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Philosophy of Approaches in Social Sciences: A Review of Positivism, Phenomenology and Critical Social Sciences in Qualitative Research

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Abstract. Qualitative approach so as to speak has become one of the most utilized methodologies when it comes to studies that have been conducted in the realm of social sciences. While this being said, when compared to the quantitative approach, qualitative studies focus more on the textual articulation of the study than with empiricism. In this context, it often uses many of the already established theories in proceeding with its studies. This paper in particular examines how qualitative studies are conducted under the philosophical underpinnings rooted in positivism, phenomenology and critical social science.

1. Introduction

In the modern-day world social research has become a common phenomenon with over millions of studies conducted every year across the globe. Social research can be defined as a purposive and rigorous investigation that aims to generate new knowledge. It is the intellectual tool of social scientists, which allows them to enter contexts of personal and/or public interest that are unknown to them, and to search for answers to their questions. Social research is about discovery, expanding the horizons of the known, of confidence, new ideas and new conclusions about all aspects of life (Sarantakos, 2012).

Social research is different from that of natural sciences, since social researchers have to do their research about people and their interactions, whereas it becomes difficult of mathematical precision, which we find under studies conducted by natural scientists. While natural scientists have formulas that could be utilized for their studies, social scientist have to find rationalization for their studies through the philosophical underpinnings. General philosophy of science is in large part about clarifying general scientific concepts, especially explanation and confirmation. The goal is to produce a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for application of these concepts (Kincaid, 2012).

If there are questions the sciences cannot answer and questions about why the sciences cannot answer them, why should a scientist, in particular a behavioural or social scientist, take any interest in them? The reason is simple. Though the sciences cannot answer philosophical questions, individual scientists have to take sides on the right answers to them. The stance scientists take on answers to philosophical questions will decide upon the questions they

consider answerable by science and choose to address, as well as the methods and techniques they employ to answer them. Sometimes scientists take sides consciously. More often, they take sides on philosophical questions by their very choice of question, and without realizing it. The philosophy of science may be able to vindicate those choices. (Rosenberg, 2018).

The philosophy of social science examines some of the perennial questions of philosophy by engaging with the empirical study of human society. The questions distinctive of the philosophy of the social sciences are encompassed within three broad themes: normativity, naturalism, and reductionism. The questions of normativity concern the place of values in social scientific inquiry, the questions of naturalism concern the relationship between the natural and the social sciences and the questions of reductionism ask how social structures relate to the individuals who constitute them (Risjord, 2014).

Social scientist employs many mythologies in conducting their studies and the qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches are often used in studies. This paper discusses on the philosophical approaches of positivism, phenomenology and critical social sciences as used in qualitative studies.

2. Nature of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. As a research strategy it is broadly inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist, but qualitative researchers do not always subscribe to all three of these features (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative research is a procedure that operates within a naturalistic, interpretive domain, guided by the standards and principles of a relativist orientation, a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. Nonetheless, the structure of qualitative research is not interpreted and practised by the researchers the same way, to the extent that some writers argue that there is not one but many qualitative methodologies; and that there is no common denominator in the various qualitative directions in social research (Sarantakos, 2012). Qualitative research can now be found in many different areas within the 'discipline' of business, management and organisational research, including those traditionally seen as founded upon objectivity, 'facts', numbers and quantification (Cassell, Cunliffe, & Grandy, 2018).

Qualitative methodology was developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, across a range of disciplines, on varied and sometimes conflicting philosophical and theoretical bases, including cultural anthropology, interpretive sociologies (such as symbolic interactionism), phenomenology and, more recently, hermeneutics, critical theory, feminism, post-colonial theory, cultural studies, post-structuralism and postmodernism. These diverse approaches inevitably give rise to substantial differences and disagreements about the nature of qualitative research, the role of the researcher, the use of various methods and the analysis of data. Although qualitative and quantitative research have traditionally been seen as opposed, and there are differences in terms of the underlying philosophical approaches, these differences are not always clear-cut. For example, qualitative research is increasingly used for theory testing as well as theory generation. Many studies have used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The value of qualitative research in a variety of settings, including market research and applied social research, has increasingly been recognized (Jupp, 2006).

