

# Dewey's Theory of Knowing: Pragmatism and Mixed Methods

Yiyue Chen\*

Tianjin University of Finance and Economics, Tianjin 300221, China

\*Corresponding author: Yiyue Chen, 237829816@qq.com

---

**Abstract:** Since its inception, Dewey's theory of knowing has had a significant impact on science and education, sparking heated debate among academics. The purpose of this paper is to explain what the theory of knowing is and what its four characteristics are. The relationship between theory of knowing, pragmatism, and mixed methods will be articulated based on this.

**Keywords:** Dewey; Pragmatism; Theory of knowing

---

**Publication date:** September 2021; **Online publication:** September 30, 2021

## 1. Introduction

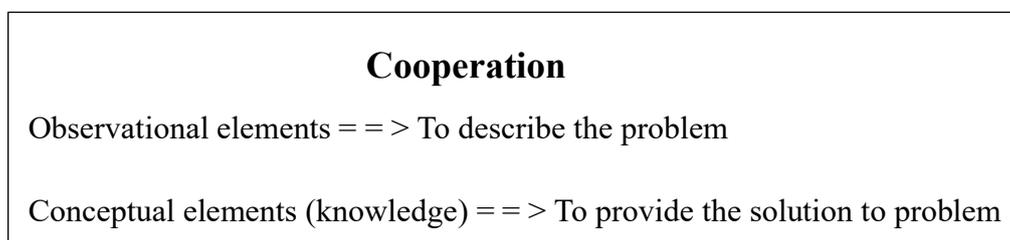
The nature of the world itself, whether objective or subjective, has undergone continuous debate. The question of whether the world is purely an objective entity "out there" independent of a human being's conscious or subconscious mind, or if the reality of the world is the inner world of which people use mental sense to interpret and construct triggers of dualism and divides the world and subsequent inquiries into two areas. In the history, there are endeavors of trying to connect these two different epistemological views to set up a whole system. Among them, Dewey's theory of knowing indicates that the world is an organic unity in which there are three types of relationships, the relationship between different thoughts, between different existential elements and between thought and existential element. This organic unity is continuous, full of these types of relationships. Dewey jumped out of the limit of dualism and declared that in epistemology, the process by which humans gain insight into the world is the process by which we endeavor to make the world with our minds and proof itself. It's also a knowing process in which a theoretical construct related to an existential element aims to discover a solution to a problematic fact. In this sense, it is not difficult to find that Dewey's theory of knowing is instrumental in a degree. Knowledge as tools is one of the features in Dewey's theory of knowing. But why does such theory of knowing exert great impact on pragmatism and mixed methods? This paper aims to straighten out the characteristics of theory of knowing at first and combine these elements to sort out how does this theory of knowing matter in pragmatism and mixed methods.

## 2. Some characteristics of the theory of knowing

### 2.1. Knowledge serves as a tool

The world, according to Dewey's theory of knowing, is an organic unity in which everything is linked and mankind participates in knowing the world through operational links composed of observational elements and ideas or knowledge<sup>[1]</sup>. Additionally, via cooperation, these two sides work together to not only gain a

better understanding of the world, but also to develop a solution to the problem. The observational elements depict how the world is, what the facts are and what problem awaits to be solved while the knowledge serves to provide the solution to the problem. The inquiry matters if it is aimed to bring about the meaning. That is to say, in Dewey's theory of knowing, the knower as participant has a purpose to know something and to interact with others in the world with a cooperation for some reasons (**Figure 1.**). As Dewey suggests, "There are as many conceptions of knowledge as there are distinctive operations by which problematic situations are resolved [2]." Here knowledge serves as tool. It must be combined with existential elements or observation elements to test whether such knowledge works or not in a particular way. Besides, that is one point that other scholars disapprove with Dewey's theory of knowing compared to other theories. Knowledge can also work as theoretical hypothesis in minds, to figure out possible relationships between objects without proofs or without an aim to solve some existential problem. That is to say, knowledge can be acquired and researched for the sake of itself rather than to be developed for solution to problem. It's difficult to say who has the correct opinion about knowledge. However, if we look back at human history, we will see that some trends in thought or innovation that propel our world ahead are inextricably linked to the explanation of knowledge as tools. Like, the innovation of incandescent lamp with carbon wire from Joseph Wilson Swan and the knowledge of how to achieve making that bulb work is not the knowledge itself, not for just to know with what types of material and under what condition, the electricity can be successfully transformed to heat energy and thus is able to illuminate. Here, knowledge is used to find out the relationships between existential elements and to try to come up with a better way to actualize illumination in society.



