



PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH (POSITIVISM, PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH & CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCES).

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the philosophical underpinnings and methodological frameworks of positivism, phenomenology and critical sociology as they apply to the study of human behaviour within the social sciences. Originating from distinct historical contexts, these approaches offer contrasting perspectives on knowledge construction and interpretation. Positivism rooted in empirical observation and the scientific method seeks to uncover universal laws governing human behavior through systematic data collection and analysis. In contrast, phenomenology emphasizes the subjective experiences and meanings individuals attribute to their social interactions advocating for an inductive approach that prioritizes understanding over explanation. Critical sociology, drawing from critical theory critiques positivist and phenomenological approaches for their perceived limitations in addressing power dynamics, social inequalities and the complexities of social structures. This synthesizes these perspectives, highlighting their contributions and limitations in advancing the understanding of human behavior and societal dynamics. It underscores the importance of adopting multiple methodological approaches in sociology to enrich our comprehension of diverse social phenomena and to foster a more inclusive and critical examination of social reality.

KEYWORDS: Positivism, Phenomenological Approach, Critical Social Sciences, Qualitative Researches, Methodology

Introduction

To explore social dynamics across diverse systems a sociological perspective is indispensable for analysing human actions and behaviours within societal contexts. Sociology is characterized by its adoption of multiple methodological approaches rather than relying on a single method. As posited by Haralambos and Holborn (1995) science holds the capacity to generate objective knowledge that markedly enhances human productivity and provides solutions previously beyond reach. Consequently, this article will focus on three primary approaches to advancing global knowledge specifically within the framework of epistemology in relation to ontology.

The acquisition of contemporary knowledge aligns with the systematic evolution of human thought, tracing its origins to the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome. The pursuit of understanding the world serves dual purposes: it satisfies human curiosity and constitutes an intellectual endeavour. Two primary methodologies exist for constructing knowledge about the world.

1. Academic Convention
2. Scientific Convention

The scientific method emerged from the amalgamation of academic and scientific conventions as articulated by Francis Bacon in England. Bacon employed metaphors to illustrate the roles of different actors in knowledge production: the craftsman as a termite which works without innovation and the scholar as a spider which spins without external contribution. In contrast, Bacon likened the scientist to a bee transforming raw material into valuable honey through a blend of innate capabilities and natural substances. According to Bacon the scientist's primary duty is to investigate nature thoroughly and uncover its concealed principles for the benefit of human society. This task necessitates a synthesis of academic rigor and scientific methodology to construct reliable knowledge.

Both the natural sciences and social sciences adopt these traditions in their research practices. Particularly within sociology these methodologies are employed to study individual interactions and societal dynamics. By the close of the twentieth century scientific approaches had permeated nearly every discipline within the social sciences marking a significant evolution in research methodologies (Uyangoda, 2010).

Research methods employed to investigate human behaviour differ markedly from those used in natural sciences, primarily due to the presence of consciousness among individuals which necessitates distinct methodologies in the study of social sciences. Sociologists employ a range of cognitive methods to gather data for social research. Within this framework the positivist approach, phenomenological approach and critical social science are of particular significance. Critical social science has emerged as an alternative paradigm to the aforementioned traditions.

Key concepts

Positivism

Positivism a philosophical stance established by Auguste Comte and Henry D. St. Simon asserts that the existence of phenomena must be observable in its factual state. Comte in advocating for positivism aimed to validate sociology as a discipline akin to the natural sciences drawing parallels with Newton's law of gravity. Scholars like Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim subsequently applied this approach to formulate empirically grounded laws based on data analysis. Comte proposed that by adopting scientific methodologies universal laws governing society could be derived impartially, devoid of researcher biases, opinions or subjective judgments (Ryan, 2018).

Central to positivism is the systematic identification, measurement and evaluation of phenomena to offer coherent explanations. These explanations endeavour to

establish causal relationships and correlations among variables, thereby connecting them to specific theoretical frameworks or practical applications.

Positivism is rooted in empirical, conclusive and rational evidence that is subject to verification. It posits that scientific advancements will eventually resolve the challenges facing humanity. This perspective contends that our perception of reality may not align with objective reality. According to positivism, the reality of phenomena can be classified into three categories: true, false, and meaningless. This classification implies that any phenomenon must be either verifiable or falsifiable through scientifically accepted methodologies. A phenomenon categorized as meaningless is one that cannot be scrutinized using a clear and definitive methodology (Uyangoda, 2010). For instance, the assertion that "an individual can attain heaven by accumulating merit" falls into the meaningless category because it cannot be empirically verified or falsified using scientific methods.

