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**Whither pragmatism in knowledge organization?**  
**Classical pragmatism vs. neopragmatism as KO metatheories**

**Abstract**  
Pragmatism has often been invoked as a fruitful metatheoretical perspective for knowledge organization (KO). Historically, the form of Pragmatism serving as a philosophical resource for KO has been classical pragmatism (CP). More recently, some KO researchers have begun appealing to another form of pragmatism known as neopragmatism (NP) as the metatheoretical basis of their work. This paper examines two key philosophical differences between CP and NP and inquires whether these differences are sufficient to make a practical difference for KO metatheory. Analysis of past applications of CP and NP principles to theories of classification design and to questions of research methodology within KO indicates that, to date, the metatheoretical consequences of CP and NP have been, for the most part, virtually indistinguishable: with respect to those issues, at least, the philosophical differences between CP and NP are not substantive enough to make a difference. With regards to the problem of how to organize KO as an interdisciplinary field, however, the philosophical resources of CP may offer a more integrative metatheoretical vision than those of NP.

**1: Pragmatism, classical pragmatism, neo-pragmatism, and KO**  
Over the last fifteen years, the field of knowledge organization (KO) has witnessed a vigorous debate about its philosophical foundations, as researchers have sought to identify metatheoretical perspectives that might effectively guide research into the design and evaluation of knowledge organization systems (KOSs). One philosophical perspective that has received considerable attention among KO researchers is pragmatism (e.g., Hjørland 1997, 75-79, 81-83; Jacob 2000). The taproot of pragmatism is the epistemological tenet that the meaning of a concept or the truth of a proposition is to be evaluated by considering the “experiential or practical consequences of its application” (Haack 2003, 774; cf. Peirce 1955, 31, 259; James 1977, 377-378, 382). A number of corollaries flow from this central notion of a pragmatic test. Pragmatists insist that the evaluation of a concept or statement by means of the pragmatic test takes place against the background of one’s habits of thinking, beliefs, goals, values, and interests and that these, in turn, inform the process of evaluation (Peirce 1955, 9-10, 228-229; James 1977, 383-384, 448). Furthermore, pragmatists hold that there are no absolute epistemic grounds for achieving certainty about the correctness of a given concept or belief (i.e., anti-foundationalism), arguing that any concept that one holds is perpetually open to challenge, revision, and improvement (i.e., fallibilism) and that any new experience can trigger a revision of one’s concepts and beliefs (i.e., contingency) (Bernstein 1997, 385-387, 388-389). The cycle of testing and adjusting one’s concepts and beliefs in the light of experience is understood to be socially embedded, for all knowledge claims are evaluated and communicated within the framework of a community of fellow inquirers: this, in turn, is taken to result in pluralism, for different individuals within a community, and different communities within a complex society, may advance different, and often competing, knowledge claims with respect to a single phenomenon (Bernstein 1997, 387-388, 389).

The principles of pragmatism enumerated above derive from what is known as “classical pragmatism” (CP) – i.e., pragmatist philosophy as enunciated and elaborated by Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), and John Dewey (1859-
Historically, KO researchers working within the pragmatist tradition have tended to invoke CP, particularly in its Deweyan form. Recently, it has been suggested that a new, postmodernist version of pragmatism elaborated and championed by Richard Rorty (1933-2007), known as “neopragmatism” (NP), provides a more fruitful metatheoretical underpinning for library and information science than its classical counterpart (Sundin & Johannison 2005): within KO itself, some researchers have begun to claim NP, rather than CP, as the epistemic basis for their work (e.g., Tennis 2007; Tennis & Sutton 2008). The introduction of NP as a live option within the philosophical landscape of KO raises important questions for KO researchers. In what ways does NP differ from CP? Are the differences between NP and CP substantive enough to make a metatheoretical difference for KO? If so, does NP constitute an advance over CP as a philosophical resource for KO research and practice? In this paper, I address these questions by sketching out the chief philosophical differences between NP and CP and analyzing how these two strands of pragmatism have hitherto been used as metatheories in KO. My argument is that, as regards the practical guidance of KO practice and research, it appears to make little difference whether one adopts CP or NP: however, if one seeks a metatheoretical vision for organizing KO as an interdisciplinary domain, CP’s approach may be more integrative than that of NP.

