RECONSIDERING THE USE OF POST-POSITIVIST PARADIGM IN SOCIAL SCIENCES: IS IT POSSIBLE?

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the evolving landscape of research methodologies in the social sciences, focusing on the renewed interest in post-positivism amid growing dissatisfaction with strictly quantitative approaches. The study traces the experiences of a junior social work researcher struggling with paradigm identification, ultimately finding alignment with the adaptable and inclusive nature of post-positivism. By highlighting post-positivism's shift from a rigid quest for absolute truths to an emphasis on interactive dialogue and continuous learning, this research enriches the methodological discourse. The examination of post-positivism's nuanced ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives underscores the significance of reflexivity and critical engagement in research. The study advocates for integrating qualitative and quantitative methods within the post-positivist paradigm to address complex social issues more effectively. It emphasizes the pivotal role of junior researchers in contributing to paradigm discussions and advancing the field, particularly in the scholarship of teaching and learning. By revisiting the post-positivist paradigm, this research encourages graduate students and emerging scholars to critically examine and understand the epistemological foundations that shape knowledge production. This exploration not only enriches their research but also equips them with essential skills for engaging with varied perspectives and advancing scholarly discourse.

Keywords: post-positivism, social sciences methodology, mixed methods, reflexivity, epistemology, and research paradigms

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1. Introduction

The resurgence of the post-positivist paradigm within the social sciences marks a pivotal paradigmatic shift in contemporary research approaches. This study delves into the intricacies of this resurgence, prompted by growing dissatisfaction with traditional quantitative-centric approaches that often neglect the complexity and nuance of social phenomena. Post-positivism, with its emphasis on critical realism and methodological pluralism, offers an alternative that bridges the divide between quantitative and qualitative research. By embracing both empirical rigor and interpretive depth, post-positivism fosters a more comprehensive understanding of social reality, accommodating the diverse and often contradictory nature of human experience.

Central to this exploration is the journey of a junior social work researcher navigating the labyrinth of methodological choices. Confronted with the limitations of rigid positivist frameworks, this researcher finds resonance in the flexible and inclusive ethos of post-positivism. This narrative serves as a microcosm of a broader academic movement, illustrating how emerging scholars grapple with and ultimately embrace paradigms that allow for more reflexive and context-sensitive research. The study underscores the significance of reflexivity and critical engagement, highlighting how post-positivism encourages researchers to acknowledge their positionality and the socio-cultural contexts that influence their work. Such an approach enhances the credibility of research findings and enriches the interpretive processes that underpin social inquiry.

In advocating for the adoption of post-positivist methodologies, this paper examines the potential for integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to address complex social issues effectively. It argues that such integration is crucial for developing a holistic understanding of social phenomena, transcending the limitations of single-method research. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the vital role of junior researchers in advancing methodological discussions and contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning. By engaging deeply with the epistemological and ontological foundations of their research, these emerging scholars are better equipped to navigate the dynamic landscape of knowledge production. This exploration enriches their academic endeavors and cultivates a critical and informed approach to social science research, ultimately fostering a more nuanced and comprehensive scholarly discourse.

When discussing the roots of qualitative and quantitative research, the influence of research paradigms becomes evident, particularly regarding the methodologies and processes researchers adopt to investigate their topics. This paper delves into the post-positivist methodology, examining its suitability and application within qualitative research. Initially, the relationship between positivism and post-positivism is defined, outlining the fundamental shifts from a rigid, truth-seeking approach to one that embraces complexity and contextual understanding. The exclusive focus on post-positivism illuminates how this paradigm can be effectively integrated into qualitative research, promoting a more nuanced and reflexive inquiry. Additionally, the paper identifies and addresses common misconceptions and ongoing debates surrounding the use of post-positivist approaches in qualitative research. By clarifying these aspects, the

study aims to enhance the understanding and application of post-positivism in the social sciences, fostering more robust and insightful research outcomes.

2. Review of Literature

The post-positivist paradigm has gained increasing attention in the field of qualitative research as scholars recognize the limitations of pursuing an objective, singular truth (Reimer, 1996; Ryan, 2006). This represents a fundamental shift in how knowledge is viewed and created-not as an external, immutable reality to be discovered, but as something actively shaped through human experience and interaction. Rather than striving for predictability and generalizability as in the positivist tradition, post-positivist researchers adopt a more interpretive, collaborative approach that acknowledges the contextual and constructed nature of knowledge (Wildemuth, 1993).

