

# Scientific methods to the study of social life sociology essay



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According to Max Weber, sociology “ is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects.” (<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/weber.html>). Sociology first developed in Europe during the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, when industrialisation resulted in massive social changes for the continent. With these social changes came a number of intellectual changes; during which an emphasis became applied more than ever to science, and it experienced a higher reputation than ever before. ‘ Science appeared to be capable of producing objective knowledge that could be used to solve human problems and increase human productive capacity in an unprecedented way,’ (Sociology: Themes and perspectives: 2008). For this reason, many early sociologists chose to turn to science for a methodology which they could base their subject on. However, not all sociologists agreed to adopt the methodology employed by the natural sciences. For them, studying the behaviour of humans is fundamentally different from studying natural sciences such as physics or chemistry, and as such, a new or different methodology was required. For these reasons, it was then possible to separate two clear ways of thinking within sociology; numerical statistical methods, also known as quantitative methods, and those who took the view of the humanistic or qualitative methods. In saying that these are the two main views of sociologists, it must and does not imply that all sociologists fit into these categories. Moreover, there exist divisions within these views as well as between them. In recent years, some sociologists have suggested methods with critical social science or with postmodernism.

According to Comte, the study of society should only be used to collect information for phenomena that could be observed objectively then classified. He argued that sociologists should not concern themselves with the motives, feelings, emotions and meanings of the individual. He believed that these only exist in the person's consciousness and as such they could not be concerned with them as they cannot be observed and thus measured objectively. Opposite to this, Durkheim argued that sociologists should only consider studying social facts. His position stood that 'the first and most important rule is: consider social facts as things', (1895). In summary, this means that the belief systems, customs and institutions of society, should be considered just as important as things which exist in the natural world, i. e. the things we can observe and touch. Because of the definition adopted by Durkheim and his use of social facts, he is distinguished to other positivists such as Comte. However, in other aspects, he followed the same logic and methods of positivism.

Another aspect of the positivist approach concerns itself with the study and application of statistical data. Positivists believed that it was conceivable to view the social world in an objective way. With these classifications, they could then count sets of observable social facts to produce statistics. This is shown in Durkheim's study of suicide; he collected data on social facts namely the suicide rate and membership rates of religious groups. A further aspect of the methodology involves looking for correlation between different social facts. A correlation exists when 'two random variables are positively correlated if high values of one are likely to be associated with high values of the other. They are negatively correlated if high values of one are likely to be

associated with low values of the other, (<http://economics.about.com/cs/economicsglossary/g/correlation.html>). In the study of suicide, Durkheim found a direct correlation between a religious group, namely Protestantism, and high suicide rates. The final stage of this methodology requires a search for causal connections. With an apparent correlation, a sociologist might argue that one of the factors is causing the other to happen. This conclusion can only be reached once all the statistical data has been studied extremely carefully, as it is not always the case in research studies. Often this is demonstrated through the example of class and criminality. Sociologists have noted a direct causal link between the working class and the probability of being convicted of a crime, (Robert Merton, 1968). This was illustrated as (1):

Being Working Class

causes

Crime

Whilst this does show a possible causal link, it is also possible to conceive other factors, and it is important to disprove all other links before you assume this link applies to the study, as within this methodology you cannot simply assume that because a link seems plausible it is the right deduction. For example, it may simply be crime that causes the person to become working class, as illustrated beneath (2):

Crime

Causes

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## A Person To Become Working Class

Within these suggestions, there may also be the possibility that the so called causal connection may be spurious or indirection correlation. This occurs when two factors are found together in the same research but have no connection on each other, one does not cause the other. To overcome spurious data, Durkheim devised the technique called multivariate analysis. This method suggests isolating the effects of independent variable on the dependant variables. The dependant is the thing that is caused, and the independent are the factor or factors that cause the dependant to happen.

According to positivists, multivariate techniques can be used to establish if a causal link exists between variables ranging in two or more, for example, the effects of gender and class status on crime or vice versa, i. e. the effect of crime and gender on working class. If these are checked in a variety of situations, the researcher can be assured that they have reached the ultimate goal of the positivist methodology, a law of human behaviour.

As well as the ' scientific' or quantitative methodology outlined above, an alternative way of approach has long existed within the world of sociology; namely the qualitative or interpretative method. According to this methodology, the scientific approach is unsuitable by itself for collecting, analysing and subsequently explaining data, or that it is inappropriate in terms of dealing with a human behavioural subject. As a result, these sociologists believe that this methodology should be used to compliment the scientific approach, with some believing that it should replace it.