3. Philosophical Approaches in Qualitative Studies

Efforts to establish the legitimacy of qualitative research have often taken the form of vociferous arguments for the merits of qualitative approaches, typically cast in terms of the contrasts between these and the more widely accepted quantitative approaches to knowledge

production (Leavy, 2014). The growing interest in researchers in qualitative research represents a reaction against the prevailing view of subjectivity and the nature of reality that is established as a premise in the positivist tradition. It is a reaction against a focus on an external reality, an existence of things and others independent of a subject who experiences them (Munhall P. L., 2001).

Qualitative approaches in science are distinct modes of inquiry oriented toward understanding the unique nature of human thoughts, behaviors, negotiations and institutions under different sets of historical and environmental circumstances. It uses such methods as nonnumerical organization and interpretation of data in order to discover patterns, themes, forms and qualities found in field notes, interview transcripts, open-ended questionnaires, journals and diaries. In particular, it is used when there is little known about a domain, when the investigator suspects that the present knowledge or theories may be biased or when the research question pertains to understanding or describing a particular phenomenon or event about which little is known (Munhall P. , 1989).

The philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research are discussed in varying detail by a number of general practice academics. The goals of qualitative research are the usual point of departure from traditional quantitative methods. While quantitative research explores the relationships between discreet measurable variables and outcomes, qualitative research is used to explore meanings and patterns, inconsistencies and conflicts in people's thoughts and behaviours (Britten, 1995). Qualitative research is explicitly interpretive. Researchers acknowledge that the analytical process involves interpreting the meanings, values, experiences, opinions and behaviours of other people. This process has been described as descriptive-inductive to distinguish it from the hypothetico-deductive means of drawing results in quantitative research (Whittaker, 1996). This interpretive and interactive quality of qualitative research is a reflection of ontological and epistemological assumptions that often differ from those of traditional quantitative research. It is apparent that much qualitative or social general practice research is certainly conducted within the philosophical and theoretical foundations and assumptions that underpin traditional biomedical quantitative research with its positivist orientation. The adoption of qualitative methods is no guarantee of researcher reflexivity or engagement with the methodological issues of qualitative research (Jaye, 2002).

3.1 Positivism

Positivism has a long history and a critical role in the development of science. According to some, the tradition of positivism can be traced back to the time of the Renaissance. For example, Italian scientist and scholar Galileo Galilei's (1564–1642) Sidereus Nuncius, or The Starry Messenger (1610), included using systematic astronomical observations to prove and extend the Copernican model. Comte's work has also proposed that society evolves through three successive stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. The term positivism was coined by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), along with the term 'sociology'. His use of the word positivism implied that this was a positive philosophy and little to do with later positivist philosophy of science influenced by empiricism. He did, however, advocate the development of sociology as a science, but in the context of a shift in societal belief systems from theological, to metaphysical and finally scientific. This was his Law of the Three Stages. Comte's positivism has had little influence on social research and is only of historical importance in sociology.

Emile Durkheim's (1858–1917) influence was altogether greater and he was one of the pioneers of the numeric analysis of large data sets in his comparative international study of suicide (Durkheim, 1952). In recent years the positivistic aspects of Durkheim's work have been less accentuated and indeed his emphasis on 'social facts' as knowable objects place him

closer to realism than positivism. Nevertheless, he equally stressed the importance of scientific detachment and value freedom in sociological research, an approach shared by the later logical positivists. However, unlike the latter, Durkheim was a methodological holist arguing that social facts (for example, rules, laws, practices) could not be reduced to explanations at an individual level.

Positivism relates to the philosophical stance of the natural scientist and entails working with an observable social reality to produce law-like generalisations. It promises unambiguous and accurate knowledge and originates in the works of Francis Bacon, Auguste Comte and the early twentieth-century group of philosophers and scientists known as the Vienna Circle. The label positivism refers to the importance of what is 'posited' (i.e., 'given'). This emphasises the positivist focus on strictly scientific empiricist method designed to yield pure data and facts uninfluenced by human interpretation or bias (Saunders, 2018). Positivism entails elements of both a deductive approach and an inductive strategy. Also, a fairly sharp distinction is drawn between theory and research. The role of research is to test theories and to provide material for the development of laws (Bryman, 2012). Positivism is said to be the methodological underpinning of survey research and experimental approaches, though in describing it thus there is a conflation between scientific approaches to social research in general and the particular position of positivism (Jupp, 2006).