Confirming the accuracy of knowledge construction constitutes a fundamental aspect of the positivist approach extensively employed in natural scientific research and pivotal in advancing various sociological theories such as structuralism, functionalism and exchange theory. The positivist approach underscores several key principles.

1. The positivist perspective asserts that reality exists independently of human cognition existing external to human beings.
2. Positivist methodologies investigate this external reality in a manner that is detached from the researcher's subjective opinions and biases.
3. According to positivism objective knowledge is characterized as impartial, scientific and capable of verification.
4. Employing objective research methods is crucial in acquiring empirical data about the tangible world employing both quantitative and quantifiable data for this purpose (Uyangoda, 2010).

Hence, it is evident that phenomena in both the natural and social realms operate independently of individual influence. Realism serves as a methodological approach employed to acknowledge and comprehend these phenomena.

Realism is applied within the natural sciences emphasizing the importance of inductive reasoning. This method initiates with the collection of empirical data followed by meticulous analysis aimed at identifying patterns and regularities. The approach employs iterative reasoning, progressing incrementally from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories. It begins with precise data collection and measurement, identifies emerging patterns and generates initial hypotheses. Through iterative refinement and empirical validation this process ultimately leads to the formulation of comprehensive conclusions or theories.

Despite the significant influence of positivism in social research its adoption is not universally embraced by sociologists. Many advocate for the deductive methodology as an alternative approach. The deductive method operates as a top-down system sharing some similarities with positivism while also exhibiting distinct differences.

Karl Popper introduced this alternative method in his seminal work *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* in 1959. Popper contends that scientists should commence their inquiry with a hypothesis or conjecture derived from an existing theory and subsequently subject it to rigorous testing. In contrast, positivist researchers frequently prioritize the use of quantitative data and employ experimental methods, surveys and statistical analysis in their investigations.

2.2 Phenomenology

Phenomenology emerged within European philosophy in the latter part of the 19th century primarily led by its founder Edmund Husserl along with contributions from thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. This approach marks a significant advancement in

sociological methodology positioned in deliberate contrast to positivism. Phenomenology aims to comprehend the interactions that individuals engage in as social beings. Researchers employing this method investigate the individuals with whom interactions occur, the intentions and purposes guiding these interactions and the meanings attributed to them. Social researchers utilize phenomenology to explore these subjective experiences and interpretations (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004).

As Solokowski (2000) elucidates phenomenology concerns the examination of human experiences and how these experiences are perceived and expressed. This approach emphasizes that knowledge should be understood as a construct influenced by societal factors. Phenomenology posits that social reality is not solely determined by individual or external factors but emerges through historical processes wherein society collectively assigns diverse meanings to phenomena. It underscores that knowledge evolves through social interactions, necessitating the development of specific methodologies designed to investigate these dynamics.

Phenomenological methodology places its central focus on investigating human experiences within the realm of everyday life and the interpretations individuals assign to these experiences. Understanding human activity involves not only grasping the meanings individuals attribute to their actions but also discerning the broader contextual significances inherent in these actions. In societal contexts individuals often convey their thoughts and emotions indirectly through symbols and expressions rather than explicit verbalization.

This approach enables researchers to uncover the underlying conditions and expectations that guide individuals in their interactions with the world. Phenomenology aims to explore the intrinsic essence of experienced phenomena avoiding reliance on predefined scientific concepts or hypotheses. Researchers engage directly with the lived experiences and perceptions of participants to uncover the fundamental nature of events as they are subjectively understood.

Central to phenomenology is the imperative to set aside preconceived notions and biases in order to authentically grasp the human experience as it unfolds (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004).

Critical social science

Critical sociology primarily seeks to introduce an impartial approach to social research influenced significantly by the contributions of the Frankfurt School. This concept has been widely applied across the social and anthropological sciences offering substantial insights into the study of social and cultural phenomena. Critics argue that positivist methodology is criticized for its perceived narrowness, lack of democratic inclusiveness and insufficient consideration of humanitarian perspectives (Given, 2018). Moreover, critics assert that the phenomenological approach overlooks the broader social contexts shaping individual experiences and may struggle to fully capture the nuanced meanings individuals attribute to their social actions.

