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RESEARCH ETHICS IN POSITIVIST, INTERPRETIVIST, AND PRAGMATIST PARADIGMS

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Abstract:

Maintaining ethics in research will defend its credibility, usefulness, and impact within society. However, ethics can vary significantly between research paradigms. This is due to the kinds of ontological, epistemological, and methodological philosophies that each possesses. This paper studies research ethics within positivist, interpretivist, and pragmatist paradigms. There is a clear difference between these paradigms. Ethical considerations in the positivist paradigm concentrated on objectivity, reliability, and treating people fairly. Researchers must uphold objectivity, refrain from prejudice, and defend the rights of participants. Getting informed consent, protecting data, and reducing the possibility of harm to research participants during surveys or experiments are important ethical considerations. The interpretivist paradigm places a high value on ethical concerns arising from subjectivity, ethnocentrism, and researcher involvement. Researchers need to manage personal dynamics, engage in reflexivity, and establish trust with participants. Relational ethics values participants' lived experiences and promotes collaborative knowledge creation, going beyond traditional judgement to ensure ethical engagement. To consolidate both paradigms, a flexible approach is introduced as the pragmatist paradigm. This is distinguished by methodological diversity and practical problem-solving. Pragmatist researchers, therefore, combine qualitative and quantitative methods to observe ethical dilemmas in a situation-appropriate manner. The researcher must critically balance their ethical responsibilities under various approaches to ensure that moral principles are maintained without sacrificing the flexibility

of their study. Using a comparative approach, it reviews literature, research ethics guidelines, and philosophical texts to analyse ethical practices within each paradigm, focusing on ontological, epistemological, and axiological beliefs in research ethics. Ethical decisions should be grounded in the study's philosophical and methodological context, promoting responsible and contextually aware research practices. This paper provides researchers and all parties involved with useful information to enhance ethical standards that consider different research traditions.

Keywords:

Research Ethics, Research Paradigms, Positivist, Interpretivist, Pragmatist

Introduction

Ethical conduct in research forms the bedrock of responsible inquiry and scholarly excellence. It encompasses a set of principles and guidelines that govern how research should be designed, conducted, reported, and disseminated (Heston, 2024; Kushwaha et al., 2024). These principles such as respect for persons, beneficence, justice, integrity, and accountability, contribute to guiding researchers in making decisions that uphold both the human and societal dimensions of scientific exploration (Islam, 2024b).

One of the primary functions of ethical conduct is to protect the rights, safety, and well-being of research participants (White, 2020). Whether the participants are individuals, communities, or even organizations, ethical guidelines ensure that their autonomy is respected, their participation is voluntary, and that they are fully informed about the nature, purpose, and potential implications of the research (Buchanan et al., 2007). This involves clear and transparent communication, the acquisition of informed consent, the right to withdraw at any time, and the assurance that personal data will be kept confidential and handled with care.

Beyond the protection of participants, ethical research practices safeguard the integrity of the research process itself. They promote intellectual honesty, accuracy in data collection and reporting, fairness in authorship and collaboration, and transparency in methods and findings (Moschis, 2024). These practices are vital to ensure that the knowledge produced is credible, reproducible, and valuable to the wider academic and professional communities (Kepes et al., 2014). Researchers are also expected to recognize and declare any potential conflicts of interest (Horner & Minifie, 2011; Silva et al., 2019) and to give due credit to previous work (Haeussler & Sauermann, 2013; Holcombe, 2019), thereby honoring the collective contribution of the scholarly community.

