

Identify the main
premises of the
interpretative tradition
in sociology



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When sociologists conduct social investigation, they raised the questions of epistemology, which is a “ branch of philosophy that investigates the nature of knowledge and truth”. (Macionis & Plummer 2002: 40) However, different sociologists use different ways to obtain the ‘ truth’. Positivism and humanistic (interpretative) are two approaches of sociology, but they advocate totally different ways of reaching the knowledge. Positivism is a logical system that bases knowledge on direct, systematic observation. (Macionis & Plummer 2002: 40) They apply the methods of natural sciences on social sciences; and think that it is the precise way of attaining the ‘ truth’.

This way of thinking was the most accepted belief for decades. Whereas interpretivism is a secondary alternative denoted to positivism. For interpretivists, the study of the human world is very different than the study of the natural world. Social science use a different logic of research process, which should produce different knowledge and also try to understand meanings.

“ It is predicated upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objective of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientists to grasp the subjective meaning of social action.” (Bryman 2001: 13) Tracing back to the times of the origin of social sciences, early sociology studies have believed social sciences were similar to natural sciences like physics or chemistry. Therefore many researchers argued that methods and methodology used in those sciences are perfectly suited to be used in the study of sociology without any modifications. The advantages of this last are:(1) The use of scientific

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methods;(2) Stress on empiricism; They also allowed sociology to be acknowledged as a true science. Those early views were reinforced by August Comte, and methodologies which were used were called positivism and based upon the view of sociological naturalism. During the 19th century, positivism and naturalism have been doubted by scientists; they argued that the world of nature is different than the world of society, as human society have exclusive aspects like meanings, symbols, rules, norms, values - all that together can be called culture.

This view was then developed by Max Weber, who introduced the antipositivism (humanistic sociology). This view was closely related to antinaturalism which stressed that sociology research must concentrate on humans and their cultural values. (Lensky: 1982)This essay will be discussing some main premises of interpretative tradition in sociology and also try to find out what kind of methods should be applied to such approach in sociological research. Kantianism and neo-Kantianism: Kantianism is the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant's critical philosophy is generally emphasized on his two opponent traditions, which are empiricism and rationalism, and epistemology (i.

e. philosophical theory of knowledge) which were dominated by these two traditions at Kant's time. Kant argued in opposition to the empiricists that there was what he called 'true synthetic a priori' judgments, which meant that we can capture what is necessary in the world, but what we capture can not derive from experience. All his claims were included in his great work the Critique of Pure Reason (1781), especially the assumption of " judgments which were conditions of the possibility of our apprehension of space and <https://assignbuster.com/identify-the-main-premises-of-the-interpretative-tradition-in-sociology/>

time (the 'form of intuition'), and our making of objective judgments of experience (the 'categories'- causality, necessity, possibility, and others).

" (Marshall 1998: 338) According to Kant, although the categories can not be obtained from experience, " could be legitimately applied only within the field of possible experience". (Marshall 1998: 338) Neo-Kantianism is a revitalized or revised type of philosophy from Immanuel Kant. In mid 19th century, the recognition of scientific materialist was growing dramatically; it provoked the intellectual and cultural resistance of the German Idealist tradition. This " back to Kant" movement began in the 1860's as a response to the materialist debate in German thought; it is called neo-Kantianism. Moreover, the neo-Kantians were concerned to stop the spread of natural scientific methods growing into the humanities and social science realm. Neo-Kantians were influenced by Kant in Two ways:(1) Kant's supposition of a perceptible and knowable world of 'appearances', and a world of 'things-in-themselves' referred to the terms such as: morality, freedom, aesthetics, and the unity of the self, and they could justify the radical separation between the natural sciences and the social sciences.

It can radically distinguish the two complexes of disciplines in terms of the dissimilarities of subject-matter, and sometimes (as in the work of Rickert) it can also be a distinct character of our interest in the two spheres. It also appeared in the latter view that, " our concern in the natural sciences is with objects of experience in so far as they are instances of universal law, whereas in the cultural sphere our interest is in particular meaningful expressions in virtue of their relevance to values". (Marshall 1998: 444) In

addition, the exclusive character of the cultural sciences is a complex of <https://assignbuster.com/identify-the-main-premises-of-the-interpretative-tradition-in-sociology/>

meanings which requires a different form of understanding (Verstehen) not just the sensory perception which is the typical natural scientific method. (Marshall 1998: 444)(2) Kant's philosophical method was also important to neo-Kantians, since they thought, of establishing the autonomy of the human, historical sciences from the natural sciences which was not enough. Moreover, they also defended natural science with an analysis of the conceptual and methodological condition for objective knowledge of human historical and cultural expressions, which is what Kant did. (Marshall 1998: 444)Max Weber: In Weber's Verstehen approach, sociology is described by him as a " science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects" (Weber, 1947: 88) Weber's definition seems to tell us that explanation and understanding are both important here, but the crucial point is that the ' interpretive understanding of social action' carries out the task of ' causal explanation'.

