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Methods of social sciences

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Abstract

One of the debates that had been raging since its origin is: Is sociology a science? To understand this, we must first learn what is science and scientific method, and then evaluate the discipline of sociology on the parameters of a scientific discipline. We will also look at some of the major theoretical strands of research methodology. Subsequently, we will also have a brief look at some of the key arguments of the methodological debate related to the scientific nature of the discipline in sections on positivism and its critique, and fact, value and objectivity. We need to understand that how we conceive of society cannot be separated from the question of how we should proceed in our study of it. In other words, what methodology a researcher would adopt in carrying out his research would largely be determined by the perspective or orientation that he has towards social reality. In this article, different theoretical and methodological perspectives have been discussed. The emphasis on the objective measurement of human social behaviour forces the positivist scholars to rely more on the quantitative methods while conducting research. While on the other hand, anti-positivist scholars who emphasize on the interpretative understanding of the social behaviour rely more on qualitative methods.

Keywords: science, scientific method, positivism, anti-positivism

Introduction

Science refers to a systematic body of certified and changing knowledge which is based upon observable and verifiable facts and the methods used to acquire this knowledge. Thus, the term science is used both for the knowledge as well the methods that are used to acquire this knowledge. Since methodology is an elementary constituent of science, it assumes an even greater significance in social sciences. Methodology helps us to determine the contours of reality. It describes what constitutes the subject matter of a discipline. It provides the social scientists precisely defined conceptual tools and procedures to study the subject matter of the discipline. Thus, methodology defines the limits of the given discipline.

The Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences titled as *Open the Social Sciences* (1996) [7] states that the classical view of science was built on two premises. One premise was the Newtonian model, in which there exists a symmetry between past and future. The second premise was Cartesian dualism, the assumption that there is a fundamental distinction between nature and humans, between matter and mind, between the physical world and the social world.

However, in order to understand methodology of social sciences properly, it is necessary to first understand the evolution of epistemology in social sciences. Epistemology implies 'theory of knowledge'. It broadly describes the nature and scope of human knowledge. It defines the proper source and foundation of knowledge. It also determines the criterion of knowledge and hence, helps in distinguishing the scientific knowledge from non-scientific knowledge. Primarily, there are two major sources of knowledge: empiricism and rationalism. While empiricism tends to emphasize on the fact that knowledge is based on sensory perception, rationalism, on the other hand, emphasizes on reason being the primary source of knowledge. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the great German Philosopher, instead synthesized the two major sources of knowledge: empiricism and rationalism.

The evolution of epistemology in social sciences is, however, contingent upon the ontological orientations. Ontology is the 'theory of reality'. It tells us about the nature of reality. Broadly, ontological orientations may be classified into two types: realism and relativism. Realism is based on the assumption that there is only one truth and which doesn't change.

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The truth can be discovered by employing objective methods and generalizations could be derived. Relativism, on the other hand, assumes that there is no single universal objective truth. Instead, there could be multiple versions of the truth. Further, truth is constantly evolving and it is contextual. Thus, realist ontological approach tends to follow etic epistemological approach while relativist ontological approach tends to follow emic epistemological approach.

Shades of Sociology

Based on ontological and epistemological orientations, various shades in sociology may be deciphered. For example, Marxist sociology offers a historical materialist account of society and social change. It tends to be deterministic since it emphasizes upon the role of economic factors in shaping the superstructure and triggering social change. It is also futuristic at the same time. It explains the progressive development in the forces of production leading to conflict between the newly emerging forces of production and existing relations of production. Explaining the demise of capitalism in this manner, it tends to have a utopian vision of an egalitarian society based on communal ownership of forces of production in the form of a communist society (Bottomore, 1986)^[2].

American sociology is fundamentally analytical and empirical. It is often said that sociology emerged in Europe and flourished to begin with on social reformist orientation in the USA. Like their European predecessors, the first U.S. sociologists tried to understand and solve the problems of their time, such as crime and delinquency, broken homes, poor neighbourhoods, and racial problems. But they dealt with social problems differently. The Europeans were more interested in developing large-scale social theories. So, they examined the fundamental issues of social order and social change, trying to discover the causes of social problems as a whole. In contrast, the U.S. sociologists were more pragmatic. They were more inclined to focus on specific problems, such as prostitution, street gangs, or racial discrimination in employment, and to treat each problem separately (Aron, 1965)^[1].

French sociology was initially dominated by the positivist tradition which in turn was based upon empiricist epistemological foundations. Positivism emphasized upon unity of sciences which implied that the methods of enquiry adopted in natural sciences could also be applied in social sciences. Comte's theory of positivism made a profound impact on the introduction and development of sociology as a new science of society. The new methodology shifted its domain from philosophy to science and from speculation to the gathering of empirical data, and becomes a positivistic methodology where the phenomena can be perceived by the senses, to employ scientific methods as like physical scientists (Haralambos and Holborn, 2014)^[4].

