with matter only which has no possibility of changing with time and context if physical parameters remain same. Post positivism is an appeal to probability and variation of results in terms of difference in context, situation and environment. Thus, post positivism challenges the notion of absolute truth. It can be used for both physical sciences as well as social sciences. It is effect of post positivism which guides us to write “hypothesis could not be rejected” rather than “hypothesis accepted” or “hypothesis could not be accepted” rather than “hypothesis rejected”.

#### **SALIENT FEATURES OF POST POSITIVISM INCLUDE:**

- ❖ Deterministic philosophy: it says causes determine effects i.e. the external behavior of matter (physical science) as well as human beings (behavioral science) is not without cause. Research should be able to answer this cause and effect relation on the basis of a theory which we need to prove, modify or disprove.
- ❖ Assesses causes that influence outcomes: the assessment of relation between influence of independent and dependent variable is the soul of post positivism. Relation between independent and dependent variables is to be described in terms of a numerical number as relatedness or differences thus makes this approach as a predictive approach.
- ❖ Reduce ideas to a small set of ideas to test out as variables: reductionism is another beauty of this approach. Data collected could be reduced to an interpretable number which expresses relation between independent and dependent variables.
- ❖ Research is governed by research questions or hypothesis: this approach is strictly formal in nature which is guided by research questions or hypotheses. Research questions or hypotheses are nothing but conjectural statements which are to be tested for approval or disapproval.
- ❖ Careful observation and measurement of observations: this is an objective approach which requires exact instruments and measurements. This introduces issue of validity and reliability in post positivist approach.
- ❖ Testing a theory: post positivist approach is guided by a theory to find relation between variables. It aims at testing the guiding theory in terms of relation between variables.

#### **Five principals of post positivism world view**

1. Knowledge is conjectural: knowledge is never perfect; it has always scope of improvement. In other words it is never a crystal and remains in fluid form, which can be arranged and rearranged for occlusions at the moment. Unless it works it is assumed to be hypothetical.
2. Research is the process of making claim: research starts with testing a theory we may call it deductive logic. Testing of a theory is aimed at confirming its validity and reliability for application. In case a theory fails to be proved in the application it needs to be modified or revised or rejected as a final say.
3. Data, evidence, and rational considerations shape knowledge: valid and reliable instruments are used to obtain the information which can bring out valid and reliable generalizations. Ultimately it is human rationale which will distinguish between true and untrue knowledge.
4. Research seeks to develop relevant, true statements: one piece of research can not be attributed to creation of knowledge. Actually each researcher studies a dimension of a complex phenomenon in terms of variables. Each of such research comes up with outcome statement, on integration of such statements we understand the phenomenon.
5. Being objective is essential: objectivity is the soul of this approach. Data obtaining instruments, statistical methods, and researcher’s own intervention need to be objective. If we ensure objectivity there is likely hood that conclusions will be objective.

#### **CONSTRUCTIVIST WORLDVIEW**

- Belief that individuals seek understanding of the world: every individual has own notion or reality of objects and subjects. Researcher needs to understand the concept from prospective of the participant which will help in ensuring his well being and resolving conflict among people.
- Belief that people develop subjective meanings of their experiences: this approach gives full weightage to individual differences which make them unique in sense of identity and personality. This helps us to understand different dimensions and facets of single phenomenon.
- Researchers look for the complexity of views: like post positivism this approach does not look for reduction of variance. Rather it does reverse i.e. variety of perceptions make things easier to understand in its real nature.
- Tools needed to be subjective and open: the data collecting tool must give lot of freedom for responding so that participant could construct his own meanings of the reality. The questions needed to be open ended against closed ended in post positivism.
- Researchers focus on the processes and interactions: processes and interactions are really instruments of data collection. The way participants express the words he uses and examples he chooses to stress the point are all important features of constructivist approach.

- Recognition that researcher's personal background shapes interpretation and meaning (interpretivism): researcher is very important in this form of research approach. His keen observation, unbiased interpretation and experience in assessing meaning of gestures, words, and images play vital role in creating knowledge.
- Develops inductively a theory: it is a grounded approach where theory is built from the data rather than tested by using the data. Frequency, intensity, pattern, exceptions, absences all have meaning in this form of research.