2: Experience, language, and method: some basic differences between CP and NP
At first glance, NP may appear not to differ significantly from CP, for it shares many of the latter’s core assumptions: the neopragmatist, no less than the classical pragmatist, professes epistemological antifoundationalism and fallibilism; holds to the view that all knowledge is contingent and shaped by the values, interests, and goals of the knower; endorses the view that knowledge is socially embedded and constructed; and acknowledges the epistemological pluralism that forms part and parcel of human society. Even a little probing, however, reveals that there are substantive doctrinal differences between CP and NP, of which Rorty (1999, 35, 95) has identified two primary ones: (1) NP’s substitution of “language” for CP’s “experience” as the starting point for an account of knowledge and (2) NP’s rejection of the notion, held by proponents of CP, that there are methods of inquiry based on universalizable norms and so generalizable across different communities. Let us take a closer look at these contrasts.

For classical pragmatists (Peirce 1955, 87-89; Dewey 1958), the idea of experience is central to an account of how we come by our knowledge. In their view, human beings typically develop their beliefs about the world in the course of solving some problem that impinges upon their activities. It is by means of encountering objects and ideas; perceiving and feeling their properties; analyzing, manipulating, and actively testing them to see what they do, what they are good for, and how they can be used to help fulfill our purposes that we come to know them and integrate this knowledge into our lives: another name for this complex process of encounter, interaction, reflection, construction, and action is inquiry (Peirce 1955, 10-11; Dewey 1986, 108-109). Within the framework of a particular inquiry, experience involves the inquirer’s perception of, and interactions with, the external world and is marked by the pushes and pulls between human probing and environmental response: insofar as an object or idea offers resistance to the inquirer’s efforts at manipulating it, it sets constraints upon his or her
conceptualization of, and beliefs about, it, while the degree to which it yields to the inquirer’s purposes provides clues as to its utility in other contexts. In short, experience of interaction with objects and ideas within a socially situated process of inquiry becomes an important – though not absolute – source of the epistemological warrant for true beliefs (cf. Hildebrand 2003, 85).

In NP, on the other hand, language, not experience, forms the starting point in determining what counts as knowledge. On this view, human beings encounter the things of the world only within the framework of the language(s) of the community to which they belong (Rorty 1989, 5-6; 1999, 48). This linguistic turn is significant, for it entails that “we have no prelinguistic consciousness to which language needs to be adequate” (Rorty 1989, 23). Such a move allows adherents of NP to claim that human beings have no access to the world unmediated by language and that, accordingly, there is no extralinguistic referent by means of which they can justify their conceptualizations and beliefs – a position that inverts CP’s view that “a universe of experience is the precondition of a universe of discourse” (Dewey 1986, 74). To be sure, neopragmatists concede that the external world can exert “causal pressure” upon one’s beliefs (Rorty 1999, 33): nevertheless, they maintain, such pressures do not take place outside of the horizon of a language and so do not, of themselves, provide justification for holding a belief (p. xxvi-xxvii). Rather, the justification of beliefs and the production of knowledge operate entirely within the confines of a given inquirer’s language game so that, in effect, “there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones” (Rorty 1982, 165). For the neopragmatist, then, epistemological warrant reposes entirely on “what our peers, ceteribus paribus, let us get away with saying” (Rorty 1980, 176) – that is to say, on intersubjective agreement.

Related to CP’s and NP’s respective valorizations of experience and language are their differing attitudes toward methodology. At issue is the question of whether there are any privileged methods of inquiry that can provide an optimal warrant for beliefs about the world. In accord with their focus on experience, proponents of CP hold that, “the method of science”, or “the experimental method”, which seeks to solve problems through a cycle of hypothesis formation, manipulation of objects, observation of their responses, reasoned deduction of the consequences, and submission of the results to one’s fellow inquirers for further testing and use in further inquiries, can serve as such a method (Peirce 1955, 251-252; Dewey 2004, 145-146, 324-325). In their view, the basic principles of experimentalism can be broadened into a general model of inquiry capable of supporting the investigation of natural and socio-cultural subject matters alike (Dewey 1986, 107-122). Experimentalist inquiry in natural science is held to produce beliefs about the world that prove resistant to falsification over the long term and are, in principle, universalizable: at any point in time, these constitute the relatively settled knowledge that has the status of scientific truth (cf. Hickman 2003, 101-103). In the case of socio-cultural matters, experimentalist inquiry is not likely to produce beliefs that are as stable or command the same degree of consensus as those generated in the natural sciences: different communities of inquiry tend to incorporate differing goals and interests into their respective inquiries and so the knowledge claims that emerge from the latter may conflict. Nevertheless, adhesion to experimentalist norms in socio-cultural inquiry ensures that it is carried out as objectively as possible and, accordingly, that the resultant knowledge claims are both adequate to the experience that produced
them and useful as tools for future inquiries (Hickman 1999, 106). CP’s general method of inquiry, then, serves as a comprehensive, epistemically grounded framework for generating and evaluating knowledge claims that is applicable, mutatis mutandis, across different communities of inquirers: as such, it provides a methodological unifying force in the otherwise plural world of inquiry that generates the universe of knowledge.

