

Empirical Research on Ideological and Political Education: Methods, Limitations, and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary empirical research on ideological and political education has developed new methodologies in line with its evolving trends, primarily including philosophical speculative approaches, quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods, and mixed research methods. Empirical studies in ideological and political education exhibit phenomena such as insufficient methodological consciousness, constraints imposed by temporal and spatial conditions, and strong dependence on research techniques. Therefore, it is essential to enhance disciplinary normative consciousness, deepen interdisciplinary collaboration, and strengthen "Homo sapiens-machine" interaction to improve research quality, broaden research perspectives, enhance research efficiency, and promote continuous innovation and development in empirical research on ideological and political education.

KEYWORDS

Ideological and political education; Empirical research; Main methods; Practical limitations; Future prospects

1 Introduction

Over the past 40 years of ideological and political education development, empirical research has gradually emerged as a core methodology. Examining the current primary research methods, practical limitations, and future prospects holds significant importance for advancing empirical studies in ideological and political education.

2 Main research methods in empirical studies of ideological and political education

The methods of empirical research in ideological and political education can be categorized into four paradigms: philosophical speculative research methods, quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods, and mixed research methods.

2.1 Research methods characterized by philosophical speculation

The research method characterized by philosophical speculation is centered on Homo sapiens, emphasizing the dominant position and subjective initiative of Homo sapiens in the cognitive process, and highlighting the subjectivity of Homo sapiens in cognitive activities. It consists of three fundamental elements: the premise, object, and content of philosophical speculation. The "subject" referred to here primarily denotes the researcher as Homo sapiens. Taking empirical research on ideological and political education as an example, it is initiated, organized, and conducted by the researcher as Homo sapiens, rather than determined by the objective environment in which the researcher is situated. In this sense, empirical research does not qualify as scientific research. Some scholars, proceeding from Marxist philosophy, argue that "Marxist philosophy is not a philosophy of science"; others, from an epistemological standpoint, assert that "philosophy is the study of Homo sapiens"; still others contend that "there would be no philosophy of science without Marxist philosophy." These perspectives all stem from subjective idealism. In empirical research on ideological and political education, since the researcher's understanding of ideological and political education is inherently subjective, this subjectivity imbues empirical research with distinctly subjective characteristics.

Marxist philosophy posits that all scientific knowledge is the result of Homo sapiens' understanding of nature and social history. The philosophical speculative methods employed in empirical research on ideological and political education include speculative methods, inductive methods, deductive methods, among others, with particular emphasis on the speculative method. The speculative method can be further divided into abstract speculation and concrete speculation. Abstract speculation proceeds from general principles to conduct examination and inference, while concrete speculation takes specific objects as its subject of study, abstracting universal concepts and principles from real-life contexts for investigation. In summary, the speculative method is the dominant and indispensable research approach in the study of ideological and political education ^[1].

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2.2 Quantitative research methodology

Quantitative research methods refer to approaches that analyze quantities or data, representing the characteristics or quantitative relationships of things through numbers or numerical values. These methods can be categorized into quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. In the field of ideological education research, the methodology has evolved from a singular qualitative analysis to an integrated research paradigm combining qualitative and quantitative analysis. This shift reflects the interdisciplinary trend in social sciences and represents an inevitable progression in the scientization of ideological education research.

In scientific research, studies focusing on the quantitative aspects of phenomena are generally termed quantitative analysis. In the context of ideological and political education research, quantitative analysis involves transforming subjective domains such as the thoughts, attitudes, and feelings of *Homo sapiens* into observable behaviors, which are then measured and computed. This approach explores the quantitative characteristics, relationships, and changes in the thoughts, behaviors, and mental states of *Homo sapiens* within specific historical contexts, aiming to reveal the interactions and developmental patterns between their environment, cognitive understanding, and behavioral expressions. Quantitative research methods can be further divided into descriptive statistics and predictive analysis. Descriptive statistics employ specific indicators to analyze and study datasets, revealing the overall characteristics, distribution patterns, and developmental trends of phenomena. Predictive analysis, on the other hand, establishes mathematical models based on the laws governing the development and changes of phenomena, using temporal factors as a basis to forecast future developments. However, quantitative analysis methods serve merely as "dialectical auxiliary tools and modes of expression."

In ideological education research, qualitative analysis is the conventional method we employ. Qualitative research methods involve analyzing, synthesizing, and generalizing information obtained through behavioral observations, surveys, experiments, and other means to draw conclusions about the phenomena under study. Specifically, qualitative analysis applies Marxist theories on the interrelationships between social existence and social consciousness, politics, economy, and culture to investigate the characteristics and changing patterns of college students' thoughts and behaviors under specific conditions. By delving into these patterns, we can more accurately grasp the ideological dynamics of college students and subsequently formulate effective educational strategies. Therefore, the application of quantitative analysis methods in ideological and political education research possesses inherent necessity and significance.