A central tenet of post-positivism is the notion that researchers cannot divorce themselves from their own epistemologies, assumptions, and biases (Ryan, 2006). This dialogic process allows for a much richer exploration of participants' realities, positioning the researcher not just as an impartial observer, but as an engaged collaborator in making sense of complex social phenomena. As such, the researcher-participant relationship takes on heightened significance, with the researcher seeking to understand participants' subjective experiences and co-construct meaning through dialogue and shared reflection (Giddings, 2006).

While post-positivism aligns philosophically with qualitative inquiry, its application is not without debate. Some contend that using qualitative methods does not inherently make research post-positivist, as the underlying assumptions and objectives may still be positivist in nature (Ryan, 2006). This tension speaks to the need for coherence between a study's philosophical assumptions and its methodological approach - qualitative methods employed through a positivist lens may yield insights that are decontextualized and lacking in nuance. Conversely, Reimer (1996) argues that the very purpose of qualitative research – to explore the particular rather than the general – is fundamentally incompatible with the positivist pursuit of universal laws and objective truths.

Notably, post-positivism has been championed as a means of reinvigorating social work research and bridging the divide between theory and practice (Gibbs, 2001). The participatory nature of post-positivist inquiry aligns well with social work's core values of empowerment and self-determination. By embracing the complexities of everyday social work and empowering practitioners as collaborators, post-positivist approaches hold promise for generating more relevant, actionable knowledge (Calderwood, 2002). Positioning practitioners as experts and equal partners holds the potential to produce findings that are more ecologically valid and translatable to real-world practice settings. However, realizing this potential will require equipping researchers with the necessary training and resources to navigate the intricate philosophical and methodological considerations involved (Wildemuth, 1993).

A recurring critique of post-positivism pertains to the perceived lack of rigor and objectivity inherent in its subjectivist leanings. Schuerman (1982) cautions that all observation is inherently biased and selective, underscoring the need for critical evaluation and peer scrutiny of research practices and findings. While post-positivism embraces subjectivity as an inherent part of the human experience, it does not absolve researchers of their obligation to maintain transparency, reflexivity, and sound methodological practices. Giddings (2006) further highlights the potential for mixed methods to inadvertently perpetuate positivist thinking, cautioning against the superficial adoption of post-positivist language without fully embodying its philosophical underpinnings. Integrating multiple perspectives and critical feedback loops becomes essential for ensuring analytical rigor.

As the field continues to grapple with the implications of post-positivism, a nuanced understanding of its ontological, epistemological, and axiological premises becomes paramount (Lapid, 1989). Rather than discarding the contributions of positivism altogether, the challenge lies in thoughtfully integrating diverse perspectives and methodologies to generate rich, contextualized insights that advance both theory and practice (Gibbs, 2001). The way forward likely involves transcending the positivist-postpositivist binary in favor of a more pragmatic, pluralistic approach that draws upon the respective strengths of varied research paradigms as warranted by the specific inquiry at hand.

The embrace of post-positivism in qualitative research represents a paradigmatic shift toward a more humble, reflective, and collaborative approach to knowledge production. By acknowledging the inherent subjectivity and complexity of human experiences, post-positivist researchers hold the potential to uncover deeper, more meaningful understandings that resonate with the lived realities of individuals and communities. This reconceptualization of the research endeavor holds profound implications not just for the ways in which we study social phenomena, but for how we define and engage with knowledge itself - prioritizing richness, context and co-construction over predictability and control.

3. The Foundations and Evolution of Post-Positivism

Post-positivism emerged as an evolution of positivism, a paradigm deeply rooted in the scientific study of human phenomena. Positivism primarily views humans as subjects to be studied scientifically, often reducing complex social issues to measurable data points. According to Babbie (2011), this objectivization not only diminishes the human experience but also assumes that all social issues can be resolved through scientific justification. This perspective tends to attract researchers who maintain a distant, detached relationship with their subjects, treating participants as mere data points rather than individuals with unique experiences and emotions. Consequently, the formal, impersonal interactions characteristic of positivist research often overlook the nuanced realities of human behavior and social dynamics. This detachment results in a limited

understanding of the social contexts and lived experiences of individuals, which is crucial for comprehensive social research.

Positivist researchers are mostly concerned with creating universal rules and regulations that apply to all humans at all times. However, this approach has been increasingly questioned by scholars who argue that it isolates and oversimplifies human behavior. Gratton and Jones (2010) found that research using a positivist ideology limits what can be observed and measured when interacting with participants. This constrained focus can lead to significant findings being overlooked or misinterpreted, as the researcher aims to prove a predetermined theory rather than exploring the complexities of human experience. Such a narrow scope of inquiry fails to capture the full spectrum of human behavior, often missing critical insights that could be revealed through more flexible and inclusive research methodologies.