Quantitative data is not simply used in relation to the study of sociology, but many vast subjects. It comprises of numerical data, found in official statistics for example, such as crime rates and divorce rates. In comparison, qualitative data is usually found in the form of words, for example providing a detailed account of a flat share providing an in depth account of the way of life of the inhabitants, or a transcript of a recorded interview, during which participants describe and explain their understanding and views towards crime. Compared to that of quantitative data, qualitative research is often seen as having a richer in depth knowledge as it presents a truer picture of people's beliefs, attitudes and views. The strongest supporters of the qualitative approach are sociologists who follow the 'interpretative' approach. These believe that the basis of sociology is the interpretation derived from social action. Social action can only be understood by interpreting on what it is based. They would argue that there is little chance of this being accomplished with quantitative data. Only by studying qualitative data, which is fuller, can a sociologist achieve an interpretation that lies behind the social actions. Some reject the use of science methodology for studying social action, as they see the subjects of sociology and natural sciences as fundamentally opposite. Natural sciences deal with matter, and as matter has no consciousness, it cannot be explained as a reaction to external senses. It must react this way and has no choice as its behaviour is inconsequential. However, people have consciousness; they interpret the world in terms of meanings, they see, understand and experience. They create their own reality in society. Meanings do not exist on their own, they are not separate from social factors; they do not have an independent existence. They are not imposed, constraining the members to

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behave and act in a certain way. They are constructed by the actors during the course of social interaction, and then reconstructed. Contrary to what positivists believe, people do not react to external stimuli. Instead, they interpret and understand the meaning of a stimulus before responding to it. A very appropriate of this would be a motorist who sees an amber light. They do not prepare to stop once they see this light; instead they attach a meaning to this stimulus before making an action. Once the meaning is established, the motorist will then decide how to respond, for example, speed up to make it through, or stop in preparation for a red light. Despite the action, the interpretivist may argue that an adequate explanation is impossible without some understanding of the individuals concerned. As such, a positivist might be satisfied with discovering the external factors that led to a type of behaviour by humans, whereas a user of the qualitative approach would delve further, enquiring into the meaning of the behaviour taken by those engaging in the action.

According to Weber, action is social when the other members of the society are taken into account. The sociologists are required to interpret the meanings given to the action by the actor committing it themselves. For example, a person deciding to buy clothes, why are they doing this? Are they doing it to for yourself, do you need new clothes, are you just bargain shopping in the sales etc..., there are many reasons for the one action. Weber's view was that an understanding could be achieved by 'verstehen', imagining yourself in the role of the person you wish to explain, i. e. you are the person buying clothes, why are you doing it?

This can be clearly seen in the work of Weber, 'The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism (1958). By using this comparative approach, Weber made a comparison between early capitalist countries and the technologically advanced eastern countries. He believed that the moral and religious beliefs followed by early Calvinists as the main reason for the creation of capitalism in the western hemisphere.

Another approach to qualitative methodology within sociology is that of symbolic interactionism. Interactionists by no means reject the establishment of causal relationships within the world of sociology; they believe this to be important. They do however believe that statistical does not and cannot provide any great insight into human behaviour. Human behaviour, according to Interactionists human behaviour is governed by the internal processes by which people interpret things around them and give meaning to it within their own lives. Interactionists also believe in the idea of self concept, which is reinforced due to interaction with other members of that society. As such, we have an image of who we are in society, and we act upon that image of ourselves. We may believe we are tough or weak, smart or not, honest or dishonest, and we will reflect this in the image we portray in a society.

The third example of qualitative research being applied is that of phenomenology. This is the furthest radical disassociation from the scientific method. According to Titchen and Hobson (2005), 'phenomenology is the study of lived, human phenomena within everyday social context in which phenomena occur from the perspective of those who experience them.

Phenomena comprise anything that human beings live/experience'. They <https://assignbuster.com/scientific-methods-to-the-study-of-social-life-sociology-essay/>



are separate from interactionists in that they completely reject the possibility of causal explanations of human behaviour. They believe that you cannot objectively measure and classify the world. Human beings make sense of the world around them through imposing meanings and classifications upon it; these subsequently make up social reality. Phenomenologists believe there is a universal problem with classification, and not simply uniqueness to particular data types.

In conclusion, as shown in this report, there are certain difficulties in applying the scientific method to social life. However, as explained, the scientific method is agreed by every faction within sociology apart from Phenomenologists as having significant meaning. It is not that this methodology cannot be applied within social life, but it cannot simply be used by itself, it must be used, when appropriate and necessary, in conjunction with qualitative methodology, as it can only go so far to discussing the phenomena that is social life. One must remember that the scientific methodology was used within the paradigm of sociology long before the concept of Qualitative data. However, with time as with everything else, this rationale has been expanded and built upon to provide two methodologies that when applied together hugely compliment each other.