Furthermore, ethical conduct plays a vital role in maintaining and strengthening public confidence in research. When ethical standards are consistently applied, they reassure the public that research is conducted with a sense of responsibility, compassion, and commitment to societal benefit (Cohen et al., 2017). This public trust is crucial, especially in studies that may influence policy, healthcare, education, the environment, and other areas of public interest (Cigarroa et al., 2018; Goldenberg, 2023; Hall, 2005). In addition, ethical research fosters a culture of respect, collaboration, and inclusivity among researchers. It encourages sensitivity to cultural, social, and contextual factors that may influence how research is conducted and received (Benuto et al., 2021; Cigarroa et al., 2018). Ethical awareness supports inclusive

practices that consider diverse perspectives and promote equity in both participation and benefit-sharing (Bedeker et al., 2022; Dam-de Jong & Sjöstedt, 2023).

Ethics in research also encourages lifelong reflection and professional development. Researchers are called to continually engage with evolving ethical standards, institutional review processes, and emerging global challenges (Ali & Sule, 2024; Calia et al., 2022). This reflective practice not only enhances the quality of research but also ensures that scientific advancement aligns with the highest moral and professional standards. In essence, ethical conduct is not merely a set of rules to follow but a commitment to the values that uphold the very purpose of research (Fritz et al., 1999; Pellegrino, 1992). Furthermore, it is also to generate knowledge that contributes meaningfully to the betterment of individuals, communities, and the world at large.

However, ethical considerations in research are not universally applied but are shaped by the philosophical underpinnings of different research paradigms (Gannon et al., 2022; Paudel, 2024). All these paradigms possess unique ontological and epistemological foundations that influence methodological choices and, subsequently, ethical practices. This paper aims to explore how research ethics are conceptualized and applied across these paradigms, focusing on key ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, reflexivity, and power relations. By critically examining the relationship between research paradigms and ethical considerations, the study contributes to more context-sensitive and paradigm-aligned ethical frameworks in research practice.

Literature Review

Philosophical Paradigms in Research
Research paradigms is a foundational worldview that shape how researcher perceived, constructed, and validated knowledge (Kuhn, 1962). This philosophical belief will guide researchers in making decisions on methodology, interpretation, and ethical conduct (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). Basically, the most commonly adopted paradigms are positivist, interpretivist, and pragmatist. Each paradigm suggests distinct ontological and epistemological assumptions that influence the entire research process.

The positivist paradigm is grounded in objectivity, measurability, and hypothesis testing, typically employing quantitative methods (Ali, 2024; Park et al., 2020). It assumes a single reality that can be known through empirical and systematic observation and logic. Researchers operating within this paradigm typically use quantitative methods such as surveys, experiments, and statistical modelling to test hypotheses and uncover causal relationships.

The interpretivist paradigm, by contrast, is rooted in understanding human experience and social context. It employs qualitative methods, emphasizing meaning, context, and multiple realities (Kouam, 2024; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Researchers adopting this paradigm typically engage in-depth interviews, case studies, ethnography, and participant observation. Meanwhile, Pragmatist bridges both paradigms, focusing on problem-solving through the integration of diverse methods. It is not bound by a specific ontological or epistemological stance but rather values practical outcomes and contextual relevance (Brister, 2023; Hothersall, 2019). These paradigms not only shape research designs but also influence the ethical decisions researchers make.

Ethical Consideration in Philosophical Paradigms

Ethics in research is strongly rooted in axiology, the philosophical study of values. Axiology forms the ethical aligning of a study by guiding what the researcher considers valuable, fair, or morally appropriate throughout the research process (Pretorius, 2024). In addition, research ethics refer to the moral principles, professional standards, and guidelines that shape how research is designed, conducted, and reported (Sutrop et al., 2020). These principles help to preserve the integrity and legitimacy of the research process while defending the rights, welfare, and dignity of research participants (Rahman et al., 2024). Fundamentally, ethical principles seek to guarantee that research is carried out in a responsible, open, and respectful manner for all parties involved.