**Figure 1.** Cooperation of observational elements and knowledge

## 2.2. Knowing is interaction with others in certain situation

In the theory of knowing, nature is a moving whole of interacting parts. Everything in the world interacts with others in the environment of nature. Such interaction is an activity. Dewey's theory about interaction of mankind and observational elements are greatly inspired from Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection. In this theory, living creatures have to interact with the environment and adapt to the environment so that they can survive. Interaction with other elements is inevitable for every living creature, including cells. Moreover, knowing itself is the theoretical thinking linked with existential elements, and it is an activity of interaction too. In the world, both the knower and the object to be known exist. In a larger sense, the term "knower" refers to any sentient entity having a mind capable of acquiring knowledge in the world. Knowing is always about the connections between actions and their outcomes. It concerns the relation between our action and the consequence. Since knowledge is a tool, the knower can apply his/her thoughts to the problem in a particular situation which cannot leave out the existence of other elements of the world. There will be consequences as a result of the interplay between concepts and observation elements. The outcome will have an impact on existing knowledge, which could be means for next inquiry. To put it another way, acquiring knowledge requires both thinking and action under particular circumstances. A tool also signifies an understanding and acknowledgement of sequential links in nature, according to Dewey [3]. That is to say, the objective of knowledge is the sequential order related to certain events or problem. Not

only knowing itself is an interaction with others, indicating the relation between conceptual elements and existential element, but also the objective of knowing is aimed to reveal certain relationship among elements with causes and consequence. Here it is related to Dewey's view on causality too. In his view, everything in the world is connected with others in particular situations, where some elements might be the reason for the happening of others. However, it only works in a certain condition. Once the condition varies, though the same elements, the logic will totally be reversed. The relation between elements or events knower inquire is just part of the sequential order in nature.

### **2.3. Knowing is continuous and historic**

One of the great points in Dewey's theory of knowing is knowing as a continuous and historic process. That is to say, the appearance of knowledge does not come from nowhere or come without any reference to the existent knowledge or past. On one side, the world is an involving and changing entity from the universe to the extinction of dinosaurs, to the appearance of plain through shortage of sea, the continuous changing of the world is the invariable feature of the world. Furthermore, that is what knowledge works too, knowledge is restricted to its scope and the condition of time, place and etc. The development of knowledge in certain areas stand on the place of the previous researches or inspired by some elements that once skimmed past our minds which are based on the experience. For knowledge is continuous, Dewey claims that, "Aside from mathematics, all knowledge is historic. Only as science is seen to be fulfilled and brought to itself in intelligent management of historical processes in their continuity can man be envisaged as within nature, and not as a supernatural extrapolation <sup>[4]</sup>."

As the knower, via inquiry, we enable us to infinitely approximate to the truth of the world and there is no fixed, final nor complete knowledge. Theoretical construction is actually the re-construction based on the past, as the knowing is historic and continuous. Via such continuous knowing in inquiry, we are able to understand some certain sequential order and regularity, and what's more, to know the continuity of nature. However, this does not mean that Dewey's knowing eyes on the past. Rather, knowing is looking forward to and centers on the future, the possible relation of means and consequence which has not been revealed and testified.

### **2.4. Reality, truth and meaning**

The living creatures undergo and suffer the consequence of its own behavior, which is called experience. In Dewey's view, all the experience we, living creatures, have are real. In addition, reality is concerned with experience instead of knowledge, and everyone's experience is equally real. The interaction of living creatures with others in the world out of instinct is counted as experience. Although knowing as a form of experience facilitates action in some ways, experience does not generate knowledge. These two come together when knowledge learns the conditions and consequences of experience, as well as the traits that emerge from the occurrence of experience. "Truth is as too worth of a certain concretely experienced thing and truth has to do with the correspondence between suggested meaning and achieved meaning <sup>[5]</sup>."

