Positivism and Interpretivism

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Mehreen Ali[1]   Ayaz Ali Shah [2] Syed Aizaz Ali Shah[3]

Abstract: *Positivism is a research approach based on ontological principles that there is an objective reality which is free and independent of viewer and waiting to be discovered. Auguste Comte, a French philosopher from 19th century is credited for being the one who introduced the philosophy of Positivism as it stands today. Since then, positivism as a research approach has gone through different stages of evolution but Comte influence still remains dominant. Positivism tries desperately to fill the gap between natural and social sciences. Despite being an innovative and healthy concept in social research, positivism is subject to harsh criticism since its birth. There is a fundamental flaw in the assumption that positivism makes about scientific enquiry in social sciences. When positivism met criticism, Interpretivism popped up its head though it had been in use for quite a while. It is a research methods that argues that people's knowledge or understanding of reality is a social construction. In other words, it is meant that there is no objective reality or truth in social world. The entire debate between the two schools of thought revolves around the nature of reality and how it is to be discovered. If one is subjective, the other is objective in its approach to reality.*

Key Words: Positivism and Interpretivism, Positivists, Social Sciences

Introduction

Knowledge world is the unfolding of thesis and anti-thesis. No theory in history has been found so valid to have universal acceptance and unlimited life span. Rather every theory has dominated the academic world for some time but has been challenged in the due course of history by a rival and competitive theoretical conception. This is exactly true about Positivism and Interpretivism. The two stand in sharp contrast to each other with the later challenging the very fundamental principles of the former. They both present an opposing and conflicting idea about reality and consequently stand on contrasting epistemological and methodological structures. However, no doubt both have contributed a good deal to academic world and human understanding of happenings and events in social world.

Positivism

Positivism is a research approach based on ontological principles that there is an objective reality which is free and independent of viewer and waiting to be discovered (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim, & Martin, 2014). So if there is any reality, it can be known and explored through rigorous research in

[1] Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

[2] Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, KP, Pakistan. Email: ayaz_mrdn@hotmail.com.

[3] National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-iAzam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

a laboratory like settings. Reality, being monist necessitates to be studied by objective epistemology so as to ensure that the research may not be affected by researcher's own value system and may explore reality as it stands out there. In positivism, emphasis is put on impartiality of the researcher, measurement of any social fact or thing and repeatability (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim, & Martin, 2014). The question is what reality is all about. Reality is after all what is available to senses; something that be seen, observed, smelt and touched (Gray, 2004). A positivist researcher asserts that there is a social world out there that confirms to certain immutable laws and rules of causation and happening in a predictable manner. However, the intricacies and complexities of social world and human behavior should be overcome by reductionism by making them more and more simple. Moreover, positivism draws a line between empirical and normative research. As it claims to be value free, positivist research is strongly based on empirical enquiry. Its research is all about "what is" instead of "what ought to be" (Fazlıoğulları, 2012).

Auguste Comte, a French philosopher from 19th century is credited for being the one who introduced the philosophy of Positivism as it stands today. Since then, positivism as a research approach has gone through different stages of evolution but Comte influence still remains dominant. The French Philosopher was concerned that social sciences being a science of society was still languishing in the pre-scientific metaphysical stage while Physics, Astronomy and Biology had entered a new era of scientific research. So he seriously started thinking how to free social sciences to be based on facts instead of assumptions. Moreover, he explored avenues as how to collect data to test theories (Hasan, 2016). Comte put forth the idea of observation by saying that social phenomenon should be considered as things or social facts. By doing so, observation remains detached from biased moral and ethical judgments. His second argument or strategy is to put social facts into experimentation. He believed that social scientists could understand the general functioning of society by observing social pathologies just like physician can learn about normal body functioning by observing diseases. Third, he put forward the idea of comparison in social sciences as such a technique has proved helpful in revealing the knowledge about fundamental properties of human social world. The fourth and final methodological strategy given by Comte is historical analysis to explore the variant qualities and features of different societies over time to formulate them into law for social organization (Hasan, 2016).