In response to these limitations, post-positivism emerged, advocating for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to research. Post-positivism, which can also be recognized under the broader umbrella of post-modernism, includes sub-paradigms such as constructivism and critical theory. Blumberg et al. (2011) emphasize that realism links positivism and post-positivism, suggesting that post-positivism evolved from positivism to address its shortcomings, particularly its neglect of social well-being and contextual factors influencing human behavior. Post-positivism rejects the notion of a single objective reality, proposing instead that multiple realities exist and can be explored through diverse methodological approaches. This paradigm shift allows researchers to adopt a more holistic view, acknowledging the diversity and complexity of human experience.

Creswell (2009) highlights that post-positivism embraces multiple realities and incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods to study phenomena. This approach enables researchers to integrate various data collection methods, such as in-depth interviews and close-ended questionnaires, to gather comprehensive data about their subjects. By employing a mixed-methods approach, post-positivism facilitates a richer, more complete understanding of social phenomena. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) underscore the importance of using varied methods to gather comprehensive data about research subjects, emphasizing the iterative nature of understanding that evolves throughout the research process. This dynamic approach allows hypotheses and research questions to develop in response to ongoing interactions with participants rather than being fixed from the outset.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) also highlight that post-positivism encourages researchers to understand that their studies may change during the investigation process. This paradigm recognizes that true results cannot be guaranteed even with the appropriate use of methods and approaches. This acknowledgment leads to a more adaptable and responsive research process, where the researcher continuously refines their methods and questions based on real-time findings and interactions. This flexibility enables researchers to uncover deeper insights and more accurately reflect the realities of their subjects' lives, ultimately producing more meaningful and credible research outcomes.

Despite its advantages, post-positivism is not without challenges. One significant limitation is the potential for intellectual confusion among new researchers. Glicken (2003) points out that this complexity can negatively impact the quality and integrity of collected data, as new researchers may struggle to navigate the paradigm's intricacies. This intellectual confusion can lead to inconsistent application of methods and misinterpretation of data, undermining the research's overall validity. However, addressing these challenges through comprehensive training and mentorship can help new researchers develop the necessary skills to effectively utilize post-positivist methodologies.

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that the critique against positivism, articulated by anti-positivists, has sparked a productive dialogue within the social sciences. Prof (2017) highlights how anti-positivists view the generalization and objectivity of positivism as threats to the overall value of social research. This critique has stimulated interest in alternative paradigms such as interpretivism, realism, and critical approaches. These paradigms emphasize the importance of engaging with participants in meaningful ways to understand the depth of their experiences. Ryan (2006) suggests that such approaches allow researchers to move beyond seeking 'truth' in responses and instead focus on the rich, contextual understanding of social phenomena.

In essence, while post-positivism presents challenges and complexities, it offers a promising pathway for advancing social research. By embracing multiple realities and integrating diverse methodological approaches, post-positivism enables researchers to develop a more nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena. This inclusive and adaptive approach fosters deeper insights and richer interpretations, ultimately contributing to the growth and evolution of the social sciences. As researchers continue to engage critically with the post-positivist paradigm, they can further refine and expand our understanding of the intricate dynamics shaping human behavior and society.

4. Discussion

Adopting the post-positivist paradigm presents both strengths and challenges that warrant careful exploration. For the junior researcher, the initial foray into academic discourse may be marked by a tendency to make definitive claims and assertions, operating under the assumption of possessing comprehensive knowledge. Ryan (2006) highlights how this inclination aligns more closely with the positivist tradition, which prioritizes the pursuit of universal truths and objective reality. However, as feedback is received and scholarly development progresses, the inherent limitations of such an approach become increasingly apparent (Reimer, 1996).

The post-positivist paradigm offers an alternative perspective that acknowledges the contextual and constructed nature of knowledge. Rather than seeking absolute truths, post-positivist researchers, as Wildemuth (1993) posits, embrace the notion that reality is shaped by human experiences and interactions. This paradigm encourages an interpretive, collaborative approach, where the researcher engages in dialogue with participants to co-construct meaning and understanding (Giddings, 2006).