In other words, Dewey's view on truth is about the meaning of knowledge as tool to identify the operational relations between events in the world or find out the means and consequences of a set of events. When the hypothesis, which is the theoretical thoughts in our mind, are testified to correctly explain the relationship via inquiry of interaction, such hypothesis will be counted as knowledge entailing the truth since it has operational meaning. Nevertheless some scholars, hold that the truth of knowledge is what can be testified and agreed to by all who investigate, which seems to indicate that truth can be universally applied to certain situation no matter who is the subject conducting inquiry. However, in Dewey's theory of knowing, truth is related to meaning in knowledge during the process of inquiry. Such truth is temporal, contextual and related to action.

### 3. Theory of knowing on pragmatism and mixed methods

Following the above features, we come to know how theory of knowing greatly impacts the theory of pragmatism and mixed methods. Pragmatism focuses on what works as truths regarding with research question in inquiry, which denies incommensurable and incompatible situation of qualitative and quantitative methodology. To find out a practical method and answer to the research question is what pragmatist concern with. Based on this, mixed method suggests the usage of different methods, regardless of what school they belong to, to disclose more facts of the object of inquiry and to provide a complementary conclusion. Mixed method research gives a more thorough view of questions and is better aligned with the researcher's interest and value system. Some mixed methods have a sequential order, with either qualitative methods or quantitative methods coming first, depending on the research objective and research design, or parallel mixed methods. Dewey's theory of knowing is also quite compatible with pragmatism and mixed methods research. The function of knowledge, according to theory of knowing, is to reveal and arrange existential elements, as well as to support the reflective anticipation of action effects. Knowing is done with a goal in mind, to find meaning by solving an existential predicament. Moreover, that knowledge can be used as a tool. Aside from that, the idea that knowledge is continuous implies that there is no end to what we know in some domains, because what we know is restricted and devoid of anything still to be discovered. Researchers will compare two results from different methodologies in mixed method research or generate subsequent study depending on the previous result. In terms of techniques, Dewey claims that truth is the exception which is attained through a complicated and extensive search. Furthermore, the method will not appeal to everyone, and it may contradict earlier research. However, it is believed that such a system can only be accepted after extensive research, testing, and discussion <sup>[6]</sup>.

It is consensus between theory of knowing and pragmatism that there is no end of knowing for more complete and approximately real knowledge and there is no final solution to problem. What mixed methods offers is a temporal solution in certain conditions which is similar to what Dewey holds. The truth is confined to current situations including current observational elements and supposed hypotheses. To get to it, inquiry is expected to mixed and continuous. Besides, mixed methods at least help us to get a more complementary and detailed vision to research questions.

### 4. Conclusion

Knowing is about interaction between our actions and consequences. Knowledge serves as a tool, together with observational elements to sort out the problems and testify what method will be practical solution to them. Dewey's theory of knowing is less about the dualism but more about the sequential order in nature related with certain situations. It is the revelation of relationships between means and consequences that makes the knowledge more of its meaning. Humans do get involved in the creation of knowledge in the world, not in the mind itself but with existential elements in the work, since knowing is with purpose. Such knowledge is continuous and with no end to the truth. Mixed methods share similar philosophical foundation, pragmatism, with theory of knowing given that disclosure of relations among existential elements will enable the existing or possible problems to be sorted out.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### References

- [1] Bulle N, 2018, What is Wrong with Dewey's Theory of Knowing. *Open Access Journal*, 5:221.
- [2] Dewey J, 1958, *Experience and Nature*. La Salle, Open Court Pub. Co. (11):123,126,310.

- [3] Dewey J, 1977, The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy. In J. A.
- [4] Garrison J, 1994, "Realism, Deweyan Pragmatism, and Educational Research," Educational Researcher, 23(1):5–14.
- [5] Gert B, 2003, Pragmatism and the Philosophical Foundations of Mixed Methods Research. Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research. Boydston (Ed.). Sage, Thousand Oaks
- [6] Tashakkori A, Teddlie C, 2003, Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research. Boydston (Ed.). Sage, Thousand Oaks.