Those external forces which have no meaning for those involved in that social action are not relevant for ' casual explanation'. (Bryman 2001: 14) Sociology is also a study of the social action. (Weber, in Gerth ; Mills: 1948). When other members of society are involved in the action, then it is social. In Weber's view, to explain the social action, it is crucial to understand the meanings and motives that lie behind human actors themselves. Motives could be understood through ' Verstehen'- imagining you are the person who trying to explain other people's behaviour.

Furthermore, Weber started with the point of social sciences study

consequentially the social action, which is different from behaviour i. e.

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movements which are directed by physical or biological causal chain. (Weber 1947) A classic example of The meaningful social action is found in Benton and Craib's book (2001) which is that " a cyclist might be engaging in meaningful action- riding her bike along country lanes for pleasure; her collision with another cyclist is not action at all, it is intended by neither; the argument that they have afterwards, however, is meaningful and social." According to Benton and Craib (2001), there are four distinctive types of meaningful social action for Weber. The first two are different from the others, by the fact that those actions are only carried out because of the satisfaction they bring, and not by any other purpose in the world.

They are:(1) Traditional action, which is similar to people's daily routines, considered as unreflective and habitual, and we do it because we always do it. It is not common in contemporary society, although there are exceptions. Presumably there still long existed routines in some families, bringing a sense of comfort.(2) Affectual action, which is, emotional guided action. It is an action on the edge of the rational, in other words, that it is less rational or not rational at all, if someone's action is controlled by his or her feelings. Nevertheless, it is closer to the rational, if someone guides his or her feelings into actions in order to achieve something.

If someone loses his or her temper and hits a friend, then he or she is not acting rationally; if someone had a problem with his or her friend, so tries to stay away from him for a while, or discuss with the friend what he or she is upset about, then the person is acting rationally. Affectual actions which are carried out entirely from sentiment are scaled as less rational by Weber.(3)

This type of action is not a proper rational action either, it has been <https://assignbuster.com/identify-the-main-premises-of-the-interpretative-tradition-in-sociology/>

described as “ a feature of human beings that we are valuing creatures and there is a class of actions which are oriented to ultimate values, values which we choose but cannot justify on any rational basis. Once we have chosen a value, however, we can make rational sense of actions we take in pursuit of it.

Here for the first time an exterior purpose comes into play.” An example here was used for Christians; there is no rational reason for their beliefs, however, it can be understood as rational when actions are taken as a result of their belief.(4) Practical action is “ action oriented towards achieving something in the world.” Nowadays, people start to feel that, an action taken (unless with purpose of achievement, success, profit, practicality etc), is a form of decadence or indolence.

The example used here is the attitude people have towards education. Some people think education is valuable itself, because it is said that the more educated we are, the more civilized we are. People achieve degrees from Universities because they believe that education is a value itself. However, most people in contemporary societies have a more rational attitude, and consider that there are more purposes added on it, such as we go to University to ensure ourselves an ambitious future, to obtain a better job, and to earn more money.

Weber differentiated these four different types of meaningful actions. Those actions which are in the nature of rational expediencies are the most understandable types in the scale of rationality. (Weber, in Gerth & Mills: 1948)Research methodologyAs regard to epistemology, where quantitative

research is very much influenced by a natural science approach, qualitative researchers are more influenced by interpretativism. This view is from the combination of three related approaches: Weber's notion of Verstehen; symbolic interactionism; and phenomenology.

(Bryman 2001) All the founders essentially claimed that it is only through qualitative research that the world can be studied through the eyes of the people who are studied. According to Schutz: "The world of nature as explored by the natural scientists does not 'mean' anything to molecules, atoms and scientist-social reality- has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting, and thinking within it. By a series of common-sense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of their which determine their behaviour by motivating it. The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men [and women!], living their daily life within the social world.

" (Schutz 1962: 59) In Schutz's view, (which is different from the object of natural sciences), the object of the social sciences are the people themselves, which are able to attach meanings to their environment. Consequently, many qualitative researchers have suggested that a methodology is required for studying people that reflects these differences between people and the objects of natural sciences. Therefore, many qualitative researchers express a commitment to viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the people that they study. The social world
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must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied, rather than those carrying out the study. As it has been expressed by some authors: "(1)..

. face- to- face interaction is the fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being, and (2) ... you must participate in the mind of another human being (in sociological terms, ' take the role of the other') to acquire social knowledge " (Lofland & Lofland 1995: 16)Conclusion: This essay contains two parts; the first part is trying to launch the premises of interpretative tradition through the introduction of the history of interpretative together with some references to the approach of positivism, then it goes on to identify Kantianism and neo-Kantianism's, assumptions which are the roots of the interpretative approach; and finally, it discusses Max Weber, and his important assumption-' meaningful social action '.

The second part of the essay is based upon the appropriate research methodology for interpretative tradition; most interpretivists are in favour of using the qualitative research as their research method. However, there are some disadvantages involved in seeing through the eyes of the research participants. For instance: the risk of ' going native' and losing sight of what you studying. The problem of how far the researcher should go, if the researcher is involved in an illegal or dangerous activity; and the possibility that the researcher will be able to see through the eyes of only some of the people who form part of a social scene but not others, such as only people of the same gender.