

### Strangers in Paradigms!? Alternatives to Paradigm-Bound Methodology and Methodological Confessionalism

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## Strangers in Paradigms!? Alternatives to Paradigm-Bound Methodology and *Methodological Confessionalism*

Udo Kelle & Florian Reith

**Key words:**

qualitative methods;  
quantitative methods; mixed methods;  
paradigms;  
paradigm wars;  
epistemology

**Abstract:** In our paper we discuss and criticize an idea which is often taken for granted in methodological discourses about mixed methods: namely that social researchers in general and mixed methods researchers in particular have to adopt a specific epistemological paradigm (a set of beliefs which have to be accepted a priori) before they can meaningfully perform research. By examining different versions of this model of paradigm-bound methodology which Yvonna LINCOLN and Egon GUBA had developed between the 1980s and 2010s, we will discuss implications of the notion *paradigm* and show that several of the paradigms proposed as the basis of research (e.g., positivism or constructivism) are ill-defined, lack coherence and are only superficially related to actual developments in the history of philosophical thought or contemporary epistemological debates. As an alternative to paradigm-bound methodology we will propose that researchers apply methods in an epistemologically informed way by employing epistemological concepts not as immutable givens but as heuristic devices which are used to identify and solve methodological problems. We will exemplify our approach by means of data from our own mixed methods study in which we simultaneously drew on realist and constructivist concepts to foster the understanding of contradictory statistical results.

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## 1. Introduction

It is often assumed that research methods have to be or are based on epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality and that qualitative and quantitative methods can be related to diverging, perhaps even incompatible philosophical world views (e.g., *positivism* or *constructivism*). In the ongoing debate about qualitative and quantitative research it is often presumed that adhering to a methodological school or tradition requires dedication to an epistemological or methodological *paradigm*,<sup>1</sup> or that qualitative and/or quantitative methods themselves constitute such paradigms (see, for instance, GOBO, 2023). [1]

The whole issue is of utmost importance for the idea of combining qualitative and quantitative methods in social research. If methods are just corollaries of epistemological paradigms, attempts to pragmatically combine methods become dubious endeavors, because this would require that researchers switch (perhaps rather frequently) between diverging or even incompatible philosophical world views. If one follows the thought model of *paradigm-based methodology* one would be well advised to stay with just one consistent worldview and the methodological tradition having emanated from it. In this way, following the idea of a paradigm-based methodology would result in sharply delineated scientific communities whose proponents use their own (qualitative or quantitative) methods and do not discuss methodological issues with adherents of alternative methodological traditions. One consequence could be a wholehearted refutation of mixed methods, as was put forward by Norman DENZIN (2010a). To counter such fundamental rebuttals of the idea of method integration, advocates of the mixed methods movement have proposed setting in place its own philosophical paradigm, namely pragmatism, as the foundation of mixed methods research (MORGAN, 2014). [2]

However, we will argue that this debate cannot be restricted to the alternatives of either abandoning the idea of method integration altogether or establishing a distinctive epistemological paradigm for mixed methods research. Furthermore, the whole idea of paradigm-bound methodology is disputable. To substantiate our claim, we will discuss and criticize three interrelated notions on which the paradigm model of research rests:

1. first, that social research is or must be based on a set of fundamental and connected beliefs about ontology, epistemology, and methodology (the *paradigm*);
2. secondly, that there exists a limited number of paradigms (2,3,4 ... n), which can be explicated, clearly demarcated and designated;

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<sup>1</sup> Already in earlier writings colleagues were sometimes inspired by the term paradigm to invent nice puns and allusions: An article by MORGAN (2007), for instance, is entitled "Paradigms Lost and Pragmatism Regained," reminding us of MILTON's (2005 [1667]) perennial poem. Having left the era of old-fashioned liberal arts, we took a comic book series as inspiration for the title of this article: "Strangers in Paradise " (MOORE, 2004).

3. and thirdly, that, since these paradigms are incommensurable, researchers have to make a choice and opt for one single paradigm. [3]

In addition, we will present an alternative approach to this model of paradigm-based methods by recommending the use of different philosophemes (by which we mean all kinds of ontological ideas, epistemological arguments, and methodological strategies) not as immutable presuppositions or starting points of thinking, but as heuristic devices and resources. [4]

The model of paradigm-bound research was most explicitly stated and unfolded in a series of highly influential and heavily cited writings of Yvonna LINCOLN and Egon GUBA from the 1980s to the 2000s (GUBA, 1990a; GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994; LINCOLN & GUBA, 1985, 2000, 2007; LINCOLN, LYNHAM & GUBA, 2011). At the core of it was the idea that social research should or has to be guided by certain coherent sets of philosophical beliefs, thus instating philosophy, or particular philosophical ideas, as a dominant model for social research in almost the same way as scholastic philosophers in medieval times regarded theology as the mistress of philosophy. [5]

We will start our argument by explicating different versions of the paradigm model which was developed over several decades (Section 2). Thereafter we will criticize the model, mainly by addressing and discussing two crucial questions: Firstly, what is a paradigm, and secondly, where do the paradigms which are regarded as foundations of qualitative and quantitative research, stem from? (Section 3). Furthermore, we will propose an alternative to the model: Instead of seeking for philosophical foundations for one's research, we will recommend that scholars freely use ontological claims and epistemological arguments from different schools of thought, where it seems appropriate, as heuristic devices and resources (Section 4). To make this idea more plausible we rely on an empirical example to demonstrate that it can make sense to simultaneously adopt realist and constructivist philosophemes. We end with some conclusive remarks (Section 5). [6]

## **2. Social Research as an *Ancilla Philosophiae*?<sup>2</sup> The LINCOLN-GUBA-Model and Its Development**

The idea of paradigm-bound methodologies in qualitative and quantitative social research is strongly connected to works which Yvonna LINCOLN and Egon GUBA have published in the past four decades. In 1985 both authors set in motion the train of paradigm thinking in their frequently quoted monograph "Naturalistic Inquiry," drawing on concepts and ideas which the philosopher of science THOMAS KUHN had made popular in his groundbreaking work "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1970a). According to KUHN, *mature* sciences like physics or chemistry pass through sequences of paradigm eras. These are

2 *Philosophia ancilla theologiae* was a catchphrase coined by the already mentioned scholastic philosophers in medieval times to clarify the relation between these two disciplines: Theology which was meant to provide supernatural knowledge revealed through God's grace was seen as the dominant discipline whereby philosophy (coming from the natural knowledge of man) should take the role of theology's servant.

periods in which certain sets of guiding ideas or principles are dominant. LINCOLN and GUBA put it this way: "It is the authors' posture that inquiry, whether in the physical or social sciences, has passed through a number of 'paradigm eras', periods in which certain sets of basic beliefs guided inquiry [...]." (p.15) [7]

