

# Thematic Analysis and Pragmatism – A Controversial Mix

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## 1. Introduction and Background

- Traditionally, knowledge in science was acquired through an empiricist or idealist lens<sup>1</sup>
- Empiricism is characterised by scientific rigour and measurements to learn about an objective world; idealism only through ideas and reasoning<sup>1</sup>
- Interpretivism derived from idealism and assumes that the social world is *constructed* and only accessible through interpretation<sup>2</sup>
- Empiricism (post-positivism) and interpretivism are the dominant (opposite) paradigms in social sciences
- Despite efforts of mixed methods philosophy, tensions exist between both paradigms over how research data can be combined (qual vs quant)<sup>4</sup>
- New developments in qualitative research (e.g., Reflexive Thematic Analysis) consolidate the notion of an epistemological dualism<sup>3</sup>
- Can pragmatism help to bridge the dualistic gap, and can it be used as an epistemological framework for Reflexive Thematic Analysis in a mixed methods study?

## 2. Reflexive Thematic Analysis

- is a “method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset”<sup>3</sup>
- *Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)* is a purely qualitative approach (*Codebook TA* and *Coding Reliability* are more aligned with post-positivism)
- For Braun and Clarke (2022) *Reflexive Thematic Analysis* is incommensurable with any kind of post-positivist assumptions

### References

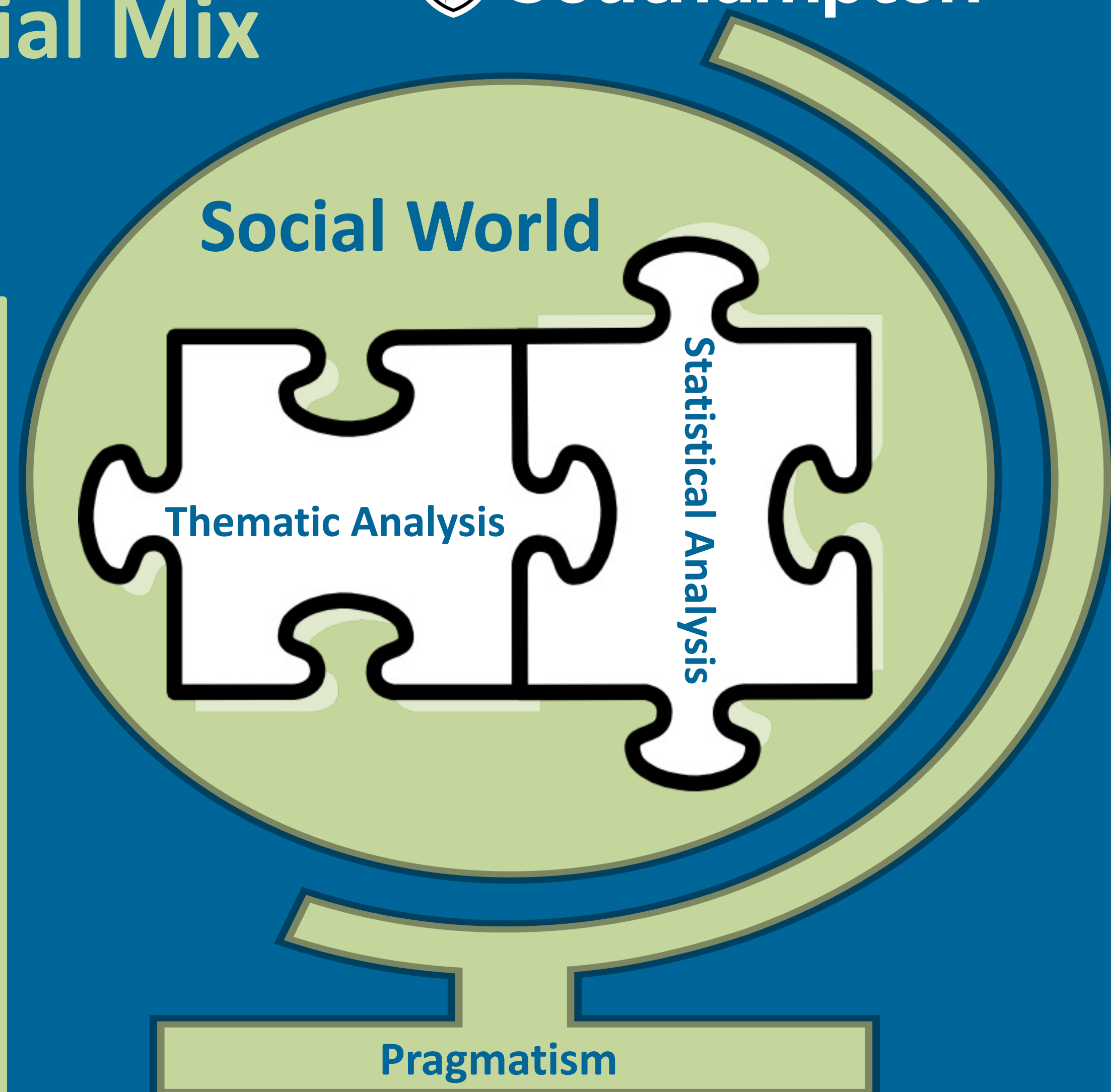
<sup>1</sup>Johnson, B. and Gray, R. (2010) 'A History of Philosophical and Theoretical Issues for Mixed Methods Research', in Tashakkori, A. and Teddlie, C. (eds.) *SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*. 2nd edn. Los Angeles: SAGE.

<sup>2</sup>Delanty, G. (2005) *Social Science*. Second Edition. Maidenhead: Open University Press

<sup>3</sup>Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic Analysis - A Practical Guide*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

<sup>4</sup>Biesta, G. (2010) 'Pragmatism and the Philosophical Foundations of Mixed Methods Research', in Tashakkori, A. and Teddlie, C. (eds.) *SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research* 2nd edn. Los Angeles: SAGE.

<sup>5</sup>Kaushik, V. and Walsh, C.A. (2019) 'Pragmatism as a Research Paradigm and Its Implications for Social Work Research', *Social Sciences*, 8(9), 255.



## 3. Pragmatism and Mixed Methods

- Focus on ‘quantitative’ or ‘qualitative’ deepens the division between researchers<sup>4</sup>
- Dewey’s idea of pragmatism provides a “Theory of Knowledge” where the epistemological assumption is set aside (anti-dogmatic)<sup>4</sup>
- Pragmatism offers a ‘What works best’ attitude to solve the research question and focus on the (practical) consequences of the research output<sup>5</sup>
- Qualitative data provides insights into participants’ behaviours, thoughts and wishes in an in-depth understanding
- Quantitative data helps to see similarities and patterns among participants’ behaviours, thoughts and wishes on a larger scale

## 4. Conclusion

- Pragmatism helps to understand and identify questions without subscribing to one or another precise epistemology
- Social world should be understood from an interpretivist and empirical perspective which can complement each other
- This would lead to research using both RTA and statistical analysis to obtain a comprehensive understanding