Respect for persons, beneficence, justice, informed consent, confidentiality, and researcher integrity are some of the most widely accepted ethical principles in research (Bitter et al., 2020; Greaney et al., 2013). Respect for persons places a strong emphasis on acknowledging people as independent agents with the capacity to choose whether or not to participate. This idea is usually put into practice through the informed consent process, which makes sure that participants willingly consent to participate in the study after being fully informed about its goals, methods, risks, and rewards. The ethical duty to maximise potential benefits while minimising potential harm to participants is known as beneficence (Beauchamp, 2008; Brear & Gordon, 2021; Cheraghi et al., 2023).

Researchers must carefully evaluate risks and put safeguards to protect participants' welfare. Similarly, justice to fairness in selecting participants and the rational distribution of both the burdens and benefits of the research. This involves making sure that no group is unjustly burdened or denied opportunities for benefits, as well as avoiding the exploitation of vulnerable populations (Chapman & Carbonetti, 2011; Mechanic & Tanner, 2017). Informed consent, while closely tied to respect for persons, stands as an ethical principle on its own (Mallardi, 2005; Schuck, 1994). It requires that participants are provided with comprehensive and understandable information about the study and are given the opportunity to ask questions and withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality entails protecting the privacy of participants by securely handling and storing personal data, using anonymisation techniques where appropriate, and limiting access to sensitive information (Colosi et al., 2019).

Finally, researcher integrity involves the commitment to honesty, transparency, and accountability in all aspects of research. It starts from the design and data collection to analysis, reporting, and dissemination (Zhaksylyk et al., 2023). Keeping these principles is essential to nurturing trust, ensuring ethical rigour, and safeguarding the dignity and rights of those involved in research. Although these values are principally acknowledged across disciplines, their interpretation and application differ depending on the philosophical assumptions underlying different research paradigms (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Each paradigm offers distinct perspectives that shape how ethical issues are understood and addressed in practice. Table 1 outlines the ethical principles typically associated with the positivist research paradigm, highlighting a procedural and regulatory approach. It emphasises standardised ethical protocols, objectivity, neutrality, and minimal researcher-participant interaction to ensure rigour, replicability, and compliance with institutional norms.

Table 1: Positivist Paradigm Ethical Considerations

Ethics as Procedural and Regulatory
• In this paradigm, ethics are typically organised and procedural, frequently administered by established ethical protocols and institutional review boards (Ali, 2024; Pollock, 2012).
• Ethical conduct is frequently viewed as replicability procedural, emphasising neutrality, objectivity, and uniform conformity, indicating a value on rigour and detachment (Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Pollock, 2012).
• Obtaining informed consent, protecting anonymity, minimising harm and remaining impartial are also stressed (Kaewkungwal & Adams, 2019; Schuck, 1994).
• Ethical compliance regarded as a predetermined requirement upheld by rigorous adherence to norms and procedures (Treviño et al., 1999).
• In order to prevent bias, the researcher is viewed as a detached observer, with minimal interaction with participants (Dreyer, 1998).

Source: Authors

Table 2 presents the ethical stance of the interpretivist paradigm, emphasising relational, reflexive, and context-sensitive ethics. It highlights the evolving nature of ethical practice, the importance of trust and cultural sensitivity, and the co-construction of knowledge through ongoing researcher-participant interaction.

Table 2: Interpretivist Paradigm Ethical Considerations

Ethics as Relational and Reflexive
• Participants and researchers engage in close communication (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Adopt a relational and reflective ethical position, where values impact the researcher's interactions with participants and are inextricably linked to the research process (Paudel, 2024).
• It recognizes the subjective and socially constructed nature of reality, where knowledge is co-created through dialogue and engagement (Riding, 2017; Treviño et al., 1999).
• Ethics are seen as relational, situational, and evolving rather than fixed. Researchers need to be ethically reflective, continuously considering their own positionality, impact, and duties within the study setting (Reid et al., 2018; Sultana, 2015).
• Concerns including power dynamics, rapport, trust, and cultural sensitivity take centre stage. Due to the complexity of interpersonal connections and a variety of social situations, ethical decisions are frequently decided on the spot (Lafferty, 2023).
• Rather than being a one-time agreement, consent may be continuous and negotiated during the course of the study (Nairn et al., 2020).