According to these authors, the whole development started with a *prepositivist era* in ancient Greece. Then, in an early modern era (which they identified with the times of NEWTON and DESCARTES), a new paradigm slowly emerged, which gained its full strength in the 20th century, when the movement of positivists inspired a paradigm revolution. After some decades of dominance the positivist paradigm now (which meant in the middle of the 1980s) had to give way to the next revolution, since basic claims of the positivists were challenged and a postpositivist era was beginning, where the *naturalistic paradigm* would be dominant.<sup>3</sup> [8]

This concept was modified five years later in a publication by Egon GUBA (1990b). In this new account the critiques of positivism resulted in not one, but three different new paradigms: one of them, postpositivism, being nothing more than a slightly altered version of positivism, "positivism in new clothes" (p.21). Thereby positivism and postpositivism were strongly associated with hypothesis testing as well as experimental and quantitative research (LINCOLN & GUBA, 2000, p.165). [9]

Apart from that, two further paradigms emerged: This was, firstly, critical theory which included neo-marxist, feminist, materialist positions, and secondly constructivism, which both authors considered in later writings as *postmodern paradigms*, whereby LINCOLN and GUBA (p.163) conceded that not all approaches within critical theory could be regarded as *postmodern* and differentiated between *postmodernist critical theory* and other types of critical theory. Thereby constructivism entailed more critique towards positivism than the other two, since by adopting this paradigm one would reject philosophical realism more strongly. Thus both postpositivism and critical theory may in some way be accommodated to positivism, whereas constructivism could not.

"It is my belief that proponents of both the postpositivist and critical theory (ideological) paradigms feel that there can be an accommodation between their positions and, indeed, with conventional positivism. [...] Constructivists [...] feel that the positivist and postpositivist paradigms are badly flawed and must be replaced". (GUBA, 1990b, p.25) [10]

The model remained almost the same in GUBA's and LINCOLN's next paper published in 1994 in the influential "Handbook of Qualitative Research" (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1994): It now included four paradigms, of which postpositivism represented the most cautious critique of positivism since it remained within

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3 This and the following sections contain language which may sound anthropomorphic to some ears; this, however, reflects our attempt to present LINCOLN's and GUBA's thoughts in an unbiased manner.

essentially the same sets of belief, while critical theory itself consisted of several alternative paradigms (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994). Whereas positivism and postpositivism were linked to experimental and quantitative research, adherents of the critical theoretical and constructivist paradigm would draw on *dialogic*, *dialectical* and *hermeneutic* (i.e., qualitative) methodologies. [11]

In a further version of the model put forward in the second edition of the handbook, published in 2000, both authors proposed a new paradigm (which was previously entailed in critical theory)—the *participatory/cooperative paradigm*. In the new five-paradigm-model (positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, critical theory, participatory/cooperative) obviously some of the paradigms were closer to each other than others, since they, in the words of LINCOLN and GUBA had in common "axiomatic elements that are similar, or that resonate strongly between them" (2000, p.174). These similarities or intersections were assumed to be strong enough to warrant grouping the five paradigms into two meta-paradigms: a *positivist model* and an *interpretivist model*. By using the notion *interpretivist* a strong alignment of these paradigms with the tradition of *interpretive sociology* (symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, etc.) was emphasized, since advocates of interpretive sociology had always opted for the (often exclusive) use of qualitative methods in social research. Thus, it is not difficult to recognize the two great methodological traditions of social research which the authors wished to address by the different paradigms: the experimental and quantitative (*positivist* and *postpositivist*) tradition on the one hand and the qualitative (*constructivist*, *critical theoretical*, or *interpretivist*) tradition on the other hand. Given the strong emphasis LINCOLN and GUBA put on the incommensurability of the two (positivist and interpretivist) meta-paradigms or *models* (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994; LINCOLN & GUBA, 2000), there is no room for any attempt to integrate these traditions, as has been proposed by adherents of mixed methods approaches (HESSE-BIBER & JOHNSON, 2015; KELLE, 2001, 2008). [12]

### 3. Critique of the Paradigm Model

Thus, a proliferation from initially two (one at a given time) to finally five paradigms which were regarded as foundations of methodological schools in social research occurred in the ongoing writings of LINCOLN and GUBA between 1985 and the early 2000s. In all these writings it was emphasized that researchers should always be very clear about which paradigms (that means to which basic epistemological, ontological and ethical tenets) they adhere to. At the same time, it obviously turned out to be difficult to identify the existing (one, two, four or five) paradigms, as is evident from the authors' own problems to straightforwardly present a set of clearly delimited concepts and the frequent alterations of their models. If we want to discuss these issues in detail, it will be necessary, in our opinion, to address the following two questions:

1. What is meant by the term *paradigm*?
2. Where do the suggested paradigms come from? [13]

### 3.1 What is meant by the term *paradigm*?

Yvonna LINCOLN and Egon GUBA used the term rather consistently during the whole period between their first and their final writings: By paradigms they meant *basic belief systems* (e.g., *positivism*, *constructivism*) that "are the starting points or givens that determine what inquiry is and how it is to be practiced" (GUBA, 1990b, p.18). These sets "of basic beliefs (or metaphysics)" are about "ultimates or first principles." They represent

"a world view that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world', the individual's place in it [...] as for example, cosmologies and theologies do. The beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted simply on faith" (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994, p.107). [14]

Compared to that, in the general debate surrounding the notion of paradigms various proposals were made for how the term can be used and understood. David MORGAN (2007) subsumed these multiple meanings under four groups:

- Paradigms can be regarded as general worldviews—this is how LINCOLN and GUBA used the term whereby they referred to ontological, epistemological, methodological and moral issues.
- The meaning of the term can be restricted to epistemology, to mark, for instance *realism* and *constructivism* as two alternative paradigms.
- An even more restricted meaning would be *shared beliefs* in a particular and limited research field—for instance, in physics, particle and wave theories of light could be considered as two paradigms in this sense.
- Finally one could use the notion to denote model examples of research as paradigms—the randomized control trial could serve as an example here. [15]

In his conclusion, MORGAN (2007, p.55) pled to "re-Kuhnify" the debate, by drawing on concepts Thomas KUHN (1970a) himself used: KUHN's original intention was to propose a model of scientific progress that was supported by the history of science. By drawing on examples of scientific revolutions in physics (the rise of Newtonian physics or EINSTEIN's theory of relativity), he argued that in *mature* scientific disciplines (to which, according to KUHN, social sciences, educational studies etc. do not (!) belong) long eras exist where researchers stick to one single paradigm. Natural scientists usually do not doubt or question such a paradigm until *anomalies* occur—by which he meant empirical facts which contradict basic assumptions of the paradigm and cannot be explained within this framework. However, such anomalies can be accepted and even ignored for quite a long time until a new paradigm occurs which can be used to explain them. After a period of co-existence of the competing paradigms the old paradigm may break down and give way to a new era of paradigm dominance (KUHN, 1970a).<sup>4</sup> This in fact is the account LINCOLN and GUBA (1985) gave with their initial model: After a period of positivist dominance (the *positivist era*) social scientists