A central principle of critical sociology is its contention that societal phenomena may not inherently reflect true reality. It asserts that to fully understand the genuine significance of social processes. It is crucial to examine them through alternative perspectives that reveal concealed meanings. Critical sociology challenges the assumption that truth can be comprehended exclusively through quantitative or qualitative methods. According to Michael Scriven and Richard Paul (2003) critical thinking is characterized as a disciplined intellectual process that skilfully conceives, applies and assesses information derived from observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or communication (Fay, 1987).

Critical sociologists posit that a particular social phenomenon exhibits diverse manifestations that differ in terms of reality, truth and empirical basis. Empirical reality is directly accessible to individuals through sensory perception, facilitating the exploration of the tangible world. However, a significant challenge emerges when empirical observation becomes intertwined with personal experience.

Scholars underscore that personal experiences are inevitably influenced by underlying theories or concepts. As social beings, individuals engage with and negotiate their social milieu through processes of socialization (Kara, 2018). Critical sociologists argue that individuals often act based on these conceptual frameworks.

Method & Materials

The methodological framework outlined herein serves as a critical shortcut in the overarching research endeavour. Within this context research methodology assumes a paramount role in the investigative process embodying the selection of a suitable and appropriate method from a myriad of approaches and methodologies available (Uyangoda, 2015). The overarching quality of research is contingent upon the methodology employed by the researcher. Methodology refers to the techniques utilized for data analysis. Within the framework of research methodology several steps are involved in obtaining information pertinent to the study encompassing processes such as sample selection, data collection and analysis.

Mainly secondary data sources were utilized for data collection including recent scholarly researches, international articles and journals. Additionally, books, newspapers, magazines and internet sources were consulted. Secondary data which refers to datasets collected by entities separate from the researcher using them is highly valuable in research endeavours. This type of data acquisition allows for the creation of extensive and robust databases which in turn contribute to solving complex problems. Secondary data typically originates from external sources but it can also include data initially gathered within an organization and later repurposed for different investigative purposes. Acquiring data involves examining relevant documents, reports and other pertinent materials already available within this context.

Secondary data, denoting datasets gathered by entities distinct from the one utilizing them, holds significant utility within research endeavours. This form of data acquisition facilitates the construction of expansive and robust databases, thereby contributing to the resolution of complex problems. The supplementation of primary datasets with secondary data amplifies the caliber and precision of analytical insights. Predominantly, secondary data emanates from external sources yet it also encompasses data initially collected within an organization and subsequently repurposed for alternate investigative purposes. Data acquisition can be achieved through the examination of pertinent documents, reports and other relevant materials presently assembled in this context.

Results&Discussion

Positivism constitutes a systematic approach for evaluating the validity of knowledge through empirical evidence closely aligned with the methodologies of natural sciences. This approach has significantly advanced scientific inquiry facilitating the development of theoretical frameworks such as structural functionalism, exchange theory and rational choice theory. Positivist researchers prioritize specific quantitative data and employ methods such as surveys, experiments and statistical analysis to rigorously scrutinize numerical data and test hypotheses. By applying deductive reasoning to empirical observations of human behaviour positivists aim to predict and explain typical human behaviours.

The primary goal of research employing the positivist method is to uncover universal causes of human behaviour and provide scientific explanations for these phenomena. Some positivists argue that human knowledge is inherently limited suggesting that ultimate knowledge resides exclusively with a divine entity. From this perspective human understanding is constrained within the parameters established by divine providence (Kara, 2018).

According to positivist theory reality exists externally, independent of individual cognition or activity and is discoverable by humans. Positivism asserts the

existence of an objective world that operates as an abstract concept, separate from subjective perceptions. Through suitable methodologies it is feasible to investigate and understand this external reality (Crotty, 2003).

A fundamental principle of positivism is the imperative for researchers whether studying social or non-social phenomena to minimize the influence of personal biases and subjective experiences. This approach underscores the importance of ensuring that such biases do not affect the collection of data or the interpretations derived from it. Positivist research methods are designed to reveal objective data and factual insights in an impartial manner. Quantitative data assumes a pivotal role within this framework with surveys, experiments and statistical analysis constituting common methods employed to gather and analyze data for the formulation of hypotheses.

The epistemology of positivism is aligned with a systematic philosophy of quantitative research employing methods analogous to those utilized in the natural sciences for the study of sociology (Crotty, 2003). Accordingly grasping the essence of reality within positivist research necessitates measurement and validation substantiated by empirical evidence (Hammersley, 2013).