### Three principals of constructivism world view

1. Construct meaning through interacting with the world we interpret: this approach believes people create their own meanings of the social and psychological phenomena. For instance people perceive range of meaning of concepts like 'love', 'education', 'religion' an honesty and the like. Data collection instruments should use open ended questions rather than looking for objective responses.
2. Make sense of the world based on personal historical and societal perspectives: the meanings are contextual and lack the intention of generalization. For doing research with this approach one needs to match with the subject in terms of personal history, societal identities and attitudinal orientation. For instance a 'Feminist' will be fit to do research in the domain of 'feminism'. In a way we can say that interpretation is also tied to researcher.
3. Generation of meaning is social from and within community: as explained above different people have different meaning of the same concept, meaning there by researcher is interested to generate theory from the available perceptions. But at the same time this theory may be applicable in limited in its application, may be for a single group, community or a class. The approach work on the premise that there must be similar groups located elsewhere on which theory is applicable or a little modification may work for other groups.

### Transformative Worldview

- ❖ Developed from a belief that research methods do not fit marginalized individuals: normal methods of research are fit for normal people. Deviant persons and groups can only be studied on their own terms and with their own means. Marginalized people do not have similar experiences to shape their feelings as normal people do.
- ❖ Not well defined: it includes researchers from various foci and includes- feminist, critical theorists, racial and ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities. Methods and techniques are varying as we progress in the project. Data collection is started with some questions in mind which may increase or decrease as the situation unfolds and researcher understands the situation more closely.
- ❖ Individuals often overlooked: in mainstream research these groups and people are overlooked as they don't exist around us. But if we combine all the marginalized groups it makes a sizable population which deserves to be studied even from humanitarian point of view.
- ❖ Element of advocacy in research: the research is directed to address the cause of marginalized groups. They need be highlighted in respect of their needs, aspiration, identity and the like.
- ❖ Research contains an action agenda: research is aimed at changing the lives of those involved. It is an effort to bring a change in the lives of marginalized people by bringing their problems in public domain. Not only highlighting the problems research focuses on possible rehabilitation process for such marginalized groups.
- ❖ Issues address important aspects: empowerment, inequality, and oppression are the issues this approach aims to address. It is issue based research which tries to find out why there are extreme classes in our society, why people are discriminated on the basis of gender, disability, economic status, power etc.

### Four principals of transformative world view

1. Research focuses on lives of people who have traditionally been marginalized: life and processes are important rather than methods and generalizations. Group or person in question is the focus of the study, which has been otherwise ignored by mainstream research, may be due to lack of will and potential benefit for which most people want to work.
2. Research focuses on inequities: the basic reason for taking up research in this approach to focus on the problem of inequality, deficit, injustice, discrimination and the like. The whole issue must be settled around intensity, type and reasons of inequalities followed by researched suggestions for possible rehabilitation.
3. Links to political and social action to inequalities: research should come out with some possible social and political actions which can relieve the persons concerned from inequality being studied. Once these actions are materialized there can be research for impact of such actions on reducing the problem. Thus we understand this form of research can be termed as 'life research' rather than simply academic or social research.
4. Utilizing research: the research needs to be an applied one on social front. It must be focused more on practical part rather than academic one, but could be transformed in to academic discipline for better understanding of issues like oppression, domination and marginalization.



### Pragmatism

- Arises from actions, situation and consequences: this approach focuses on actions and consequences rather than cause and effect as in case of post positivism. It is contextual and time bound approach and never aims at theory building or theory testing.
- Focus on “what works”: when theories fail pragmatism starts i.e. science is which works. The methods and techniques may be traditional or self invented but the information and results these deliver should be valid and reliable.
- Focus on problem more than methods: solving the problem at hand is issue rather than how we solve it. More than one approaches, methods and techniques could be merged to reach the solution. Even concepts of physical science could be used in social science if it leads to solving of a problem. For instance intellectual inertia is analogous to inertia of matter we learn in the subject of physics, thus gives an idea to break intellectual inertia as we break physical inertia of matter.
- Practical more than focus on methods: it is flexible as far as use of methods is concerned. If we solve a problem by non traditional method researcher should even go for establishing validity of the newly discovered method. This practical approach creates space for creativity and innovation.