4 Again, the use of anthropomorphisms is a consequence of our efforts to represent KUHN's view adequately.

were now entering, according to both authors, postpositivist times, in which a new (*postpositivist* or *naturalistic*) paradigm was prevalent. [16]

It is important to note here that the whole idea of paradigm-bound research KUHN (1970a) put forward in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" was heavily contested in the philosophy of science. In a vigorous discussion that took place in the 1960s, later also called the POPPER-KUHN-controversy (e.g., KUHN, 1970b; LAKATOS, 1970; LAKATOS & MUSGRAVE, 1970; LAUDAN et al., 1986; POPPER, 1970; TOULMIN, 1970), KUHN's concept was criticized for several reasons: Critics, for instance, bemoaned a certain lack of clarity in the use of the term *paradigm*—in her (predominantly very constructive) critique Margaret MASTERMAN (1970) carved out at least 20 different usages of the term *paradigm* in KUHN (1970a). [17]

KUHN (1970a) had borrowed the term from ancient Greek. However, the Greek word *παράδειγμα* does not refer to *leading* or *guiding assumptions* or *basic beliefs*, but to images, or crucial examples, or models of something—a meaning KUHN frequently referred to. (The sculpture of the Atomium in Brussels can serve as an example of a paradigm in this sense). KUHN emphasized that the persuasiveness of such images can make it difficult for scientists to accept empirical counter-evidence, the so-called anomalies. [18]

Although it may be difficult to understand what a Kuhnian paradigm *is*, KUHN was unequivocal about what a paradigm *does*, or, in other words, about the functions of paradigms. According to KUHN (1970a), paradigms constitute

- common views of whole scientific communities;
- thereby resulting in a "strong network of commitments—conceptual, theoretical, instrumental, and methodological" (p.42);
- and paradigms entail or imply rules and habits, which are explicated only in exceptional scientific crises and set up a non-problematized background knowledge. [19]

For those purposes, paradigms

- must be more or less rigid and inflexible, mostly implicit and not modifiable;
- can only be accepted or rejected as a whole;
- are incommensurable or incompatible with each other;
- cannot be discussed in rational ways;
- predominate and replace other paradigms. [20]

These ideas were intensively debated and criticized during the already mentioned POPPER-KUHN-controversy, whereby the critics themselves drew on examples from the history of science. Thus, it could be shown that basic and dominant scientific theories are often (contrary to KUHN's claims) not taken as a "*take-it-or-leave-it-package*" but gradually changed—different components of such theories



are thereby treated as individually negotiable and individually replaceable" (LAUDAN et al. 1986, pp.213f.). Furthermore, paradigms are often not (as KUHN asserted) implicit—we can see from historical examples that debates about which concrete guiding assumptions should be modified or abandoned are often initiated by finding anomalies or empirical counter-evidence. [21]

KUHN's assertion that crises of paradigms as well as the development of alternative approaches always lead to a breakup of communication between the partisans of either side has also been subject to serious criticism. TOULMIN (1970, 1972), for instance, showed that during many disputes about the significance of anomalies for specific theories discussants drew on shared methodological rules. Thus, sudden conversions of scientists to a new paradigm occur much less often than KUHN (1970a) maintained, and instead one can frequently observe in the history of science how scientific communities and their adherents slowly accommodate to new theoretical systems. [22]

The idea of incommensurability represents a hallmark of the Kuhnian concept of paradigms. Are paradigms always incommensurable? Regarding this topic GUBA and LINCOLN failed to present a consistent position. In 1988 they wrote: "A call to blend or accommodate [paradigms] is logically equivalent to calling for a compromise between the view that the world is flat and the view that the world is round" (p.93). This statement clearly corresponds with the Kuhnian view of incommensurability. The wave and particle theory of light may serve as a good example for that, since it is not possible for physicists to treat light simultaneously (that means: Within the same experimental setting) as waves *and* particles. In the year 2000, however, LINCOLN and GUBA came to another conclusion: "There is a great potential for interweaving of viewpoints, for the incorporation of multiple perspectives, and for borrowing or bricolage" (p.167). Thus it may be "possible to blend elements" of paradigms "if the models (paradigms) share axiomatic elements that are similar [...] Commensurability (sic) is an issue only when [...] axioms are contradictory and mutually exclusive" (p.174). Following this view one must assume that there are paradigms which are compatible with each other and others which are incompatible, depending on their respective axioms. This was, however, obviously not KUHN's (1970a) view—after their first account in 1985 about the change from a *positivist* to a *postpositivist* or *naturalist* paradigm (which would represent a true Kuhnian *scientific revolution*) GUBA and LINCOLN had slowly and gradually *de-Kuhnified* their original ideas. [23]

### 3.2 Where do different paradigms come from?

These inconsistencies arose with two central amendments GUBA and LINCOLN made while they advanced from a Kuhnian to a post-Kuhnian perspective during the development of the already described series of paradigm models. Firstly, they had enlarged the number of paradigms which are regarded as the basis of social research, and secondly they had allowed that different paradigms had several assumptions in common. LINCOLN and GUBA's various paradigms were meant to represent different philosophical perspectives, as both authors made clear. Nevertheless, in the different accounts of the paradigm models, direct quotes from original writings of positivists, post-positivists, critical theorists, even constructivists were extremely scarce. Thus the crucial question remains: To which philosophical traditions or schools of thought are the paradigms related? To answer this question, it will be necessary to have a much closer look at the paradigms which are the alleged epistemological foundations of social research. [24]

#### 3.2.1 Positivism

It can be said without exaggeration that positivism is one of the most flogged dead horses in the history of philosophy. As a philosophical movement which arose in two subsequent waves in the 19th and 20th century, inspired by the work of the French philosopher Auguste COMTE (2015 [1848], who also coined the term), first-wave positivism had a broad constituency in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially when it became a secular humanist political and quasi-religious movement (culminating in the foundation of a *church of positivism* in Brazil in the year 1881). These cultist peculiarities (positivist activists urged to combat all traditional religions and propagated a strict rule of science over all aspects of human existence) deterred most of its initial academic followers who then turned in the first half of the 20th century to similar, but in scholarly terms more reputable philosophical schools, for instance to Ernst MACH's *empirio-criticism* (1922), to Bertrand RUSSELL's *logical atomism* (2009 [1918-1919]) or to the *logical empiricism* of the *Vienna circle*. Especially the latter group gained great influence on the history of philosophical thinking, when it became clear during the so-called *protocol sentence debate* in the 1930s that basic tenets of positivism (namely the postulate to base all knowledge on empirical observables, on the one hand, and the claim that everything which can be observed is governed by general scientific laws) led to serious contradictions. The movement of logical empiricists (or "logical positivists" as they also called themselves) fell apart after these discussions very quickly, so that nowadays one will have serious difficulties to spot philosophers (or other philosophically interested scholars in the social sciences) who would claim the label *positivist* for themselves. Thus, it may be fairly said that the positivist philosophical movement or school has been a dead horse for quite a long time, and that it was killed and buried by positivist philosophers themselves. While the term *positivist* has ceased to be a self-designation that philosophers use to denote their thinking or their work, it has become a label frequently applied from outside, usually with a pejorative connotation (HAMMERSLEY, 1992; SEALE, 1999). [25]