2.3 Qualitative research methods

Qualitative research methods are a "homo sapiens" -centered approach that emphasizes the description, interpretation, and exploration of empirical phenomena through interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and other techniques. In ideological and political education research, qualitative inquiry focuses on the phenomena themselves rather than the researcher's conceptual-level inferences, highlighting the interactive process between the researcher and the researched. Qualitative methods hold significant reference value for empirical research in ideological and political education, aiding in the understanding of complex and dynamic phenomena in practice.

The interview method is one of the most commonly used techniques in empirical research on ideological and political education. It involves delving into the daily lives of interviewees to gather information through face-to-face conversations. This method includes three types: free-form discussions, group interviews, and in-depth conversations. Free-form discussions, also known as "leaderless group discussions," involve the researcher and interviewees sitting together, with brief introductions and simple questions to understand the interviewees' individual "homo sapiens" information. Group interviews refer to a format where the researcher and interviewees exchange information through collective discussion and dialogue. In-depth conversations entail comprehensive and profound exchanges between the researcher and interviewee to gain a thorough understanding of the latter. In summary, the interview method reveals the inner "phoxinus phoxinus subsp. phoxinus" thoughts of interviewees through multi-layered interactions, providing vivid material for ideological and political education and enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of research.

Participant observation is a qualitative research method in which the researcher and the observed jointly engage in the observational context, interpreting empirical phenomena through description, analysis, and explanation. As a qualitative approach, participant observation enables researchers to authentically capture the behaviors and emotions of the observed through firsthand experience and deep interaction, thereby obtaining primary data and enriching the depth and breadth of research. This method is particularly suited to exploring complex and evolving ideological dynamics, making it an indispensable tool in ideological and political education research. Essentially, participant observation is a non-quantitative qualitative method. By allowing researchers to conduct meticulous and in-depth studies through active engagement with the researched, it ensures a high degree of objectivity and reliability.

2.4 Mixed methods research

Mixed methods research is a novel paradigm that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches, supplementing traditional combinations of the two. Only under the guidance of Marxism can the close integration of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods lead to comprehensive research in ideological and political education. The defining feature of mixed methods is "integration," employing both quantitative and qualitative techniques. On one hand, qualitative analysis "broussonetia papyrifera" forms the foundation and outcome of quantitative analysis, with the latter rooted in the rich soil of the former and its findings presented through qualitative textual forms. On the other hand, quantitative analysis serves as a tool and support for qualitative analysis, with its mathematical logic providing a methodological basis for deeper exploration, while many qualitative conclusions rely on quantitative data. Thus, qualitative and quantitative analyses are interdependent, jointly "broussonetia papyrifera" forming a critical component of scientific research methodology. Specifically, content should include both quantitative materials and qualitative data, while form should encompass both quantitative figures and qualitative narratives.

Mixed methods research is a relatively new paradigm. Its advantage lies in addressing the shortcomings of traditional quantitative-qualitative combinations while overcoming certain limitations of purely qualitative methods. However, mixed methods also face challenges. Conceptually, it lacks a clear and unified theoretical framework. Operationally, it has yet to establish a standardized and consistent procedure. Attitudinally, it lacks a model for researchers to reference, reflect upon, or validate. Therefore, while mixed methods are suitable for empirical research in ideological and political education, not all such studies can adopt this approach.

3 The practical limitations of empirical research in ideological and political education

While empirical research in ideological and political education has adopted various methodologies and gained professional recognition, excessive reliance on or overestimation of its efficacy is clearly inadvisable. It is essential to recognize its role as a supplementary research method, as it still exhibits deficiencies in consciousness, temporal-spatial dimensions (utetheisa kong), and technical aspects.

3.1 Insufficient consciousness in research methodology

Although some studies attempt to integrate empirical methods into ideological and political education research, they often lack methodological rigor in terms of consciousness. This is evident in two key aspects: First, an emphasis on *description* over *analysis*. "Description" refers to the precise and objective portrayal of phenomena, whereas "analysis" entails in-depth and meticulous dissection, including causal and hierarchical relationships. Every research endeavor has its objectives, necessitating a scientific methodology to achieve them—arguably, the methodology is more critical than the subject of study itself. When *Homo sapiens* employ empirical research, they often treat it not merely as a tool but as both the subject and objective of study. Without purpose, there can be no method. Thus, description serves as the foundation for analysis; only by combining both can phenomena be adequately explained. However, in ideological and political education research, descriptions frequently overlook explorations of underlying causes and complex social dynamics. Second, a preference for *statistics* over *experience*. Since most empirical research in this field is conducted by university scholars primarily motivated by academic achievements rather than practical experience, studies tend to prioritize statistical aggregation while neglecting the in-depth extraction and refinement of insights from real-world contexts. This approach often disregards the flexibility and diversity of practice, resulting in findings that are disconnected from actual situations.