### Eight principals of pragmatism world view

1. No commitment to one philosophy or method: this approach is a dynamic one which avoids sticking to one methodology or method. In a way this approach denies to accept research as ‘ism’ in which one ‘ism’ necessarily opposes other what so ever is the context.
2. Researcher has freedom to choose methods, techniques etc.: one kind of method and technique is not sufficient for achieving the target. There can be a mixed of quantitative and qualitative methods and techniques. There is a possibility of corroborating quantitative results by an in depth interview of the participants and vice-versa i.e. an interview can give idea for quantitative evaluation of the concept.
3. Look at many ways of collecting data and comparing it (triangulation): data can be collected in terms of figure, images, narratives, content analysis and the its collection instrument may range from physical measurements, scales, observations to even narratives and even self enquiry.
4. “Truth is what works at that time”: as explained above pragmatism is a practical approach and looks for theory building in the context only. The research may be short termed for application, but is more valid and reliable as it is applied on the same population on which it has been researched.
5. There is an intended purpose for the research and an examination of consequences: it is tied to the purpose like an action research, but with valid and reliable procedures and instrument. While doing the research hypotheses can be modified, increased or even decreased as per suitability of the purpose. The solution obtained for the problem should be applied and consequences must be analyzed to test the developed theory.
6. Research is situated in context (social, historical, etc.): as already explained research is contextual and can’t be generalized for population in general.
7. Practical purpose for research; no need to focus on the nature of the world: in this context we may consider approach as applied one and can’t be interpreted at molecular level and even for multistep phenomena. It is more about external nature of phenomena rather than its internal structure.
8. Very open approach to collecting, analyzing and looking at data: this approach is flexible in terms of vital elements of the research design including data collection, analysis and interpretation of the data. This flexibility provides chance for exploring the facts in creative manner by mixing more than one methods. While collecting the data researcher may get idea to collect data for some more variables and accommodate the same for further data collection, thus modify the whole design for the sake of finding the truth.

### Three Approaches

On the basis of different world views we have discussed, we find these approaches still overlap to be termed as independent approaches. consequently we conclude that there could be only three approaches:

Quantitative (Positivism and Post positivism): approach of measurements and numbers.  
Qualitative (Constructivism & Transformative): approach of words and images.  
Mixed Methods (Pragmatism): approach of measurements, numbers, words and images.  
These three approaches are represented graphically in figure2 given below.

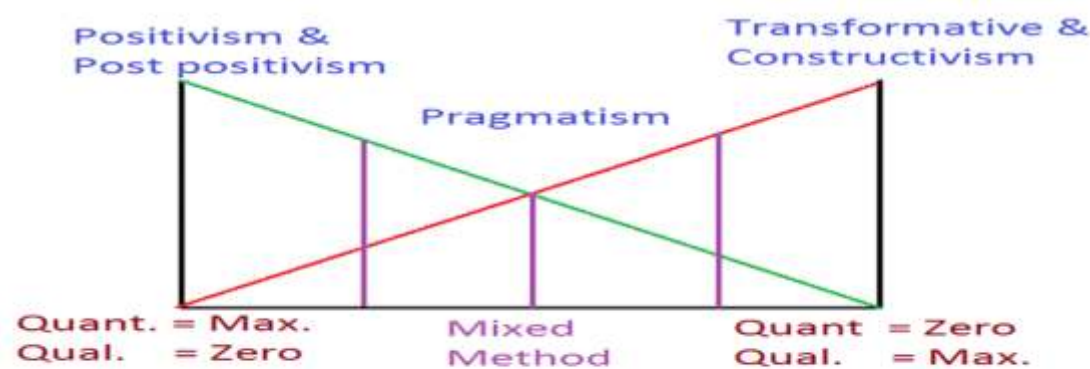


Figure: 2. Relative position of Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed methods approach

A subject deserving to be treated with quantitative approach has little possibility of application of qualitative approach and vice-versa. Newman & Benz (1998) state 'qualitative and quantitative approaches should not be viewed as rigid, distinct categories, polar opposites, or dichotomies. Instead, they represent different ends on a continuum'. When we find a research problem which can't be handled by single approach we should use both the approaches in combination we call it as mixed methods approach. Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, multimodal and mixed model researches are examples of mixed methods approach.