LINCOLN and GUBA failed to take these developments into consideration. Only in their early monograph about "Naturalistic Inquiry" (1985) were some positivist philosophers explicitly mentioned by name. However, throughout the text hardly any references to or quotations from concrete works of positivist philosophers or other positivist writings were given—only some critics of positivism were included. Thus it must remain unclear what kind of positivism is addressed. However, since LINCOLN and GUBA constantly (also in their later writings) described *naive realism* as the *ontological basis* of the positivist paradigm they seemed to refer to the conjunction between radical empiricism and ontological realism in early Comtean positivism: Especially this thinker had asked scientists to give up their search for the *real origin* and the *hidden or final causes* of things, and instead constrain themselves to *observables*. But COMTE (2015 [1848] simultaneously stressed the significance of universal laws of nature. The inherent contradiction between these two claims (*universal laws can never be observed* in a strict sense as early empiricists like David HUME (2016 [1748] had already made clear) was an important topic during the debates conducted by later positivists who also were strict empiricists. Following such lines of thought all questions regarding the *true nature of things* have to be treated as *metaphysical* and even *senseless* (see, for instance, CARNAP, 1931, for such a position). By claiming that sound scientific statements must always relate to concrete empirical data, Rudolf CARNAP and other followers of logical positivism would have regarded a sentence like "an apprehendable reality ... exists, which is driven by immutable laws" (GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994, p.109) as a meaningless statement. If one looks at positivism as a real philosophical school in an advanced status (and not as a rhetorical strawperson) one will find that positivists were mainly occupied with epistemological (and not ontological) questions and avoided determinations ontological realists routinely make (like: there exists an independent reality governed by laws). [26]

### 3.2.2 Postpositivism

Such disregard of actual philosophical schools and debates can also be found in the treatment of *postpositivism*. It remains unclear who the postpositivists LINCOLN and GUBA referred to are. In "Naturalistic Inquiry" (1985) they mentioned Rom HARRE and Juergen HABERMAS (whom one would normally regard as a *critical theorist*, not as a postpositivist). Also, in later writings concrete references and quotations were extremely rare. There the term *postpositivism* (which was regarded as one of the crucial systems of thought underlying social research) seemed only to relate to ideas to which the authors wished to apply it. [27]

It is important to note here that the notion is only rarely used in writings from the philosophy of science, whereas it is more familiar in methodological publications in the educational and social sciences. Authors like PHILLIPS and BURBULES (PHILLIPS, 1990; PHILLIPS & BURBULES, 2000) mentioned, for instance, Karl POPPER, Willard Orman von QUINE, Thomas KUHN, Norwood HANSON, Imre LAKATOS, Paul FEYERABEND, among others, as representatives of postpositivism. Perhaps one could add philosophers to this group who—in the aftermath of the movement of logical positivists—referred to and criticized their

ideas, like Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, Gertrude ANSCOMBE, John AUSTIN, John SEARLE and Stephen TOULMIN. However, these scholars held widely diverse views and often criticized each other. It is difficult at the first glance to find a common denominator in their writings, apart from the fact that they often developed and put forward arguments which revealed basic flaws and misconceptions in radical empiricist accounts of science, like the problem of induction (POPPER, 1959 [1935]), the DUHEM-QUINE-problem (DUHEM, 1976 [1908]), the theory-ladenness of observation (HANSON, 1958) and others. Thus, one could understand the temporal prefix *post-* in postpositivism as denoting authors who in one way or another referred (mostly in a critical way) to different concepts or ideas important within the positivist movement. Nevertheless, these scholars did not form a common movement called *postpositivism* and did not call themselves *postpositivists*. Similar to the application of the term *positivist* or *positivism* to contemporary authors the term postpositivism is a designation from outside which is rarely found before the 1980s and outside educational research. Also, in PHILLIPS' contribution to GUBA's book "The Paradigm Dialog" (1990a) *postpositivism* did not represent a complete and independent paradigm—PHILLIPS (1990) only summarized the most important arguments and insights which have caused the breakdown of the logical empiricism of the Vienna circle—and many of these arguments were, as has been said before, also put forward by positivists themselves. [28]

In the first section of the paper, we already described the proliferation of paradigms between LINCOLN's and GUBA's first approach (1985) and their later works (GUBA, 1990a; GUBA & LINCOLN, 1994; LINCOLN & GUBA, 2000, 2007; LINCOLN et al., 2011) which had led to a growing compatibility of paradigms. To retain the idea of incommensurability at least between positivism and constructivism LINCOLN and GUBA had to fuse the paradigms again—a process which now resulted in a contrast between a *positivist* and an *interpretivist* model (or paradigm). This process of disassembling and reemerging of epistemological concepts (whether they are called *paradigms*, *models*, or something else) resulted in a reevaluation of the role of postpositivists, who had helped (as had been described in the 1985 monograph) to overcome positivistic dominance, but later turned into (closeted) positivists, since, as both authors had repeatedly stated, postpositivism was only a slightly altered version of positivism. Thereby, several findings and arguments of (postpositivist) philosophers mentioned by PHILLIPS (1990, e.g., the ideas of theory-ladenness of observation) were now subsumed under the label *constructivism* (by abstaining from naming concrete representatives of postpositivism the necessity to relabel postpositivists as constructivists could be avoided). To sum up these considerations we can draw the preliminary conclusion that the categorizations *positivism* and *postpositivism* did not refer to real debates and discussions about epistemology and methodology but were used to assert that (reductionist and naive) positivist ideas were still influential (partly under the new brand name *postpositivism*). However, if one does not want to abandon the quest for basic philosophical positions underlying social research two options regarding the notion of postpositivism remain:

- One can either accept the label and try to identify a real group of people and their positions to which it refers. This is the road which Denis PHILLIPS and Nicolas BURBULES (2000) took, who summarized all the arguments and insights which have resulted in the breakdown of classical logical empiricism. However, these authors also emphasized that postpositivism was less a philosophical school, but more of a "broad, complex, and dynamic approach" (PHILLIPS, 1990, p.44).
- Or one may stress the fact that the claims of non-positivist philosophers were and still are extremely diverse and reject the idea that *postpositivism* is a school, group, movement, etc. altogether (HAMMERSLEY, 1992; KELLE, 2008; SEALE, 1999). [29]