Positivism tries desperately to fill the gap between natural and social sciences. According to positivists, events in social world, which lend themselves to discovery neither occur at random nor are they pre-destined by fate. Instead, happenings in social world are same like those of natural world, explained in terms of causes and effects with one phenomenon leading to another (Nudzor, 2009). Importantly, positivist researchers are tasked not to create patterns in social world rather they are supposed to discover them in the course of their research. However, positivists argue that reality is discovered only through the application of scientific model of research (Ryan, 2015). For that reason positivists even combine features like hypothesis testing, experimentation and then applying statistical tools for data analysis. Perhaps this has also been the reason to make social science dependent on scientific tools for the later has no place for values and ethics in research. Moreover, the application of scientific epistemology to social sciences is to chase the successes registered by natural sciences in research world.

However, there can be seen differences among positivists concerned with social sciences that how strictly verifiable statements should be in order to be accepted as true scientifically and how likely it is possible to frame actual laws governing human behavior in society even if scientific methods are applied. A social researcher can gather meaningful information about society and politics through scientific methods. However, any information to be meaningful must be verified empirically. Now the question is whether social values or facts are verifiable? There is much debate on these issues but Positivists suggest that science has made progress to an extent that it is now in a position to study the complex structure of social world.

Positivism has provided analytical tools and helped to develop intervention and evaluation methods that are more effective than those previously used in social research. Positivism has contributed a good deal to social research to be more objective, scientific and quantitative oriented to have reliable and verifiable results. Since the days of Comte, positivism has been utilized as helpful tool by social researchers to make use of large sets of data, quantitative measurement and statistical analysis. Around the world, positivism based scientific research has been able to provide suggestions and recommendation to the government on important technical policy issues ranging from food security to foreign policy matters. In almost all countries statistical data are collected on all aspects of social and economic life in social research and then analyzed to give the government recommendations on various policy matters. Moreover, the application of survey methods, questionnaires, hypotheses testing and other statistical models speak volume of the relevance of positivism in social world (Hasan, 2016).

Critique of Positivism

Despite being an innovative and healthy concept in social research, positivism is subject to harsh criticism since its birth. There is a fundamental flaw in the assumption that positivism makes about scientific enquiry in social sciences. Science produces theoretical explanations but not on the basis of observations. Science doesn't begin with observation but with theory to make observation intelligible. Thus even observations are theory based (Gray, 2004). This approach in scientific approach negates the very basic assumption of positivists. Moreover, scientific knowledge has boundaries and there are certain areas and realms where science can't give answers to questions in social science. For example in matters of arts and aesthetics, it is almost impossible for what constitute good and bad tastes to reduce into laws of science. Same is the case with matters in religion and faith (Nudzor, 2009). The research will further be subject to deficiencies in social science by putting other limitations like value free and impartiality of the researcher. Such an approach may be desirable but very hard to digest in social science. As Teo argues that even within the positivist approach, hermeneutics play a role in interpreting results of statistical analysis. It is exemplified by the role played by speculations in scientific psychology (Oppong, 2014).

Human behavior is too complex that keeps on changing and so carrying different meanings over time and thus almost impossible to be studied from objective lenses. They better need to be contextualized. There is also argument that the concept of variables in today's qualitative social research is flawed as variables only have quantifiable changes instead of pointing reasons and causes.

Such a variable based approach will result in superficial and incomplete information to have better understanding of a social phenomenon.

Interpretivism

When positivism met criticism, Interpretivism popped up its head though it had been in use for quite a while. It is a research methods that argues that people's knowledge or understanding of reality is a social construction. In other words, it is meant that there is no objective reality or truth in social world. Interpretivism rejects the application of scientific research tools and methods in social research because the two belong to different realm of academic enquiry with different subjects to study. Subjects of natural sciences are less diverse than human sciences. Thus while studying human society, researchers require different methodological tools, like sympathy that help the social researcher to study and understand the thoughts of the people being studied (Goodsell, 2013). Interpretivism remains under the heavy influence of two terms; hermeneutics and phenomology. The former is the study of meaning and interpretation in historical texts while the latter is to consider human subjective interpretation based on researcher's perception of the world (Mack, 2010). Researchers with interpretivist approach look for meanings and understandings beyond human actions by studying behavior and culture one lives in. In one way, social meanings or constructions are contextualized by including so many things while studying a particular phenomenon. "Interpretations resulting from the application of contextualization, explain action in terms of the agents' reasons for it. A reason for an action makes the action meaningful, so that, for a third person, it makes sense to act in that way in that circumstance" (Matta, 2015). Moreover, Interpretivism argues that the collection of value free data is almost impossible as a researcher is guided by his pre-conception about the enquiry process (Chowdhury, 2014). Researcher in social sciences must find way to hearts and minds to avoid any deception at every turn.