German sociology, for some three decades prior to the outbreak of the First World War, was dominated by a number of related disputes about methodology (the so-called *Methodenstreit*), the most general and probably the most important of which dealt with the relationship between the natural and social sciences. The most influential scholar, Wilhelm Dilthey, a neo-Kantian, believed that since social or cultural science studied acting individuals with ideas and intentions, a special method of understanding (*Verstehen*) was required, while natural science studied soulless things

and, consequently, it did not need to understand its objects. Max Weber appreciated the neo-Kantians for taking into cognizance the subjective meanings and motives of the social actors in order to better understand the social reality but also stressed the need for building generalizations in social sciences (ibid.)

Japanese sociology is yet another important school of sociology. American and German schools of sociology dominated Japanese sociology before World War I. Japanese School of sociology, namely, *Shakai-Ishikiron*, i.e., study of social consciousness, developed immediately after World War II. Empirical research methodology and quantitative techniques have been strongly advocated in post war period in Japan. I. Shimizu, R. Hidaka, H. Minami and A. Takahashi have significantly contributed towards the development of *Shakai-Ishikiron* during 1940s (Yamagishi & Brinton, 1980)^[9].

Indian sociology and its development can be best understood in the context of colonial rule. The colonial impact on the inauguration of sociology in India led to a negative pattern in the division of labor where theory building is done by western social scientists. Frank Welz, in his article *100 Years of Indian Sociology*, argues that the scientific field of sociology in India is the site of struggles between different external influences, specific conditions and different local centres of sociology (Welz, 2009)^[8]. Govind Sadashiv Ghurye, has often been acclaimed as the "father of Indian Sociology" on account of his unique contribution to Indian Sociology. Sociology in Bombay developed under the leadership of G.S. Ghurye. In Ghurye's works, cultural nationalism tends to be apparent. Ghurye stressed on assimilation of diverse religious and 'backward' groups to mainstream Hindu society as the basis for national integration. He argued that the remedy for untouchability is the 'assimilation' of Untouchables into Hindu society. Carol Upadhyaya argues that a significant feature of Ghurye's cultural history is the almost complete neglect of economic/material content in his analysis. In his vast body of works we find few references to agriculture, crafts, trade, and so on, except in discussions of caste-based occupational specialisation. This is in stark contrast to the work of his contemporary D.D. Kosambi, for example, who also reproduced the Aryan invasion theory but reworked it through a materialist perspective. (Upadhyaya, 2002).

Prof. Vivek Kumar, in his article "How Egalitarian is Indian Sociology?" highlights the domination of the upper or twice-born castes in the discipline of sociology since its inception in India. He explores this domination in the areas of epistemology, methodology and pedagogy. In this article, he highlights the domination of the twice-born castes at four levels – as members practicing sociology in universities, institutions and colleges, in the sphere of production of knowledge while writing chapters of books, producing knowledge with the help of scriptural sources, or producing data from the field and while teaching sociology in the classrooms (Kumar, 2016)^[5].

Foundations of Classical Sociological Theories

Let us now look at the ontological and epistemological foundations of the three classical sociologists viz. Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. While Hegel, in common with all idealist thinkers, argues that the most truthful version of the world is the one that we hold in our consciousness, Marx proposed the opposite or materialist

view, which is that the most real version must be the one we can actually touch and feel. Marx rejects the priority Hegel gives to thoughts and ideas. He argues that the source of change lies in contradictions in the economic system in particular and in society in general. As a result of the priority he gives to economic factors, to 'material life', Marx's view of history is often referred to as 'dialectical materialism' (Morrison, 2012) [6].

The roots of Durkheim's sociology reach deep into the history and intellectual life of France. His theory of the foundation and progress of modern society is based on ideas first clearly formulated during the dramatic social changes that came about from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. Durkheim's most significant predecessor was Auguste Comte, the founder of French positivism. Durkheim adopted a social realist stance towards social reality and ascribed the ultimate sociological reality to the group rather than to the individual. For Durkheim, social facts constituted the subject matter of society. Durkheim elaborated his methodology in his famous work *The Rules of Sociological Method* published in 1895 (Durkheim, 1938) [3].

Max Weber, agreeing with the neo-Kantians, believed that human beings respond to their environment in a meaningful way and therefore, human behaviour has to be understood in the context of the underlying meanings. Therefore, Weber argued that to build the strategies of social research on the methods of natural sciences alone would be a serious mistake. The methodology of social sciences should focus on understanding the human behaviour. According to Weber, the cognitive aim of social sciences is to understand the human behaviour. Under the influence of Dilthey, Weber suggests *Verstehen* method for sociological enquiry. The *Verstehen* approach is usually translated as 'interpretive understanding' (Morrison, 2012) [6].

Last but not least it is worth discussing the ideas of Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. Popper argued that the aim of science is not to verify a hypothesis or theory but to falsify it. Falsificationism and historicism are two of his major contributions. Kuhn in his work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* argues that a science achieves maturity with the development of a paradigm. According to him, social sciences do not have any paradigm yet. He argues that when the anomalies in the paradigm fail to answer some questions, then, crises emerge. It is then that a new paradigm may be suggested by the fraternity of scientists.

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