### 3.2.3 Critical theory

According to GUBA and LINCOLN *critical theory* is "a blanket term denoting a set of alternative paradigms" (1994, p.109), namely "ideologically oriented inquiry, including neo-marxism, materialism, feminism, ..., participatory inquiry" (p.23). Also in this case, we will learn a different story by drawing on the history of philosophical thinking: The term *critical theory* is firmly linked to the *Frankfurt school*, a group of Marxist philosophers, whose first generation (ADORNO, FROMM, MARCUSE, BENJAMIN, and others) was inspired by Max HORKHEIMERS book "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie" [Traditional and Critical Theory] (2010 [1937]). A second generation of scholars who represent the modern critical theory are social and political philosophers like Jürgen HABERMAS, Axel HONNETH and Oskar NEGTE. None of them is engaged in any kind of (quantitative or qualitative) empirical social research, and it is unclear in the writings of LINCOLN and GUBA who the *critical theorists* are who apply the ideas of these scholars to empirical social research. [30]

### 3.2.4 Constructivism

The most crucial paradigm within the different LINCOLN-GUBA-models is constructivism, to which both authors admit a lifelong strong advocacy (LINCOLN & GUBA, 2016). As a matter of fact, constructivism does represent a significant philosophical root of the qualitative research tradition, beginning with the works of the (sociological) Chicago school in the 1920s. At that time William and Dorothy THOMAS formulated what later became the renowned *THOMAS-theorem*: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (1928, p.571). Crucial constructivist axioms were formulated decades later by the Chicago sociologist Herbert BLUMER who was a disciple of George Herbert MEAD and coined the term *symbolic interactionism*. That "human beings act [...] based on [...] meaning," and that meaning is "derived from social interaction," and "handled and modified" through "interpretive processes" (BLUMER, 1969, p.2) was also at the core of the social constructionist ideas put forward by Peter BERGER and Thomas LUCKMANN in their seminal book "The Social Construction of Reality" (2011 [1966]), two authors coming from the tradition of sociological phenomenology. [31]

However, social constructivism represents a specific kind of constructivism which can be distinguished from other types like *radical constructivism*. Representatives of the latter approach (i.e., FOERSTER, 1985; GLASERSFELD, 1995) have maintained that the construction of knowledge exclusively depends on processes in the human mind and is not determined by factual occurrences in the outside world. In such an epistemological context terms like *objectivity* would make no sense at all. By contrast, *social constructivism* would denote a more moderate stance since by adopting that position one would not deny the general possibility of (social) structures with (limited) objectivity. Following that position, knowledge is socially constructed, meaning that individuals relate to shared worlds of meanings in given (sub)cultures but can nevertheless modify and deviate from these meanings to a certain extent. As a moderate or social constructivist, one would say that the term *objectivity* only makes sense within certain cultural frameworks. Within this context the constructed nature of social reality may have as a consequence a variance of structural patterns, but (rarely ever) arbitrariness. Variance exists, but is always limited—or else any attempt at serious sociological investigation would necessarily fail. Unfortunately LINCOLN and GUBA did not draw this distinction. Throughout their different accounts of constructivism the focus was always on the *constructed nature of reality* (epistemological constructivism), and not about the *socially constructed nature of social reality* (social constructivism). [32]

If one thoroughly scrutinizes the axiomatic claims social constructivists like BERGER and LUCKMANN (2011 [1966]), BLUMER (1969), and THOMAS and THOMAS (1928) made, one will find that they indeed combined epistemological constructivism with ontological realism. THOMAS and THOMAS, for instance, asserted that the constructions or "definitions of the situation" (1928, p.572) are crucial, but have "real consequences" (ibid.)—which means that it is possible to differentiate between *real* and *unreal* (i.e., not existing) consequences of a given definition of a situation. Different constructions may have different consequences in reality—which means that these authors did not fully abandon a realist position (p.571). [33]

In a similar way one could regard Herbert BLUMER's already mentioned axioms of symbolic interactionism as simultaneously based on constructivist and realist epistemological assumptions:

"Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them. The meaning of things is derived from the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. These meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he [sic] encounters" (1969, p.2). [34]

At least two constructivist ideas can be identified here, namely that humans act "on the basis of meanings" (BLUMER, 1969, p.2), and that these meanings are handled and modified "through an interpretative process" (ibid.). However, the basis of the whole process of construction would vanish and one would get entangled into an endless circle or regress if one totally rejected the idea that

these "things" and "interactions" are to some extent *real*. Instead, the idea was more that human beings *construct* different meanings based on *real* encounters with different *real* things and *real* interactions. [35]

The differentiation between radical and moderate (social) constructivism also has far-reaching consequences as one can easily see if one leaves the realm of abstract philosophical concepts and enters the sometimes tough world of social experience. According to the labeling approach (i.e., BECKER, 1963; GOFFMAN, 1959; MEAD, 1934), which is rooted in the interpretive tradition of social theory, agents of social control (for instance police officers) can be led by certain real attributes of people to adopt certain constructions (assuming, for instance, that these people are possible criminals). This may have really harsh consequences for those people like being arrested, beaten, prosecuted, sent to jail, or even killed. [36]

### 3.3 Paradigm-bound methodology as a political program

To sum up our considerations up to now, one may regard the LINCOLN-GUBA-paradigms as ill-defined, lacking coherence (which means that they do not consist of necessarily connected ontological, epistemological and methodological elements), only superficially related to real developments in the history of philosophical thought or to contemporary epistemological schools or movements. Given these problems the question becomes pertinent: For what reasons is such a concept of paradigm-bound methodology needed? To answer this question, it is helpful to have a closer look at the wording of GUBA's and LINCOLN's definition of paradigms: According to the two authors, paradigms "are world views, which have to be simply accepted by faith, and we are asked never to embark on research without such a faith basis" (1994, p.107). [37]

This invitation to researchers to seek for a *faith basis* may at first glance sound strange within an academic context, however, it is matched by the title of LINCOLN's and GUBA's last book (which mainly consists of excerpts and statements from earlier writings), by which the authors demonstrated a great proximity to the language of political or religious confessions: "The Constructivist Credo (2016). As David MORGAN wrote, both authors tended to make "strong demands for self-conscious allegiance" (2007, p.63) and gave a "'political' or 'social-movement-based' account of who gets to define and draw boundaries around paradigms," which he criticized as an attempt to "'impose order' on the practices in social science research through an externally defined, a priori system" (p.61). [38]

If one looks at the construction (the assumed ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies) of the different paradigms it becomes clear that a major objective behind the establishment of this order is to keep the two great methodological traditions (qualitative and quantitative) of social research apart: LINCOLN and GUBA (as has been already discussed in Section 2) finalized their concept by postulating two great meta-paradigms or *models*. One of them, the *positivist model* can be easily identified with quantitative research, the other, called the