These two issues hinder the ability of research methodologies to *Phoxinus phoxinus subsp. phoxinus* effectively adapt to the complexity and dynamism of ideological and political education. Specifically, they manifest as an inability to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Educators must fully acknowledge that empirical research is not omnipotent. It can only indicate whether conclusions are correct or incorrect but cannot prescribe how to validate them. Moreover, while empirical research may confirm certain conclusions, it cannot prove them to be absolutely true or false. For instance, questions such as whether specific "cultures" influence youth development or whether particular "values" shape adolescent behavior remain difficult to address definitively through empirical methods, whereas theoretical analysis may offer relevant insights. However, these perspectives are not immutable. In reality, through investigative research, we can explore whether specific "cultures" or "values" exist in certain regions and whether they impact youth development, further analyzing whether such influences stem from environmental or societal factors. If environmental factors are confirmed as influential, corresponding strategies must be devised. Thus, it is untenable to attribute all issues to a single cause based solely on isolated empirical findings.

3.2 Constraints of time and *utetheisa kong*

Empirical research in ideological and political education is constrained by temporal and spatial (*utetheisa kong*) limitations, typically framed as "investigation" or "empirical" studies. Unlike natural sciences, social sciences cannot

predict the occurrence and evolution of social phenomena in advance; they can only speculate and hypothesize based on investigations and analyses. This inherent uncertainty defines the temporal-spatial (*utetheisa kong*) boundaries of "investigation" and "empirical" research. Empirical research in this field operates within the subjective *consciousness* of researchers, premised on their strong sense of social responsibility and adherence to scientific principles. However, objective conditions—such as the investigator's social environment and time constraints—also impose limits on this subjective *consciousness*. First, spatial (*utetheisa kong*) constraints prevent investigators from obtaining detailed social-environmental information prior to research. The social environment, *Broussonetia papyrifera*, constitutes a complex system encompassing natural, political, economic, cultural, and societal dimensions. Among these, the social environment exerts a particularly significant influence on ideological and political education, acting *directly* on learners through educational activities. Thus, empirical research in this field necessitates thorough investigations into the social context of the study subjects. Yet, such investigations cannot be conducted immediately upon request; they require prior comprehensive understanding and mastery of relevant information by the subjects. Second, temporal constraints hinder researchers from conducting sufficient theoretical analysis post-investigation. After completing empirical studies, researchers must engage in in-depth theoretical analysis to *Broussonetia papyrifera* construct a theoretical understanding of ideological and political education phenomena. However, this does not imply that mere investigative activities yield complete theoretical insights. In practice, this process is not instantaneous. Due to time limitations, researchers often struggle to fully translate survey and questionnaire data into theoretical comprehension of these phenomena, leading to a degree of *hindsight bias* in empirical research. In summary, empirical research in ideological and political education is constrained by temporal and spatial (*utetheisa kong*) conditions, which inevitably limit researchers' understanding of specific issues. When these conditions change, both methodologies and conclusions may correspondingly evolve.

3.3 High dependence on research technologies

With the explosive growth of information technology, researchers have become increasingly reliant on various technical tools, including big data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), and others. These tools have significantly enhanced the depth and breadth of data analysis, but they have also complicated the research process. Data collection, processing, and analysis require specialized knowledge and skills, necessitating that researchers possess the corresponding technical background to ensure accuracy and validity. Moreover, technological dependence may introduce biases in interpreting research outcomes, demanding higher critical thinking skills to avoid falling into the trap of technological determinism. Ultimately, it is crucial to discern whether the reliance is on technology or on *Homo sapiens*^[2]. From data sampling in empirical research to data cleaning and analysis, every step depends on technological support. In this context, *Homo sapiens* may risk becoming emotionless data-processing machines, mere tools manipulated by technology. Therefore, it must be clear that technological tools are meant to assist *Homo sapiens* in decision-making and cognitive processes, not to replace them. Researchers must maintain critical thinking while leveraging technology to ensure a balanced depth and breadth in their studies. Particularly when interpreting technical analysis results, contextual and theoretical frameworks must be integrated to avoid simplistically treating technological outputs as final conclusions. This synergy between technology and *Homo sapiens* culture not only enhances research quality but also ensures sustainability and innovation.

