

Chapter 7

Social Constructivism vs. Pragmatism: A Search for a Suitable Social Work Paradigm for Research on Immigrants

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ABSTRACT

Migration is one of the most significant areas where we can connect social work research, with an estimated 281 million people living outside of their country of birth in 2020. Given the social work profession's commitment to serving marginalised and disadvantaged populations, it must acknowledge the importance of researching immigrants. The primary problem with immigrant studies is that there are no unified paradigms, and this is a subject of ongoing discussion in social work research. However, a number of paradigms, such as constructivism, post-positivism, participatory action frameworks, pragmatism, etc., frame and construct modern social work research. To determine which paradigm is best for researching immigrants, this chapter primarily examines the paradigms of social constructivism and pragmatism. It concludes that social constructivism is the best paradigm for this type of research.

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INTRODUCTION

There were approximately 281 million people living outside of their country of birth in 2020 [International Organization of Migration (IOM), 2022], and migration is one of the most important areas where we can connect social work research. When individuals move, they frequently experience challenges integrating into host societies, but the growing literature explicitly connects social work research to the question of immigrants. Since the social work profession is dedicated to disadvantaged and marginalised people [International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2018], it cannot disregard the significance of studying immigrants. However, the main issue with immigrants study is the lack of unified paradigms that synthesise, generalise, and organise the accumulated knowledge of immigrants' experiences in their new country (De Haas, 2021; Scholten, 2022).

A paradigm is a collection of widely held philosophical (axiological, epistemological, and ontological) beliefs that guide and define the researcher's worldview to comprehend and account for human experience (Abbott et al., 2004; Morris, 2006; Walliman, 2021). It has been found that the emergence of research practices in social work started in the late nineteenth century but it is legit to say that the field does not have its unique paradigm (Povidaichyk et al., 2021; Soifer, 1999). However, there are several paradigms that frame and construct contemporary social work research, including constructivism, post-positivism, participatory action frameworks, and pragmatism, etc. Literature suggests that social constructivism and pragmatism are dominant approaches to studying immigrants. Social constructivism helps to understand people's perspectives on the world, how they experience it, how they think, and the social structures that develop as a result of sharing those perspectives through language and behavior (Dodd & Epstein, 2012; Teater, 2019), while pragmatism believes people's world views can be understood through their actions and there may be multiple truths and realities (Creswell et al., 2011; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). This chapter aims to find a suitable paradigm to conduct research on immigrants by investigating pragmatism and social constructivism paradigms.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. Firstly, discusses social constructivism and pragmatism concerning migration research. Secondly, it identifies social constructivism as an appropriate paradigm for research on immigrants and explains why social constructivism is the best fit for it. The gap and shortcomings of both paradigms are also discussed throughout the chapter. Finally, the conclusion summarises its main points and focuses especially on how social constructivism can advance research on immigrants.

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