*interpretivist model*, obviously represents the qualitative tradition. Followers of both traditions thus may feel admonished to stay in their camps, to honor their flags and to avoid any cooperation with the foe. The next step would be the claim of moral and political superiority for one of the camps. This step was taken by Norman DENZIN who (2010b in his book "Qualitative Manifesto") called qualitative researchers back "to arms" (p.117) in *paradigm wars* where they should fight for social justice and against demands for rigorous evaluation and evidence-based policy. Thereby the mixed methods movement was identified as one of the numerous enemies of this heavily politicized concept of research (DENZIN, 2010a). [39]

If one attempts to historically trace back such a discourse style—demanding the subscription to axioms which must be accepted on faith and which must not be challenged by any of the discourse participants—one may find oneself in the era of confessionalism after the Reformation when it had become clear that religious disputes cannot be solved by rational arguments alone. The logical problems resulting from such a position came to be known in the history of philosophy under the label "Agrippa's Trilemma" (KLEIN, 2008), sometimes also called the "Münchhausen-Trilemma (FRIEDMAN, 1983): When we try to finally justify assertions this can result in 1. an infinite regress, or in 2. a logical circle or 3. the whole argument must stop at given points where certain dogmas and creeds must be accepted without further questioning. Classical religious confessions (like, for instance, the Westminster or Dordrecht confession), represented attempts to explicate such final ground where controversies must end, since discussants have to choose between incompatible statements: Do we believe in justification in faith alone or not? Do we believe in the total depravity of human nature or not? [40]

The concept of paradigm-bound methodology represents such a confessionalist tradition within a modern secular context. Historically we are reminded of the fact that progressive socio-political movements in the USA from the progressive era up to the civil rights movements were strongly influenced by theology (e.g., through the protestant social gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th century). Paradigms of the kind discussed here, which are meant as a *faith basis* of social research, represent creeds or confessions: beliefs and values that shall not be doubted and must be adopted by researchers to answer important questions like: *Whose side are we on?* It thus represents a sequel to Howard BECKER's (1967) famous inaugural address: Are we, as social researchers, right-minded people who acknowledge that the world views of the oppressed and marginalized are at least as valid as those of people with higher social status? [41]



### 3.4 Pragmatism as an alternative paradigm?

The idea of paradigm-bound methodology provides a strong rationale for monomethod researchers who exclusively use techniques and procedures from only one methodological tradition (quantitative or qualitative). The wide acceptance this idea has gained especially in the United States leads to a difficult situation for mixed methods researchers. To use a mixed methods design within this framework would mean that researchers are forced to (frequently or even permanently) switch between incompatible world views which are at the same time deeply rooted in moral and political commitments and convictions. If one accepts such ideas, one may be seduced to go along with DENZIN and abandon mixed methods altogether, as it is implied in his methodological writing reconstructed above. [42]

An alternative to such a strict repudiation of mixed methods research could be the quest for a distinctive paradigmatic foundation. Often *pragmatism* is recommended as an alternative to positivism, postpositivism, or constructivism (e.g., FEILZER, 2010; MORGAN, 2014). This idea resonates with a basic rationale of mixed methods designs that research methods do not exist for their own sake but "should follow research questions in a way that offers the best chances to obtain useful answers" (JOHNSON & ONWUEGBUZIE, 2004, pp.17f.). To highlight this point TASHAKKORI and TEDDLIE (1998, p.20) have coined the notion of the "dictatorship of research question" which should be established and observed in every study. This can clearly be seen as a pragmatic position (in the sense of an everyday understanding of that term): Researchers are advised to use methods which help them to solve their problems and to reach their goals. [43]

However, the idea of establishing pragmatism as a methodological paradigm goes beyond that, since it does not refer to the common-sense idea of being pragmatic, but to a particular philosophical school, founded by American philosophers at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, like Charles Sanders PEIRCE (1878), William JAMES (1907) or John DEWEY (1910). This particular group or school is usually the point of reference when it is recommended that "the paradigm of pragmatism can be employed as the philosophical underpinning of using mixed methods" (TASHAKKORI & TEDDLIE, 1998, p.167). Philosophical pragmatism seems to represent an ideal philosophical partner for attempts to combine qualitative and quantitative research. However, like with positivism, or constructivism, it must not be forgotten that adherents of philosophical schools always propagate certain ideas while others are excluded, since they are subject to criticism from scholars who hold those other ideas. [44]

To clarify this point, one may have a closer look at the crucial pragmatic maxim according to which the prevailing meaning or the truth of any statement can be ascertained by taking into account the practical outcomes or experiences that the belief in this statement may produce (MURPHY & MURPHY, 1990) This idea was severely criticized by Bertrand RUSSELL (2020 [1992]), among others who argued that taking this stance was to confuse the criteria of truth with the

meaning of the word *truth* (HAACK, 1976, p.236). By trying to establish philosophical pragmatism as a paradigmatic foundation of methods use, researchers (who for pragmatic common sense reasons advocate, for instance, the combination of qualitative and quantitative research) are pushed to become followers of a tradition of thought which is embedded in a specific culture by being "a specific historical and cultural product of American civilization" as Cornel WEST (1989, p.4) made clear, "a particular set of social practices that articulate certain American desires, values and responses and that are elaborated in institutional apparatuses principally controlled by a significant slice of the American middle class" (p.5). [45]

Among those institutional apparatuses were the social science and sociology departments (like those in Chicago or New York City) founded between the progressive era and the late 1940s when the GI rights bill flooded universities with war veterans. Thereby, due to the expansion of the social sciences "a significant slice of the American middle class" (ibid.) occupied new professional fields as social reformers, social engineers, and social workers. These developments were fueled by the spirits of social gospel and American pragmatist philosophy whose main representatives, like John DEWEY, deeply influenced and even participated in the founding of successful social science institutions. Thereby the individualistic narrative of the American dream was supplemented with a social reform perspective: In the same way as the belief that a poor boy born in a log cabin can become a millionaire or President, persistent societal grievances like poverty, crime or social inequality could be overcome. Following pragmatist philosophy, one would treat such predicaments as *social problems* which can slowly, in a step-by-step manner, be solved if well-meaning social workers and reformers make serious attempts to do so (for the relations between American pragmatism and socio-political activism see also BETHMANN & NIERMANN, 2015). However it is doubtful whether and why social researchers should subscribe to a philosophical school which can be seen, in many regards, as a typical result of the *American dream*, especially since American pragmatism not only "carries profound insights and enabling strengths"(WEST, 1989, p.5) but, as any philosophical school, also "myopic blindnesses and debilitating weaknesses" (ibid.), among which are tendencies to overlook and underestimate obstacles to social work and social reform, which are the product of powerful and persistent economic and social structures. [46]