One of the strengths of post-positivism lies in its alignment with the core values and principles of social work practice. By empowering participants as equal partners and experts in their own lived experiences, post-positivist inquiry resonates with the profession's emphasis on self-determination and empowerment, as Gibbs (2001) suggests. This participatory approach holds the potential to generate findings that are more ecologically valid and directly applicable to real-world practice settings.

Additionally, the post-positivist paradigm's openness to mixed methods research can be appealing to emerging scholars seeking to integrate diverse perspectives and methodologies, an aspect highlighted by Creswell (2009). This flexibility allows researchers to draw upon the respective strengths of varied approaches, fostering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena.

However, the adoption of post-positivism is not without its challenges. One significant hurdle for junior researchers, as Ryan (2006) notes, is the relative scarcity of literature and guidance on applying this paradigm, particularly in the context of qualitative research. As a paradigm that has gained traction more recently, there is a gap between its theoretical foundations and its practical implementation, which can create uncertainty and a need for extensive self-guided exploration.

Furthermore, the post-positivist embrace of subjectivity and the co-construction of knowledge raises concerns about analytical rigor and objectivity. Schuerman (1982) cautions that emerging researchers must grapple with the need to maintain transparency, reflexivity, and sound methodological practices, ensuring that their findings are not unduly influenced by personal biases or assumptions. Integrating multiple perspectives and critical feedback loops becomes essential to mitigating these potential pitfalls, as Giddings (2006) emphasizes.

As the field continues to evolve, Lapid (1989) underscores that a nuanced understanding of the ontological, epistemological, and axiological premises of post-positivism becomes paramount for emerging researchers. Rather than perpetuating a dichotomous view of positivism versus post-positivism, a more pragmatic and pluralistic approach may be warranted – one that thoughtfully integrates diverse perspectives and methodologies to generate contextualized insights that advance both theory and practice, as Gibbs (2001) suggests.

Ultimately, the decision to align with the post-positivist paradigm requires careful consideration of one's philosophical beliefs, research interests, and the specific goals of the inquiry at hand. For emerging researchers, Calderwood (2002) and Wildemuth (1993) emphasize that this process of self-reflection and critical examination is essential to navigating the complexities of the research endeavor and contributing meaningfully to the body of knowledge within their chosen discipline.

5. Conclusion

The resurgence of post-positivist paradigm within the social sciences represents a paradigmatic shift that holds immense promise for advancing our understanding of complex social phenomena. By acknowledging the inherent subjectivity and context-

dependence of human experiences, post-positivism challenges the traditional positivist pursuit of universal laws and objective truths. Instead, it embraces a more nuanced and reflexive approach, one that recognizes the co-constructed nature of knowledge and the intricate interplay between researcher and participant (Giddings, 2006; Wildemuth, 1993). This philosophical reorientation not only enriches the interpretive processes underpinning social inquiry but also enhances the credibility and resonance of research findings.

As junior researchers navigate the labyrinth of methodological choices, the post-positivist paradigm offers a compelling alternative to rigid positivist frameworks. By fostering critical engagement and embracing methodological pluralism, post-positivism equips emerging scholars with the tools to explore the complexities of human behavior and social dynamics more comprehensively. However, this paradigmatic shift also presents challenges, particularly concerning analytical rigor and the potential for intellectual confusion (Glicken, 2003; Schuerman, 1982). Addressing these challenges through comprehensive training, mentorship, and ongoing dialogue within the academic community becomes paramount, ensuring that post-positivist paradigm is embraced with a deep understanding of their epistemological and ontological underpinnings.

The true potential of post-positivism lies in its ability to transcend the dichotomous view of positivism versus post-positivism, paving the way for a more pragmatic and pluralistic approach to social science research (Gibbs, 2001; Lapid, 1989). By thoughtfully integrating diverse perspectives and methodologies, post-positivism holds the promise of generating rich, contextualized insights that resonate with the lived realities of individuals and communities. As we continue to engage critically with this paradigm, we not only refine our understanding of the intricate dynamics shaping human behavior and society but also redefine the very nature of knowledge production itself – fostering a more humble, collaborative, and transformative approach to scholarly inquiry.

In the pursuit of knowledge, the resurgence of post-positivist paradigm represents a profound shift – a shift that challenges us to embrace complexity, acknowledge our positionality, and co-construct meaning through reflexive and inclusive practices. It is a call to transcend the limitations of rigid frameworks and venture into uncharted territories, where the boundaries of what we know are pushed, and the depths of human experience are explored with reverence and curiosity. In this pursuit, we are not only enriching our academic endeavors but also contributing to a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the social world around us, ultimately fostering a more just, equitable, and compassionate society.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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