There have been several versions of positivism, and though all favour a scientific approach to investigation they are not synonymous with science and indeed in the natural sciences positivism disappeared as an important methodological position many decades ago Nevertheless, it was via the positivist movement that social science became science and was the form in which scientific method entered the study of the social world. There are three main forms of positivism that have been historically important to social science, though arguably none is present to any great extent today. In today's sociological studies, especially those focusing on business and management, the use of the word 'positivist' frequently emphasizes an objectivist epistemology which seeks to 'explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements'

The positivist paradigm and qualitative research methods may seem to contradict each other. Specifically, positivism was traditionally considered to be chiefly associated with quantitative methods, whereas qualitative research tends to be associated with more subjectivist positions of the researchers. However, the positivist paradigm and qualitative methods can coexist in harmony. In fact, positivist qualitative research represents a uniquely useful and extensively adopted genre of academic inquiry. Ontologically, positivist qualitative research assumes the existence searching for, through non-statistical means, regularities and causal relationships between different elements of the reality, and summarizing identified patterns into generalized findings. Methodologically, positivist qualitative research tends to emphasize a nomothetic rather than idiographic approach; this approach utilizes systematic research protocols and techniques to develop and test theoretical models or propositions in accordance with the canons of scientific rigor of an objective, external reality that can be apprehended and summarized, although not readily quantified. Epistemologically, positivist qualitative research focuses on searching for, through non-statistical means, regularities and causal relationships between different elements of the reality, and summarizing identified patterns into generalized findings. Methodologically, positivist qualitative research tends to emphasize a nomothetic rather than idiographic approach; this approach utilizes systematic research protocols and techniques to develop and test theoretical models or propositions in accordance with the canons of scientific rigor (Cassell, Cunliffe, & Grandy, 2018).

3.2 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a school of philosophy developed in the first quarter of the twentieth century by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). It has been influential in sociology, particularly in the writings of Alfred Schutz (1962). An associated school of psychology has been vigorously developed by a small group of enthusiasts, without attaining widespread influence, though, on its more philosophical side, it has been advanced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962). Phenomenology can be identified as one of the main intellectual traditions that has been responsible for the anti-positivist position has been phenomenology, a philosophy that is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them and how in particular the philosopher should bracket out preconceptions in his or her grasp of that world. The initial application of phenomenological ideas to the social sciences is attributed to the work of Schutz's, whose work did not come to the notice of most English-speaking social scientists until the translation from German of his major writings in the 1960s, some twenty or more years after they had been written. His work was profoundly influenced by Weber's concept of *Verstehen*, as well as by phenomenological philosophers, like Husserl.

Under the Weberian exposition of Verstehen and phenomenology, it has been necessary to skate over some complex issues. In particular, Weber's examination of Verstehen is far more complex than the above commentary suggests, because the empathetic understanding that seems to be implied above was not the way in which he applied it (Bauman 1978), while the question of what is and is not a genuinely phenomenological approach to the social sciences

is a matter of some dispute (Heap and Roth 1973). However, the similarity in the writings of the hermeneutic– phenomenological tradition and of the Verstehen approach, with their emphasis upon social action as being meaningful to actors and therefore needing to be interpreted from their point of view, coupled with the rejection of positivism, contributed to a stream of thought often referred to as interpretivism.

One can synthesize the basic assumptions of phenomenological research as being implicit in seven characteristics. The first is "fidelity to the phenomena as it is lived." The phenomenological interpretation of living is composed of both experience and behavior. The lived experience must be the guide in understanding other people and what things mean to them. The second characteristic is the "primacy of life-world". This life-world is viewed as experience within the world as we live it, prior to any explanation or theoretical interpretation. Conceptual and theoretical notions are not automatically assumed to be relevant to the individual. In phenomenology one's perceptions and actions are seen as meaningful expressions of being-in-the-world. The third characteristic of phenomenological research is its descriptive approach. Next is the expression of the situation from the viewpoint of the subject. Fifth, the lived situation is the basic unit of research. This would include the assumption that the significant factors for research are the meanings given to the lived situation by the subject and the researcher. Sixth is a biographical emphasis because all human phenomena are temporal, historical and personal. Included in this characteristic is the phenomenological approach which seeks to formulate its key terms after contact with the data. The seventh characteristic is phenomenology's aim to be presuppositionless description. This is accomplished by explicitly setting forth the investigator's presuppositions. A search for meaning is the final characteristic; the method is to directly interrogate the phenomena itself in the search for meaning (Knaack, 1984).