So many scholars and researchers contributed to the interpretivist model research but it is Max Weber whose influence and contribution remains dominant. Being a founding father, Weber thought that as natural and social sciences address two different questions, thus they require different methods to conduct research. In his opinion, an empirical science cannot tell anybody what he should do, rather it can only tell what one can do (Goodsell, 2013). Research into social world has an inner meaning to be understood by the researcher while a natural scientists applies an external meaning on his data (Goldkuhl, 2013).

Interpretivism is based on constructivist ontology. It assumes that social world is not given, rather it is constructed and reinforced through humans' actions and interactions (Goldkuhl, 2013). Resultantly research moved from explanation to understanding of social phenomena. However, the argument that Interpretivism is purely qualitative as against Positivism which stands for quantitative research is subject to much debate. Scholars are very much divided on this aspect of Interpretivism as no research can be strictly either qualitative or quantitative although Interpretivism is more qualitative because of the nature of enquiry it makes. This is not even advisable because it will severely limit the boundaries of a research.

Interpretivism opened new ways and vistas for research in social world. In comparison to positivism, interpretivist research enquiry is broader and wider to include many new techniques,

concepts and strategies. It has more room to look into a particular social phenomenon from different but inter related and relevant aspects to have a better understanding of the object under research. Interpretivism is more realistic in its approach to separate social and natural sciences from each other in conducting research. The two belong to different world of research enquiry whose research goals and objects are quite distinct using thus different research tools. Interpretivism must be credited for recognizing this divide. Moreover, there is agreement among a number of scholars that value free research is not even possible in a number of natural sciences. So how can it be extended into social world where the object and subject are so much inter connected? Emotions, sentiments and built in knowledge are all there to affect one's research and so must be given due attention in the course of research. So it is more naturalistic and accepts the fact that social world is too complex and can only be studied properly by an all-inclusive and all-encompassing approach rather than an objective research methodology. For that reason it avoids a generalizability claim in its research. To avoid the issue of validity, the technique of triangulation can be used where two or more than two methods of investigations are used and those methods reinforce the same conclusion, validity is strengthened and may even be generalized (PhotongSunan, 2010).

Critique of Interpretivism

Interpretivism is criticized for some of its shortcomings and limitations. Interpretivism abandons the scientific procedure of investigation and verification and so can't be generalized to apply to other even similar situations (Mack, 2010). Interpretivists argue that they provide a much deeper and more meaningful understanding of a social phenomenon through their research approach. But critics suggest that Interpretivism has failed to provide any representative platform for all qualitative research in social science. This is reflected in the fact that many social science researchers in feminism, post modernism etc have switched over to positivism in their research and apply tools and methods that fall in the domain of natural science. It has also been suggested that Interpretivism doesn't give any alternative to positivism because in final analysis, it retains some of the key assumptions of the positivism in its research. Thus, critics consider Interpretivism a minor theoretical perspective admissible at the earliest stage of research before the hard nose research begins (Nudzor, 2009). Moreover, drawing sharp line between natural and social sciences is also not recommendable as the two must benefit from each other reservoir of knowledge and methods of research. No doubt, natural sciences' methods of research are more reliable, social scientist must utilize them in their own research. But interpretivists drop any such idea.

Interpretivists' findings and results lack verifiability, despite being so exhaustive and comprehensive in its approach. As it is more subjective in its approach, there is every possibility that contradictory and inconsistent explanations are, or would be, advanced to explain social phenomena (Nudzor, 2009). It has been noticed so many times that one social phenomenon researched more than one time through interpretivist lenses has produced results different from those produced by previous one. Such a weakness leads to other interlinked problems for it is considered more time and resource consuming.

Conclusion

The dichotomies in research world have led to paradigm wars between interpretivists and positivists. The entire debate between the two schools of thought revolves around the nature of reality and how it is to be discovered. If one is subjective, the other is objective in its approach to reality. They also differ on qualitative and quantities research methods in social world. However, both have its comparative strengths and weaknesses and so both have a large number of proponents and opponents. This is the reason that both approaches have proved to be a rich source for debate and research reservoirs in the academic world.

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