#### **4. The *Social Construction of Social Facts*—in Search for Alternatives to Paradigm-Bound Methodology**

However, the consequence of such a philosophically informed critique of the model of paradigm-bound methodology must not be that we throw out the baby with the bathwater, i.e., abandon or neglect epistemological questions in social (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) research. On the contrary, social researchers may learn a lot from philosophical debates and philosophical concepts which often have a far-reaching relevance for research practice. Take as an example the problems of the idea of causality. Philosophical debates from antiquity onwards foreshadowed the numerous quandaries and vexed questions one gets into if one attempts to causally interpret associations in social research data. But the question remains: How can social researchers meaningfully refer to deeper methodological questions and basic epistemological concepts? [47]

In earlier writings Martyn HAMMERSLEY (1992) and Clive SEALE (1999) made suggestions for how such an alternative to confessionalist and foundationalist strategies of paradigm-bound methodologies may look: Instead of searching for a set of immutable givens or basic beliefs that guide the entire thinking, researchers were advised to make a more flexible use of philosophical debates and concepts by utilizing them as heuristic devices and resources. SEALE gave a variety of examples from research practice where investigators make flexible use of different and even allegedly contradictory epistemological approaches (e.g., by simultaneously drawing on constructivist and realist ideas) in order to make sense of their data and thereby produce illuminating insights about their research field (ibid). [48]

In his "Philosophical Investigations" Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN (1958 [1953]) has argued why attempts to vaporize an effective and successful strategy into a set of propositional statements (which can be easily memorized and reproduced word by word) may cause philosophical dead-end streets, since in this way notions and concepts are disconnected from their use in practice. The result may often be sterile quibbling and wars of words bringing forth philosophical problems which have no real basis in language use. Therefore WITTGENSTEIN recommended to avoid, wherever possible, the realm of dogmatic philosophical debates, which is a place, where "language goes on holidays" (p.19e) and to investigate the use of words in such contexts where such words are "working." If we make an attempt to transfer such ideas to our problem area we will have to look at those situations where methodological concepts are not employed for idle debates but where they can work—this is naturally research practice. Consequently, we will present a concrete empirical example of the *social construction of social facts*. [49]

For our small-scale study we used already existing standardized data sets and available statistical results about religious affiliation and religious attitudes. In addition, we conducted qualitative interviews. Although we performed very few statistical calculations by ourselves and mainly relied on the statistical work of

colleagues, our study can be regarded as an *explanatory mixed methods study*<sup>5</sup>: We collected and analyzed qualitative data which was useful for understanding inconsistent statistical information. One may regard it as a straightforward social fact that people all over the world relate themselves or are related to certain religions. However, in many countries it can be very difficult to accurately measure the extent of this affiliation. Differences between different sets of survey data, census data and organizational data are not uncommon. There is, for instance, a comparatively small difference between the data from the German Social Survey about religion from 2018 and the self-reported figures of the two great state churches in Germany, Protestant and Roman Catholic (see Table 1). Germany has a formally institutionalized system of membership in the state churches where tax authorities directly collect church membership fees together with the income tax, so that respondents are usually very conscious whether they belong to one of the state churches.

	<b>German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) 2018 (GESIS, 2019, own calculations)</b>	<b>Figures officially released by churches 2018 (EVANGELISCHE KIRCHE DEUTSCHLAND, 2019)</b>
Protestant state churches	30,4%	26,1%
Roman Catholic	29,1%	28,4%

Table 1: Percentages of people who declared that they are members of the main churches in Germany (ALLBUS) and figures of the churches [50]

In Great Britain where such a system is unknown the situation becomes much more difficult (see Table 2). Taking figures from some of the best-known large surveys one will always find astounding differences. Especially the proportion of non-members ("nones") in different surveys deviated from each other during the past decades in a remarkable manner. In the "Bertelsmann Religionsmonitor 2008" (HUBER & BERTELSMANN STIFTUNG, 2010) (a large cross-national dataset about religious attitudes and practices) a third of respondents said that they have *no religion*, 43% belonged to this group in the "British Social Attitude Survey" (BSAS) in the year 2008 (CURTICE, CLERY, PERRY, PHILIPPS & RAHIM, 2019, p.21). Three years later, in 2011, only one quarter of the participants in the UK census were attributed to the category *no religion* (NATIONAL RECORDS OF SCOTLAND, 2014, p.38; OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS, 2012; own calculations). In a subsequent wave of the BSAS 52% of respondents identified themselves as non-religious (CURTICE, CLERY, PERRY, PHILIPPS & RAHIM, 2019, p.21), whereas in the "European Value Survey 2017" (EVS, 2020, own calculations) more than 60% chose this alternative, when asked about their religious background. The figure attributed to

5 This is certainly only one of the various possibilities described in the literature to integrate qualitative and quantitative research in one research design. For a detailed discussion of different forms and functions of mixed methods designs see, for instance, HESSE-BIBER and JOHNSON (2015), KELLE (2022) and MAYRING (2001).

this group in the "European Social Survey" in the year 2018 (ESS, 2021, own calculations) was in between the results of the two other surveys.

	No religion or religious community	Church of England
May I ask which of the following religious communities do you belong to? "Bertelsmann Religionsmonitor 2008" (HUBER & BERTELSMANN STIFTUNG, 2010)	33,9%	18,8%
Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? "British Social Attitude Survey 2008, 2018" (CURTICE et al., 2019)	43% (08) 52,0% (18)	22% (08) 12% (18)
Do you belong to a religious denomination? "European Value Survey 2017" (EVS, 2020)	61,4%	11,5%
What is your religion? (England and Wales) What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to? (Scotland) "Census 2011" (NATIONAL RECORDS OF SCOTLAND, 2014, p.38; OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS, 2012; own calculations)	26,1%	no data available
Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination? "European Social Survey 2018" (ESS, 2021)	55,2%	18,8 %

Table 2: Percentage of people reporting affiliation with the *Church of England* and no affiliation with any religious community in the United Kingdom [51]

Certainly these differences may be the result of different wording of questions since the items were formulated in different ways in the various surveys (see Table 2). However, by investigating the formulations more carefully we can see that even a seemingly straightforward question like *To which religious community do you belong* can be understood in quite different ways by different respondents. For this investigation we used the method of *cognitive pretest* (SUDMAN, BRADBURN & SCHWARZ, 1996) which is nowadays an acknowledged and often used methodology in professional survey research utilized to find out whether respondents understand items in the way intended by the developers. During a cognitive pretest extensive qualitative interviews are employed to ask respondents how they understand certain words or phrases entailed in the items. We used this methodology not as a pretest instrument, but post hoc to examine the validity of survey items (and the trustworthiness of statistical figures and distributions resulting from such surveys) regarding church affiliation. How do respondents understand such questions? In our qualitative

interviews with German and English speaking and bilingual interview partners (n = 25) we found a variety of different meanings our respondents attached to *belonging to a religious community*.