Source: Authors

Table 3 outlines the ethical approach within the pragmatist paradigm, characterised by adaptability, contextual awareness, and a focus on practical outcomes. It emphasises the need to balance formal ethical protocols with relational and situational sensitivity, often resulting in hybrid strategies adapted to research goals and stakeholder impact.

Table 3: Pragmatist Paradigm Ethical Considerations

Ethics as Adaptive and Contextual

- Uses an adaptable, goal-oriented methodology that frequently blends qualitative and quantitative techniques (Shaw et al., 2010).
- Based on useful results and methodological adaptability, ethics is viewed through the prism of usefulness and consequence, frequently striking a balance between several, perhaps opposing, value systems (Marchetti & Sarin, 2021; Oldenhof et al., 2022).
- Researchers have to balance formal processes with relational sensitivity while navigating ethical issues across various approaches (Reid et al., 2018).
- Ethical considerations may also encompass the research's wider applicability and impact, including its significance to communities and stakeholders (Buchanan et al., 2007).
- They frequently create hybrid ethical strategies that fit the objectives and circumstances of their research. This entails continuing to be sensitive to new concerns and modifying ethical guidelines as the study progresses (Islam, 2024a).

Source: Authors

Method

This theoretical paper utilised a comparative approach, reviewing literature across research ethics and paradigmatic traditions. It is based on the analysis of current scholarly literature, guidelines, and theoretical information pertinent to research ethics and philosophical understanding rather than the collection of empirical data. Sources were identified through systematic searches of academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. To determine how ethical principles are operationalised differently in positivist, interpretivist, and pragmatist studies, peer-reviewed literature, research ethics guidelines, and philosophical texts were examined. These ideas were analysed in light of each paradigm's ontological, epistemological, and axiological beliefs. The methodological approach of this paper aligns with the interpretive tradition in conceptual research, which aims to comprehend and explain theoretical relationships and abstract constructs. The result is a context-sensitive and philosophically informed discussion aimed at advancing an understanding of ethics in research practice.

Discussion

This argument highlights how important research paradigms are in forming ethical knowledge and behaviour. It expands on the fundamental ideas discussed in the previous sections, specifically positivist, interpretivist, and pragmatic philosophical beliefs, and demonstrates how these paradigms naturally influence the moral choices researchers make at every stage of the investigation. This section contends that ethical practice is firmly anchored in the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher, as opposed to viewing research ethics as a universal and physical process.

In positivist research, where the pursuit of objectivity, measurement, and replicability is paramount, ethics tend to be procedural and standardised. The emphasis on formal structures such as research ethics committee approvals, structured consent forms, and anonymised data protocols reflects a commitment to control, neutrality, and risk mitigation. This model ensures clarity and compliance, particularly in large-scale, quantitative studies (Straub et al., 2004). However, as highlighted, such rigid frameworks can inadvertently neglect important relational

and contextual differences, particularly when dealing with complex social issues or marginalised groups whose lived experiences may not be easily quantified (Paudel, 2024).