A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (e.g., grief is universally experienced). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. To this end,

qualitative researchers identify a phenomenon, an "object" of human experience. It can also be described as as beginning "with wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself. It can only be pursued while surrounding to a state of wonder" (Creswel, 2018). This human experience may be a phenomenon such as insomnia, being left out, anger, grief, or undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery. The inquirer then collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. This description consists of "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

3.3 Critical Social Science

Critical social science is characterised by a concern with the social conditions that contribute to relations of domination and oppression. Moreover, this cluster of theories incorporates explanation, evaluation and programs of action for addressing injustice by pursuing social change. This is the research program undertaken by a variety of social theorists that are strongly influenced by critical theory. Critical theory of society, in turn, can be characterized as being of a practical philosophy and explanatory social science, sharing and radically reforming the intentions of both. Practical philosophy is concerned with the specifics of ethical and political life (praxis) and the actions that must be undertaken to achieve the good life; explanatory social science produces scientific knowledge of the general causes of social action. Critical social science is characterized by several general themes. First, its aim, broadly conceived, is to integrate theory and practice in such a way that individuals and groups become aware of the contradictions and distortions in their belief systems and social practices and are then inspired to change those beliefs and practices. Its method here is immanent critique, which challenges belief systems and social relations not by comparing them to some set of external standards but by showing that these practices do not measure up to their own standards and are internally inconsistent, hypocritical, incoherent, and hence comprise a false consciousness.

Second, critical social science is thus practical and normative and not merely descriptive and explanatory. Third, it is foregrounded in a critique of instrumental, technical reason. Critical theorists (among other social theorists) argue that this kind of means-end reasoning is pervasive; it informs the traditional empirical-analytic sciences and dominates not only societal processes and cultural meaning but also the dynamics of personality formation. Critical social scientists argue that instrumental reason aims to eliminate crises, conflict, and critique. Although founded in the Enlightenment bid to liberate people from myth, ignorance, and oppression, the rationalization of social and individual life by means of instrumental reason actually works to suppress the very self-transformative, self-reflexive, critical, liberating impulses on which it was founded. Critical inquiry supports a kind of reasoning that is practical, moral, and ethically and politically informed. Fourth, to retain or recapture the Enlightenment belief in the power of human reason to affect individual and social transformation, critical social science argues that a form of inquiry is needed that fosters enlightened self-knowledge and effective social-political action. The logic of critical social inquiry requires linking hermeneutic and explanatory social scientific interests to normative concerns. This feature of critical social science marks it as distinctly different from social science characterized by naturalism and antinaturalism. Finally, critical social science is self-reflexive. To prevent a critical theory of society from becoming yet another self-serving ideology, the theory must account for its own conditions of possibility and its transformative effects. It rejects the idea of disinterested social science and emphasizes attending to the cultural and historical conditions on which the theorist's own intellectual activity depends.

In research, critical theory can be defined by the particular configuration of methodological postures it embraces. The critical researcher might design, for example, an ethnographic study to include changes in how people think; encourage people to interact, form networks, become activists, and form action-oriented groups; and help individuals examine the conditions of their existence. The end goal of the study might be social theorizing, which can be defined as "the desire to comprehend and, in some cases, transform (through praxis) the underlying orders of social life—those social and systemic relations that constitute society" (Jupp, 2006). The investigator accomplishes this, for example, through an intensive case study or across a small number of historically comparable cases of specific actors (biographies), mediations, or systems and through "ethnographic accounts (interpretive social psychology), componential taxonomies (cognitive anthropology), and formal models (mathematical sociology)". The design of research within a critical theory approach, according to sociologist, falls into two broad categories: methodological, in that it affects the ways in which people write and read, and substantive, in the theories and topics of the investigator (e.g., theorizing about the role of the state and culture in advanced capitalism). As a study of the manifestations of resistance and state regulation, it highlights ways in which actors come to terms with and struggle against cultural forms that dominate them. Resistance is also the theme addressed in an ethnography of a subcultural group of youths (Moustakas, 1994).

4. Discussion

Qualitative method is particular has shown a great tendency to be one of the most favourite methods that have been used by researchers in recent times. While it lacks some of the scientific precision that is present under natural sciences, those who are involved with social sciences have been fond of the qualitative methodology. When we compare the approaches discussed above, it seems clear that positivism as an approach is somewhat contradictory with the idea of qualitative research, at least from a historical perspective due to the subjective nature of social sciences and the inherent vices of the qualitative method.