Positivist researchers strive to identify patterns and regularities within empirical data in order to elucidate "rules of explanation" pertaining to the phenomena under investigation. This approach relies on factual evidence and data to discern underlying structures and causal relationships.

In contrast, the phenomenological perspective diverges significantly from positivism. Phenomenology asserts that the social world is not simply constructed from observable facts alone but emerges from the interactions and actions occurring within it. Therefore, interpreting social variables merely as objects is considered inadequate (Uyangoda, 2010). Phenomenological researchers are primarily concerned with exploring the deeper dimensions of human experience that transcend empirical data (Uyangoda, 2010). They aim to comprehend the

subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals attribute to their lived experiences highlighting the richness and complexity inherent in human consciousness and interaction.

Positivism asserts that the natural world exhibits orderliness and can be comprehended through logical reasoning and predictive methods facilitating the discovery of natural laws and knowledge. In contrast, social reality is perceived as stable marked by persistent patterns and laws that dictate future outcomes (Kara, 2018).

Positivist assumptions encompass the perspective that humans are rational beings motivated by self-interest and that universal factors affect all individuals equally. Positivist researchers attain insights into reality through observation and analysis of human behavior. They emphasize determinism in human actions prioritizing the influence of external factors over individual agency. Positivism applies technical frameworks to the application of knowledge and the explanation of phenomena, employing diverse orientations to comprehend how humans exert influence on events within their environment.

However, phenomenology faces challenges in measuring human behaviour similar to those encountered in the natural sciences. Human motivations are intricate and influenced by subjective factors that are not always readily observable. Unlike positivism, phenomenologists contend that individuals interpret events in diverse ways leading to a preference for gathering natural, first hand data to generate new theories (Kara, 2018). This approach underscores the complexity and diversity of human experiences prioritizing qualitative methods to investigate subjective meanings and interpretations.

Phenomenology places significant emphasis on understanding subjective experiences rather than exclusively concentrating on objective facts or observations. Its central objective is to reveal the meanings and distinctive perspectives that underpin actions within a social context. German philosopher

Wilhelm Dilthey argued that sociology's fundamental task is to examine everyday life, whereas Max Weber posited that sociology should investigate social actions to illuminate human existence. Individuals' thoughts are notably influenced by the nature of their actions.

Social structures and phenomena should be comprehended as intricate networks of interactions that evolve over time shaped by prevailing belief systems and social practices within shared living environments. Within this framework of social relations various social groups negotiate consensus and participate in unique activities. Phenomenology rooted in this theoretical underpinning emerges as a pivotal methodology for interpreting how individuals organize themselves within society. It enables researchers to explore the subjective meanings individuals assign to their actions thereby shedding light on the intricacies of social organization and interaction.

Phenomenology is fundamentally concerned with offering explanations that probe deeper into intimate phenomena focusing on how individuals interact and relate within social contexts. It entails systematic analysis of socially significant actions involving direct observation and meticulous documentation of human behaviours in their everyday settings.

The objective of phenomenological research is to develop an understanding of social existence and to formulate innovative explanations for human behaviour within real-life environments. Phenomenologists contend that all human actions are intentional and inherently embedded in social contexts conceptualizing human social life as a dynamic phenomenon. Unlike positivists who prioritize quantitative data phenomenological researchers concentrate on uncovering profound human experiences and relational dynamics that inform empirical observations (Pham, 2018). This approach underscores the richness and complexity inherent in human social interactions seeking to illuminate the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their actions and relationships.

Positivist researchers assert that social life exists externally to the individual and must be objectively discovered through empirical investigation. In contrast, phenomenological researchers adopt an interpretive stance focusing on the subjective meanings ascribed by individuals themselves. Phenomenologists seek to address fundamental inquiries such as: What do individuals perceive as true?, How do they define their actions?. Within this framework phenomenological researchers aim to uncover the underlying meanings of people's actions and interactions with others. They prioritize understanding the subjective perspectives and interpretations that individuals bring to their social experiences emphasizing the exploration of human consciousness and lived experiences in their research (Pham, 2018). This approach highlights the nuanced and contextdependent nature of social reality as perceived and understood by individuals themselves.