In contrast, the interpretivist paradigm frames ethics as a fluid and relational undertaking. Here, knowledge is co-produced through sustained, empathetic engagement with participants. Ethical dilemmas are often emergent, arising spontaneously in the field, and are best addressed through ongoing negotiation, trust-building, and cultural sensitivity. Consent is not a one-off agreement, but an evolving process that reflects mutual respect and shared understanding (Nairn et al., 2020). Ethical reflexivity, where the researcher remains critically aware of their positionality, influence, and power dynamics, is a cornerstone of this paradigm (Sultana, 2015). This redefines ethics from a checklist to an active moral responsibility, demanding that researchers remain sensitive and adaptable in ethically ambiguous situations (Reid et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, pragmatist research, with its commitment to practical outcomes and mixed methods, introduces additional complexity. Pragmatists navigate both the rigour of quantitative research and the depth of qualitative inquiry, requiring an integrative ethical stance that bridges divergent methodological expectations (Paudel, 2024; Sim et al., 2024). For example, formal protocols might govern surveys and experiments, while flexible, rapport-based ethics might be essential during interviews or community engagement. Furthermore, pragmatist ethics emphasise not only internal validity and participant protection, but also external relevance, real-world impact, and stakeholder accountability (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020; Nicholls et al., 2019). This paradigm requires researchers to be ethically agile, capable of reconciling methodological tensions while addressing the broader consequences and utility of their findings (Chattopadhyay & De Kok, 2023; Torkamaan et al., 2024; Zuber et al., 2022).

Collectively, these insights affirm that ethical practice in research is inseparable from the philosophical paradigm in which the inquiry is grounded. The assumption that a single ethical framework can be universally applied across all types of research is no longer tenable. Instead, what is needed is a paradigm-sensitive ethical framework, one that acknowledges the diverse ways in which knowledge is constructed and the unique ethical challenges each approach entails. This reflection also calls for a reimagining of the role of ethics committees and institutional review boards. Rather than enforcing uniform guidelines, these bodies should embrace more flexible and context-aware review processes. Reviewers must be trained not only in ethical principles but also in the philosophical underpinnings of different research traditions, enabling them to provide more nuanced and supportive guidance. Likewise, researchers must cultivate deeper ethical literacy, grounded in both theory and practice, to make informed, reflective decisions throughout their study.

To put it briefly, this argument encourages that ethical research is not just about rule compliance, it is about fostering respectful, responsible, and contextually grounded relationships with participants, communities, and knowledge itself. By aligning ethical practice with the paradigm guiding the inquiry, researchers uphold both the scientific credibility and the moral integrity of their work. In doing so, they contribute to a research culture that is not only methodologically robust but also ethically responsive, socially relevant, and intellectually honest.

Conclusion

Ethical research conduct is not only about following rules but also about being agreeable to the philosophical and methodological context in which research occurs. This paper highlights that research ethics should be interpreted and applied in alignment with the paradigm guiding the study. Positivist, interpretivist, and pragmatist paradigms each bring unique ethical challenges and opportunities. Recognising these distinctions encourages more responsible, culturally sensitive, and contextually relevant research practices.

The findings call for more ethics training for researchers and greater flexibility in institutional ethical review processes to accommodate the diversity of research paradigms in contemporary inquiry. Beyond merely following established procedures, ethical research conduct necessitates a careful and contextually aware engagement with the methodological, philosophical, and epistemological foundations of the study. This paper has shown that research ethics must be interpreted and operationalised in accordance with the research paradigm that guides the design and implementation of the study rather than being applied universally and rigidly.

Every paradigm offers a unique combination of opportunities, difficulties, and ethical priorities. In generally controlled and predictable research settings, the positivist paradigm places a strong emphasis on neutrality, procedural rigour, and harm minimisation. The interpretivist paradigm, in contrast, views ethics as a dynamic process that is negotiated between participants and researchers and places a higher priority on ethical reflexivity, respect for one another, and cultural sensitivity. In contrast, the pragmatist paradigm emphasises utility, real-world relevance, and ethical coherence across various approaches, requiring ethical adaptability across mixed methods and stakeholder contexts. These paradigm-specific ethical requirements highlight how crucial it is to abandon a one-size-fits-all approach to ethical supervision.

The findings support a more flexible method of ethics assessment and training that acknowledges the ontological and epistemological foundations of diverse research traditions. Researchers should be trained to make ethically sound decisions that are grounded in philosophy and contextual understanding, while ethics committees and review boards should be equipped with the knowledge and resources necessary to evaluate research proposals through the lens of the paradigm directing the study.

Acknowledegment

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