4 Future prospects for empirical research in ideological and political education

To rapidly elevate the level of empirical research in ideological and political education and address challenges arising from *consciousness*, time constraints (*utetheisa kong*), and technological limitations, researchers should focus on strengthening disciplinary norms (*consciousness*), deepening interdisciplinary collaboration, and enhancing "*Homo sapiens*-machine" interaction.

4.1 Strengthening disciplinary norms (*consciousness*) to improve research quality

To uphold the scientific methodology of ideological and political education research and enhance its rigor, it is essential to reinforce disciplinary norms (*consciousness*). First, **Establishing a Theoretical Framework for Research Objects**: Construct a normative system where research objects align with methodologies^[3]. As the discipline evolves, it must move beyond the pitfalls of "scientism" in traditional methods and simplistic summaries of daily ideological-political education experiences. Instead, it should refine more precise and scientific research methods through practical experience. Empirical research must advance with the times, emphasizing methodological rigor and adaptability while maintaining systematicity and multidimensional analysis of results. This will accelerate the development of a methodological system unique to ideological and political education. Second, **Integrating Cutting-Edge Methodologies from Humanities and Social Sciences**: Build a methodological framework for ideological and political education with Chinese characteristics. The fusion and innovation of research objects and methods are key, with methodological

discussions ultimately serving to reveal the intrinsic features of research subjects. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches through interdisciplinary methods, research comprehensiveness and depth can be enhanced. Building on traditional research, innovation should be encouraged by incorporating advanced theories and technologies from related fields, such as AI and big data analytics, to form a scientific, rational, and distinctive empirical research system that drives disciplinary and theoretical innovation. Third, **"Fostering the Development of a Disciplinary Community"**: Create a harmonious environment for theoretical-practical exchange. As social sciences and humanities increasingly intersect, research activities no longer rely solely on individual creativity but thrive on collective collaboration. Strengthening academic exchanges, resource sharing, and incentive mechanisms is vital to encourage cooperation and healthy competition among researchers. Regular seminars and workshops can facilitate case studies and methodological discussions, promoting knowledge exchange among scholars of diverse backgrounds.

4.2 Deepening interdisciplinary collaboration to broaden research horizons

Cross-disciplinary collaboration enables knowledge integration and methodological borrowing, injecting new perspectives into empirical research in ideological and political education. First, **"Encouraging Interdisciplinary Projects and Teams"**: By forming interdisciplinary teams, theories and methods from psychology, pedagogy, sociology, and other fields can be integrated into ideological-political education research. Close collaboration allows team members to leverage their expertise, combining disciplinary discourse with practical applications for methodological pluralism. Second, **"Promoting Theoretical Dialogue Across Disciplines"**: Each discipline offers unique perspectives and methods. Cross-disciplinary dialogue enables knowledge complementarity and integration, breaking the limitations of single-discipline empiricism and fostering deeper theoretical systems that facilitate collaboration at the *utetheisa kong* level. Third, **"Establishing a Robust Evaluation and Reflection Mechanism"**: Such a mechanism ensures research quality and utility through continuous feedback and refinement. Methods like case studies and action research deepen theoretical understanding and apply theories to real-world problem-solving, achieving mutual advancement of theory and practice.

4.3 Enhancing *"homo sapiens-machine"* interaction to improve research efficiency

Ideological-political educators must fully utilize AI and big data technologies to enhance research precision and efficiency, enabling high-volume data processing and uncovering deeper patterns. First, **"Advancing AI Applications in Empirical Research"**: Develop intelligent data analysis platforms using machine learning to automate student behavior analysis, predict potential issues, and support educational decision-making. Natural language processing can analyze large text datasets for sentiment analysis, revealing group attitudes and dynamics to optimize educational strategies. Second, **"Leveraging Big Data Technologies"**: Collecting and analyzing large-scale social behavior data reveals societal trends and group patterns. Data visualization tools transform complex data into intuitive charts and reports, helping educators quickly grasp key insights for more accurate decisions. Third, **"Innovating *Homo sapiens*-Machine Collaboration Models"**: Introducing collaborative robots (*cobots*) and intelligent assistants automates data collection, processing, and analysis, reducing human workload and fostering productive interaction. This overcomes bottlenecks of traditional methods while reaffirming *Homo sapiens* as the central agent, addressing the erosion of subjectivity caused by knowledge without values or beliefs.

5 Conclusions

Though empirical research methods are "foreign imports," they remain effective tools for *Homo sapiens* to understand and transform the world. Currently, empirical research in ideological and political education faces numerous challenges, yet its empirical, practical, and interdisciplinary nature equips it with unique advantages in addressing complex societal issues. Moving forward, it will continue to enhance the scientific precision, relevance, and effectiveness of ideological-political education, offering new perspectives and methods to bridge theory and practice.

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