In sharp contrast to CP, proponents of NP reject the notion that scientific method is a privileged model for inquiry on the grounds that it does not place us in greater epistemic touch with the external world than other, less methodical ways of describing reality (Rorty 1999, 35-36). Rather, inquiry is to be viewed as a form of conversation, in which the regulative principles of experimental rationality, such as objectivity in observation and self-control in reasoning, give way to ethical norms of conversational reasonableness such as “tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force” (Rorty 1987, 40). This shift in the model of inquiry from one founded on the epistemic norms of experimentalism to one based on the ethical norms of conversation is significant, for it signally weakens the epistemic standards for evaluating knowledge claims across communities (p. 51). Each community of inquiry develops its own intersubjective agreements as to what beliefs its members are to take as justified: needless to say, these will vary from community to community. Within a single community of inquiry, conversation is the mechanism whereby intersubjective agreement is secured and solidarity is affirmed (p. 45, 52). Across different communities, conversation provides a channel for encounter and dialogue: it does not, however, provide a set of shared epistemic criteria to which members of different communities might appeal in their attempts to resolve their disagreements (pp. 48-49; Rorty 1999, 86-87; but cf. Rorty 1982, 194-195). In comparison to experimentalism, conversation provides a rather thin model of inquiry, one that stipulates rules of dialogic engagement but offers little criteriological guidance for the evaluation of the competing knowledge claims presented within a dialogue. Proponents of NP accept the lack of common epistemic norms with equanimity, for they hold that “we should discard the metaphor of inquiry, and human activity generally, as converging, rather than proliferating, becoming more unified rather than more diverse” (Rorty 1987, 45). By relaxing the epistemic norms of inquiry, NP may well increase the range of what qualifies as knowledge and so extend the boundaries of the universe of knowledge: in doing so, however, it provides minimal methodological tools for making this universe a well-integrated one.

3: The metatheoretical consequences of CP and NP for KO

In the foregoing section, we have traced two significant ways in which NP differs from CP. We have seen that, whereas CP views the interaction between a (socially embedded) inquirer and the external world as the starting point of epistemological warrant, NP displaces the emphasis to intersubjective consensus alone: in other words, CP represents a moderate form of constructivism, while NP verges towards a more radical constructivist approach. Furthermore, we have seen that CP proposes a general method of inquiry as a unifying framework for the production and evaluation of knowledge claims, whereas NP denies that there is any such unifying framework. Do these differences between CP and NP make a difference for KO metatheory?
One approach to this question is to consider if, when one of these two types of pragmatism is invoked for warrant in the KO literature, the other can be substituted in its stead. If they are intersubstitutable, then they are, for metatheoretical purposes, functionally identical and choice of one or the other makes no substantial difference to KO research and practice; if not, then there is reason to believe that they do indeed lead to distinct outcomes, which merit further scrutiny. Although limitations of space do not permit a full review of pragmatist-inflected KO literature, a few examples of the use of CP and NP may at least provide us with some preliminary impressions on this score.

Let us examine, first, cases in which KO researchers have appealed to CP and NP in theorizing KO design. Hjørland (1997, 45; 2003, 105), whose own position seems closest to that of Deweyan CP, has argued that “knowledge organization always serves pragmatic purposes and should reflect this”, suggesting that designers should seek to construct “systems [...] developed on the basis of the analysis of goals, values, and consequences”. In this case, NP, no less than CP, could provide philosophical underpinning for the creation of pragmatist KOSs, such as viewpoint-based classifications designed for particular communities or indexing systems generated through “user-oriented or need oriented indexing” (Hjørland 1997, 77; 2003, 107, Fig. 5, s.v. “Pragmatism”). On the other hand, in a recent paper proposing the introduction of a “concept instance” entity into the Simple Knowledge Organization System (SKOS) in order to model conceptual change, Tennis and Sutton (2008, 30) state that NP justifies their attempt to add a new entity (namely, “concept instance”) to SKOS on the grounds that “the neopragmatic approach” mandates the creation of vocabularies “to cope with the social world”: on this view, the addition of the idea of “concept instance” to SKOS would represent a means of coping with the problem of expressing conceptual change within that data model. Such a manner of proceeding certainly finds justification in NP (Rorty 1982, 198) but it also draws upon the insight from CP that concepts and words are tools to help people cope with their natural and social environments (Brandom 2000b, 169): here again, either CP or NP could provide philosophical justification for the move. These examples suggest that, as meta-theoretical positions, CP and NP are indistinguishable in their effect upon the theory of KOS design.