Positivists assert that scientific knowledge surpasses common sense in comprehending the world. In contrast, phenomenology acknowledges the role of common sense in guiding everyday human activities. Phenomenologists argue that common sense and scientific laws represent distinct frameworks for interpreting the world each offering unique perspectives (Kara, 2018). Consequently, phenomenological researchers recognize the significance of both scientific principles and common sense in understanding human behaviour and social phenomena. They emphasize that while scientific laws provide structured explanations, common sense informs practical decision-making and social interactions in everyday life. This perspective underscores the complementary relationship between scientific inquiry and ordinary knowledge enriching the understanding of diverse human experiences and interpretations.

Positivism and phenomenology diverge notably in their methodologies for delineating truth and falsehood. Positivism relies on logical theories and systematic analysis of facts to systematically gather and interpret data in an objective manner. It prioritizes precision impartiality from personal biases and the

observable nature of phenomena rooted in theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence.

In contrast, phenomenology defines truth relative to its significance for those investigating it highlighting the validity of a theory based on its resonance with the experiences and realities of involved individuals (Solokowski, 2000). Phenomenologists prioritize the exploration of social meanings within particular contexts emphasizing the interpretation of subjective elements and meanings. Unlike positivism, phenomenological inquiry seldom relies solely on survey questions to uncover profound insights. Phenomenological researchers aim to achieve a deep understanding of how individuals perceive and interpret the world, striving to reveal nuanced insights into human experiences and behaviours.

Some positivist researchers acknowledge the utility of phenomenology in exploratory research acknowledging its capacity to offer detailed, context-specific insights that complement more structured positivist approaches (Kara, 2018). This acknowledgment underscores the complementary roles played by positivist and phenomenological methodologies in enhancing comprehensive understandings of social phenomena.

Phenomenology centres its inquiry on human behaviour and perceptions of reality encompassing subjective experiences, cultural beliefs and societal influences. It explores how individuals interpret and engage with the world emphasizing the importance of personal perspectives and lived experiences.

In contrast, critical sociology adopts a critical realist perspective which contends that reality is complex and comprises multiple layers. It acknowledges that empirical reality can be accessed through sensory perception and observed superficially but our interpretations and experiences of this reality are not entirely objective, neutral or direct. Critical sociology argues that our comprehension of empirical reality is invariably shaped by theoretical frameworks or conceptual perspectives.

Critical sociology additionally posits that individuals are products of social construction influenced by societal structures and cultural contexts. It underscores the importance of critical inquiry in uncovering underlying power dynamics, inequalities and the intricate dynamics of social phenomena (Solokowski, 2000). This viewpoint emphasizes the critical analysis of how social structures meld individuals and societies contrasting with phenomenology's emphasis on subjective experiences and interpretations of reality.

Below is a table summarizing three cognitive approaches, each presenting unique perspectives on knowledge construction, their respective findings, the types of data used and their analytical methodologies:

	Positivism	Phenomenology	Critical Social Science
Knowledge	Explanation	Interpretation	Understanding
Seeking out	Facts, Causes	Meanings	Structural relationship
Types of data	Social facets	Social interactions	Historical, structural ideologies
Analytical approach	Scientific method	Direct involvement	Dialectical

Conclusion

The philosophies of positivism, phenomenology and critical sociology have developed from unique insights, observations and principles articulated by ancient philosophers, each providing explanations for human behaviour within specific historical and intellectual contexts. These methodological approaches have been extensively applied in the social sciences with positivism traditionally serving as the conventional framework. Over time, other theories have emerged from or diverged from this established framework often integrating its foundational

principles while also embracing broader and more adaptable theoretical perspectives (Kara, 2018). This academic viewpoint emphasizes the historical and philosophical origins of these approaches and their contributions to comprehending human behaviour in the realm of social sciences.

In sociology, a thorough grasp of positivism, phenomenology and critical sociological theory is crucial from historical and practical standpoints encompassing their similarities and distinctions. Phenomenological sociologists strive to reconcile divergent views on fundamental human nature employing inductive methods to illuminate social phenomena and observations. They prioritize the interpretation of subjective experiences and the meanings individuals attribute within their social contexts.

In contrast, critical sociologists eschew the dichotomy between positivist and phenomenological perspectives directing their focus towards studying the world as it exists rather than merely describing it. Critical sociology underscores that knowledge is intricately intertwined with power dynamics within society emphasizing how dominant discourses and structures shape social relations and perpetuate inequalities.

This academic perspective highlights the diverse approaches within sociology, each offering unique insights into human behaviour and social dynamics while also reflecting distinct philosophical and methodological orientations.

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