Quantitative research historically has dwelled at the dedicated positivism end, whereas qualitative research arose as the alternative when post-positivist thinking began to hold sway. In the older positivist view, language was conceived to be adequate to represent objective reality- the "real" beyond the limitations of human subjectivity. Language, although sufficient to mediate objective truth, is powerfully assisted in that task- the task of research – by numbers, which are capable of even purer approximations of truth-as-such. Numbers get us so close to the "real" - to the objective, the verifiable, the factual, the actual, to being in essence, otherwise known as truth- as to be identical with, or at least paradigmatic of, truth in essence. In the positivist mind-set, when using language, we must push it as far as we can to the objective Condition of mathematics, a voiding the sloppiness of subjectivity that can creep in, if we are not careful, such as calling ourselves "I" rather than" the researcher," or calling the people we are researching" they" rather than" subjects," and so on.

However, this is not to say that positivist qualitative is not possible. In positivist qualitative research, the input of the research process typically consists of a variety of data, especially unstructured data. The sources of data include interviews, observations, videos, and documents. Interviews usually consist of open-ended or semi-structured questions about subjects' experience, perceptions, and knowledge. In the final publication, interviews are usually incorporated in the form of direct quotations. Observations and videos capture actions, interactions, conversations, practices, processes, and other dynamics at multiple levels, including individual, interpersonal, group, community, organizational, interorganizational, and industry. The data are incorporated into the final publication as field notes. Documents include

written records, official publications and reports, correspondence, press releases, memorabilia, artistic works, photographs, films, and videotapes. Excerpts of documents can be included in the final publication to support and explain the findings. A key benefit of utilizing the diverse forms of data is the creation of a 'thick description' capturing both detailed content and rich context of the studied phenomena.

When one considers about phenomenology, where the core of the study remains with the study of a phenomenon and generalization of lived experiences of the individuals as a collective theme, it is one of the most apt and compatible philosophies that is could be utilized under qualitative studies. Phenomenology, as opposed to positivism looks at the individual cases with an aim of generalization that could be used with some reliability, even though if the cases were to be taken subjectively, it would perhaps be more accurate assumption under a qualitative study to use those individual experiences at forming generalizations. On the other hand, phenomenology requires at least some understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions, and researchers should identify these assumptions in their studies. These philosophical ideas are abstract concepts and not easily seen in a written phenomenological study. In addition, the participants in the study need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, so that the researcher, in the end, can forge a common understanding. Finding individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon may be difficult given a research topic.

Critical theory is a term that is often evoked and frequently misunderstood. It usually refers to the theoretical tradition developed by the Frankfurt school; a group of writers connected to the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. However, none of the Frankfurt school theorists ever claimed to have developed a unified approach to cultural criticism. The critical social science approach seeks to show the contradictions the the perceived truth and the actual realities of the society, where by the process is advanced to change those belief systems that exists that do not match with the existing realities. Under qualitative method, critical theory has found its place as one prominent domain which is utilised for critique the existing facts through words and symbols so as to explain the gap between what is believed to be and the reality of the social existence. This approach is distinguishable from the traditional approaches to theorizing which is more focused on empiricism. This traditional approach takes for granted the fact; humans perceive things based upon the existence of theories without critiquing its actual existence. This approach employs the method of immanent critique, working from within categories of existing thought in order to radicalize these categories, reveal their internal contradictions and shortcomings, and demonstrate their unrecognized possibilities.

5. Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that, qualitative method, being more focused on the words, actions, symbols and lived experiences of individuals, unlike in the quantitative method, where quantification and empiricism plays a pivotal part in its analysis, has become a common method used and favoured by many researchers who are conduiting studies in the field of social sciences. The attractiveness of the qualitative method for researchers in the realm of social sciences lies in the fact that, in studying the human interactions and giving meaning to them, the explanations, generalization through phenomenon and critiquing the differences between the established theories and the existing realities the approaches of phenomenology and critical social sciences have been more conducive and convenient for them. In this regard, the positivistic approach advanced by those who are more in favour of the quantitative method, where quantification and empiricism are the underlining thread coming under researchers and

studies carried out under the realm of natural sciences is still looked with scepticism by researchers who adhere with the qualitative approach. However, the development of new technologies and the plethora of work that is made available suggests that, in the future instead of being skeptical, those who are doing qualitative studies would also find some value and use for the positivistic approach as well.

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