When we turn to the application of pragmatism to KO research methodology, we find that a similar situation prevails. For example, when Tennis (2007, 2) adopts a “neo-pragmatist stance” in a study on the modeling of conceptual change in indexing languages, he does so on the grounds that NP “is an anti-essentialist approach to knowledge organization”: however, he could, in principle, just as easily have appealed to CP, which is no less “anti-essentialist” than NP (e.g., James 1950, II, 332-337). Or consider Tennis and Sutton’s (2008, 30) claim that the application of NP to indexing research justifies viewing the concepts denoted by indexing terms as “useful conventions employed by designers and indexers to facilitate retrieval and display”. The notion of concepts as intersubjectively constituted “conventions” is congruent with the thoroughgoing constructivism of NP; however, provided that “useful” is understood as “adequate to the experience of indexers, designers, and end-users using the index”, it is perfectly in accord with the more moderate constructivism of CP as well.

The foregoing examples indicate that, when CP and NP have been applied to methodological questions of KO design and research in the past, they have both been used to underwrite a perspectivist, constructivist, and anti-essentialist approach to KO.
For this purpose, at least, they are functionally interchangeable. It is true that one can also find points where the philosophical distinction between the two is reflected in KO metatheory. For example, Hjørland’s (1997, 46-47, 83) characterization of “scientific”, “pragmatic”, and “ad hoc” classifications as classifications that have, respectively, “high”, “middle”, and “low” ambition in KO echoes CP’s respect for the “method of the sciences”, as does his affirmation of the importance of classifications based on the “pure inquiry” of science, which he describes as “the pursuit of truth for its own sake”. Similarly, Hjørland’s commitment to an account of “pragmatical realism” (p. 82) – clearly aligns him with the experientialist standpoint of CP, for it recognizes that both the object acted upon and the human agent acting upon it contribute to the development of the latter’s beliefs about the former. Neither the notion of pursuing truth for its own sake nor the idea of pragmatical realism is congruent with the theoretical tenets of NP: here, the philosophical gulf is very wide indeed. It remains doubtful, however, whether a shift to an NP-based account of science – according to which science is just one type of human activity among others that has no privileged epistemic status nor access to the nature of things (Brandom 2000a, xiii-xiv) – would drastically change the practical import of Hjørland’s theory of design for pragmatist KOSs: after all, if the goal of constructing a classification on pragmatist principles is to cater to the values, goals, and interests of a given community of users, one can do so for a scientific domain without asking whether the knowledge that one is organizing has a privileged epistemic status vis-à-vis that generated in other fields of inquiry or not.

Are, then, the practical effects of CP and NP on KO metatheory so similar as to make selection of the one or the other largely a matter of philosophical temperament? Although such a conclusion seems to hold for many cases of the use of pragmatism in KO, I would like to suggest that there is at least one area where the philosophical differences between CP and NP may make a crucial difference for KO metatheory – namely, in the field’s very conception of itself. A frequent perception of KO is that it is “a field populated by theoretical models and methods without much inter-connection […] and without much awareness of its conceptual limits”, largely as a consequence of its interdisciplinary nature (López-Huertas 2008, 115). If KO researchers deem the chaotic theoretical landscape confronting them problematic and seek a roadmap for envisioning how the field might be made more cohesive, CP and NP offer two starkly different visions of the inner articulation of KO. As we have seen, CP proposes that a general model of inquiry possessing solid epistemic norms yet flexible enough to accommodate different types of inquiries can serve as a methodologically integrative force within a pluralistic world, whereas NP advocates a less stringent model of inquiry that opens up lines of communication between communities of inquiry but stipulates no single set of shared epistemic tools for achieving inter-community consensus. The choice is, in effect, between a vision of a KO capable of achieving an integration of its different approaches by reference to a shared metatheory – or a cluster of interrelated metatheories – of inquiry and one of a KO whose varied approaches to inquiry are fragmented or, at best, constitute a loosely conjoined congeries. In this regard, at least, CP provides a more integrative, and so perhaps more useful, ideal for bringing order – and solidarity – to the domain of KO than does NP.
References
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