#### Two more approaches:

##### Logical, theoretical research

By a logical theoretical research approach is meant formal deduction of logical consequences from a set of initial assumptions (axioms). If the axioms are true and the rules are logically sound, the consequences are true as well. This kind of approach is used in subjects like mathematics, computers and management science. According to Hirschheim et al. (1995), "data modeling is first and foremost a social and organizational activity and very little, if anything (except consulting folklore) is known how data modeling is exercised in practice and what its impacts are on organizations, their information systems management, and business operations."

##### Participatory action research

Reason (1994) and Meel (1993) refer participatory research as a set of methods to research on social systems in which the researcher actively engage in the process under investigation (the actors of the social system being studied can be considered as co-researchers). Meel exemplifies this approach to research: First, an initial case study is performed for identification of problems, followed by theory development and implementation of a prototype. Then Prototype is employed to full-scale project, researcher participates and reflects upon the use of the prototype with the actors.

##### Criterion for selecting an Approach

- ❖ The nature of the research problem: it involves consideration of issue being addressed and questions we need to answer. We know different disciplines have their own preference of research approach due to the fact that they deal with different types of research. Other way of deciding an approach can be classifying the research problem in categories like-exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, prediction, evaluation or historical, which are bound to respective approaches.
- ❖ Purpose of the project: it deals with the question for what purpose I am pursuing the research. Is it for a degree? Or for a policy preparation? Or for resolving a social issue? Or as apart of big project? And so and so on. The purpose will definitely bring different concerns and formats of presenting results, which will help in selecting an approach.
- ❖ Researcher's personal experiences, skills, attitudes, interest etc.: it is our experience with people that they have their own liking and disliking as far as research approach and types of research they want to pursue. Some would like to interact with people in exploratory studies where as some would just prefer to do a survey only still other may enjoy working with secondary data only, this will compel them to choose appropriate approach and research methods.



- ❖ Resources at disposal: research requires all sort of resources ranging from financial, infra structure most importantly time. Availability of resources will be a factor while deciding a research approach. For instance experimental study would require researcher to be in constant touch with the participant/matter of the study, where as survey would require large amount of sample before sitting for analysis and interpretation.
- ❖ Sensitivity of the issue at hand: research to invent a medicine would require rigorous design of the study involving quantitative measurements as well as strict monitoring of the effect. On the other hand a case study could be qualitative and limited in scope. Research on subjects like security, religion, cast, deviant groups, and minorities should be dealt with utmost care and the strategy used need be valid and reliable.
- ❖ Discipline of study: as explained above physical science would prefer quantitative approach whereas language people prefer to use qualitative approach with critical analysis and anthropology would like to use triangulation.
- ❖ The audience/consumer of the study: for whom we are doing this research? It matters, because a business house will look for cost-benefit analysis of the project, whereas an academic agency can afford to postpone the gratification for bigger gains in the future. If we are concluding for general public, we need to be careful enough as this may create a myth which can harm the society instead of benefiting, which is aim of any form of research.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Choice of appropriate research approach is like choosing corresponding key for opening a lock. If we select appropriate research approach only then corresponding methods could be applied and results could be valid and reliable. In fact nay form of research is not accomplished by a single research project. A concept or phenomenon can be researched by number of researchers at different time using different approaches for covering different dimensions. Knowledge can never be complete by any one of the approaches. If a theory is developed by constructivism, it needs to be validated by a quantitative method and vice-versa. If survey method require greater sample we ask for lesser number of measurements on the other hand a case study involves lesser sample but greater number of measurements with greater frequency. The ultimate purpose is to find the truth, different research approaches should work on complementary basis rather than in contrast fashion. If quantitative approach has scientific orientation then qualitative approach is an art, when these focus on one aim we call it research.

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