- It can mean, for instance, to have a particular faith or certain religious convictions.
- Or it can mean that one has grown up in a family which belonged to a culture where a particular religion is held in high esteem, and where certain religious rituals (like baptism, or religious funerals) are a taken-for-granted part of life. [52]

A respondent who was insecure in the beginning how to answer the question (since both meanings came to his mind) said:

"Belonging to a religious community can be ... eh .. as I just said ... which set of beliefs do you hold. Or you could understand it ... say .. were you brought up in a Christian or a Jewish or a Islamic family and therefore ... whatever your beliefs are, that's your background. And I had to interpret, which of those two you meant.... So, it was quite difficult to ... to sort out ... with the wording of the question [...] and whether I live in a Christian group or ... town ... or country ... or, whether I ... have a set of beliefs based on one of those."<sup>6</sup> [53]

Belonging to a religious community can also be interpreted in a more local context. Then it can mean some sort of attachment (which can be quite loose) to a local religious congregation or organization, like a respondent said: it "means to have some attachment, even if it's only going to church once a year, or reading the material, the magazines that come out of that church. Even if it's a loose attachment." [54]

But it can also be regarded as something which affects people much more intensely, like in the following interview passage:

"... if it's a RELIGIOUS community, it is something you are a member of heart and soul. ... That you're believing with your absolute being. If I look at people I know who are what I would perceive as truly members of a religious community, it [...] influences their everyday life, it supports them in all situations, provides them with a support, with an enviable support. It gives them something I know it couldn't give me, and I look upon it, at times with envy, because I know it's not within my soul." [55]

Such a concept of firmly belonging to a tightly-knit community which affects one's whole life was also emphasized by this respondent who gave the following definition: "For me community first of all implies that we meet together, that we spent time together, that we share time together, and share something of our life together." And finally, community may also refer to some formal membership

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6 The interview segments were translated from German into English and smoothed for better comprehensibility. Full stops stand for short, medium and long pauses (one, two or three full stops), full stops in square brackets stand for omissions, words in capital letters mark emphasis on the word.

status. Thereby it clearly depends on the cultural context whether this aspect comes to a respondent's mind, as happened with this interviewee who migrated from Britain to Germany:

"As I lived in England, I went to several different churches and there were three or four where I was long enough that I would have considered myself a member of the church [...]. But the question of whether I was formally a member of these churches I am not at all sure. The formal aspect of church membership is not something that I was so much aware of in England until I came to Germany." [56]

This interview partner further explained this by referring to a local church congregation he has visited: "when I went to the congregation xxx there was a kind of a strong request from people to become official members because it has bureaucratic and financial consequences for the church [...] it's a system which is still alien to me" and he finishes this sequence of the interview with saying "I can't fully answer, I can't say, what it fully means to be a member." [57]

In order to understand this interplay between quantitative and qualitative results it would be helpful to combine realist and constructivist ideas: Philosophical realists (or *positivists*, as LINCOLN and GUBA would prefer to call them) would wish to refer to some sort of *reality*, existing independently from the observer and would maintain that (at least some) *social facts* can be determined and *measured* in a more or less *objective* manner. (Social) constructivists would emphasize that social facts like membership are constructed artifacts, and that the process of construction can differ with regard to social contexts. [58]

With reference to our research field both parties may have good arguments on their side, since

- German data about religious affiliation and membership to religious organizations seem more reliable than British data (different data sources result in more consistent results and less variance);
- "belonging to a religious community" or "denomination" is a classical *social fact* (DURKHEIM, 1950 [1894]) simultaneously objectively existing and socially constructed;
- the process of social construction of membership (the process by which one is defined or categorized or one defines and categorizes oneself as *belonging*) differs between different cultures, leading to data with varying degrees of objectivity;
- and reliability results of such processes can nevertheless be compared (which means that they are not incommensurable), if the process of social construction is known. [59]

Religious affiliation, in other words, is a *social fact* which is, at the same time, *socially constructed*, and this construction takes place in a way that it has *real (objective) consequences*. [60]

## 5. Concluding Remarks

To sum up our preceding arguments we would like to discourage social researchers in general and mixed methods researchers in particular from basing the application of research methods on specific epistemological paradigms. As a result, especially mixed methods studies would become either rather difficult or even impossible (by demanding that investigators permanently switch between supposedly contradictory philosophical ideas), or it would not be possible without the adoption of a particular mixed methods paradigm which may imply assumptions many scholars may not want to share. However, as we have already stated, we do not ask researchers to dispense with references to philosophical debates or ideas. Instead, we strongly recommend the use of epistemological concepts, if they are not treated as unshakeable standpoints, but as heuristic resources which can be employed to identify and solve methodological problems in research practice. We plead, in other words, for an epistemologically informed research practice as an alternative to standpoint methodology. [61]

Our warnings of allegiance to philosophical schools, paradigms or creeds (may they be called *positivist*, *constructivist*, or else) also relates to the even more far-reaching claim to mingle research with political partisanship and social activism. We already mentioned Howard BECKER's inaugural address in the 1960s: "Whose Side Are We On?" (1967), where the author put forward the legitimate questions whether social researchers sufficiently take into account the world views of the oppressed and marginalized as at least as valid as those of people of higher social status. [62]

Even if one is sympathetic towards such claims (as we are), one may be allowed to refuse to take sides in a way LINCOLN and GUBA invited or requested us to do. Furthermore it remains a dubious rhetorical move to identify trust in the significance of empirical data as a central (although not exclusive) resort to warrant assertions as *positivism*, since such a trust can definitely be combined with the claim that there are also entities in the social world which do not easily lend themselves to empirical observation. It is also questionable whether the acknowledgement of the socially constructed character of social phenomena can be directly and adequately identified with the philosophical position of (radical) constructivism, since the socially constructed nature of social phenomena (or social facts, to draw on the Durkheimian term) is compatible with the claim that these phenomena share an objective existence which no member of a given society may simply ignore or deny, otherwise he or she may have to pay a serious price (e.g., in the form of severe social sanctions). [63]

Furthermore, it is doubtful whether the postulate to act pragmatically in various circumstances and situations can be identified with philosophical pragmatism, since common sense pragmatism in some areas of life can be easily combined with a foundationalist stance in others. We are concerned about the idea that social researchers are pushed to refer to certain philosophers or philosophical ideas to find an ultimate conceptual foundation of their work, since it is well known that (since the time of the Pre-Socratics) philosophers always had



disagreements and disputes about almost everything. In contrast to the idea of a *paradigm-bound methodology* we plead for the application of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research whenever it can be justified by the research questions, the research field and the concrete phenomena under investigation. Thereby it will be also warranted to draw on any methodological and epistemological argument one finds convincing and/or plausible in the specific situation, regardless which school of thought has discovered or developed this argument. [64]

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