

Research on the paradigms positivism and interpretivism sociology essay



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According to Colin Hay's Political Analysis (2002) hopes to do social research more flexible and easy about the underlying assumptions upon which its range of scientific strategies is premised. This alternative requires necessary trade-offs that ought to be rendered without given the way in which, he claims, social research cannot achieve complete objectivity. Indeed, although they often remain unacknowledged, implicit meta-theoretical positions and assumptions profoundly influence our approach to theory and practice (Marsh and Furlong, 2002). This article considers whether Hay's argument that such assumptions ought to be rendered graphic based on a via media, or middle way, between positivist and interpretive social science- maintains strength and coherence in the wider description and understanding argument. As such, while many vital contributions have focused on his epistemology, this article takes a broader perspective on Political Analysis's contribution to the principles of social science. The principle of social science literature generally holds that 'positivism' places an emphasis on experience in public, and monitoring and testing in particular. A prime example is the work of Emile Durkheim (1982) who aims to 'extend the scope of scientific rationalism' to human behaviour based on the belief that, in light of the past, it is capable of being reduced to

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relationships of cause and effect. By contrast, 'interpretivism' appeals to 'subjective meaning', Verstehen and concepts such as empathy and understanding. In the strong version, based on an anthropological or sceptical relativism, it holds that social differentiation gives rise to different 'ways of knowing' between which there is no way of according common standards (Williams, 2001). In all, this article will attempt to verify that Hay's via media strategy successfully navigates a path between these positivist and interpretivist approaches. To this end, we must evaluate his claims about the subject-matter of the social sciences, the limits of positivism and interpretivism and, finally, the via media approach it. The subject-matter of the social sciences: -

A main theme of Political Analysis is the qualitative difference in subject-matter between the natural and the social sciences. Following Bhaskar and Hay (2002) maintains that social structures, not like regular structure: (1) do not exist apart of the performance they do; (2) do not exist independently of a company's appreciation of their interest and (3) may only be relatively constant. Taking each in turn, distinction (1) holds that effective, conscious and reflexive subjects occupy the social world whereas the units of study in the natural sciences can be assumed to be dead and un-reflexive. This brings into question the notion of a predictive science of the social world and therefore explanations based on the probabilistic correlation between explanation and prediction. If social systems are 'intrinsically open', crucial test situations for our theories cannot be created, which means there can be no reasonable approval or rejection of predictions (Bhaskar, 1989). This argument can be criticized for overemphasizing the differences between

natural and social structures based on human organization because it rests on top of the plan to facilitate nothing happens in the general public save in or in virtue of somewhat individual do with it or have already done (Bhaskar and Collier, 1994). Arguably, this statement could be reformulated by substituting the relevant kinds of animation for 'society' and 'human beings' in each case, which would provide similar principles to apply in the natural sciences (Collier, 1994). Nevertheless, for many there is a natural accuracy to the belief that social systems are intrinsically available enough to the reflexive variety of social action. Steven Bernstein et al (2000) argue that human intervention in society is striking because the more individuals believe they know the context in which they operate, the more they try to exploit it to their advantage. In this sense, the 'laws' of social science are open to the environment to which they refer (Giddens, 1979). Moreover, even when social scientists attempt to emulate experimental conditions, the research is hindered because a subject's behaviour is potentially influenced by learning about its hypotheses and methods (Rosenberg, 1988).

Finally, distinction (3) maintains that social processes tend to be culturally, spatially and historically specific in contrast to worldwide natural laws. Hay (2002) compares the study of the global political economy and physics to emphasize this difference. In the former, the purpose of simplifying assumptions to generate testable propositions is made particularly hard by relentless change. In the latter, by contrast, the generalized laws of physics can be assumed to involve in all situations across time. However, in one academic understanding, social structures can be a help to be space-time

invariant as when certain conditions are met, for example economies with certain features, certain tendencies will operate (Collier, 1994).

In this way, we can develop social laws in terms which are 'universal' by virtue of being conditional. Yet, in a more convincing sense, when considered in historical perspective social structures do seem to be only relatively stable. Indeed, a devastating problem for covering-law explanations of social phenomena, which seek to identify generalized laws based on observable regularities, is that they happen either impossible or silly because we are forced to make so many branch details to the 'initial conditions' that in some cases only the name of the event or activity is missing from the given 'explanation' (Outhwaite, 1996). Thus, again, distinction (3) is relevant. Overall, by highlighting the key divisions among the subject-matter of the natural and the social, Hay is rich in laying the foundation for the necessity to identify the key differences in their methods while still allowing both to maintain some demand to knowledge production. We must now consider how social scientists meet with their distinctive subject-matter.

Positivism, interpretivism and the via media:-

According to Hay (2002), and building on these three distinctions above, social scientists think it extremely difficult to make impartial and empirical knowledge claims for two main reasons. Firstly based on one and two, is the inevitable location of the social scientist within that which forms their subject-matter. From this embedded position, the social scientist cannot only escape their complex and densely structured environment in order to carry out scientific examination of the social world. Secondly based on two and three, there are ethical dilemmas associated with the social scientist's

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privileged position owing to their potential to influence the social environment. Again, from an embedded position, the social scientist may appear to redefine and modify that which socially viable. In reply, we can consider three different approaches, each having their own response to these ethical considerations associated with the problem of objectivity: positivism, interpretivism and the via media.

Although most positivist approaches would not expect all theoretical terms and assumptions to refer directly to observables, there is a commitment to the view that substantive hypotheses must be able to be falsified using a call for empirical evidence. For Hay, positivism is therefore simply unable to handle the social responsibility, he identifies as essential to social science. This is because to achieve epistemic security and conceptual clarity it tightly demarcates what can count as knowledge - a statement is not valid unless it is possible to explain what would count as falsifying it (Williams, 2001). Rather than a damaging criticism, at this point Hay's study constitutes a description of the aims of positivism: to specify exactly what influence we can give to our knowledge claims is a key strength of the approach, even if it means we have to exclude certain types of information.

Although it is difficult to determine, 'interpretivism' can be regarded as a variety of social research which represents profound scepticism towards claims to objectivity and a prosperous access to information. Thus, in these terms, it would appear that interpretivism suitably accounts for Hay's problem of objectivity. To take seriously the challenge presented by post-modernist critics to social science is to recognize the value-laden and normative content of many of its assumptions and much of its language

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(Rosenberg, 1988). However for Hay (2002), interpretivism cannot accurately be thought of as making a substantive contribution to social analysis. Its ontological view that the world can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, along with its normative commitment to according them equal respect, means that interpretivism is drawn inevitably towards a suspicion of all epistemological foundations. This degree of relativism is just as dangerous as positivism to the social scientist's ethical responsibilities. The interpretivist approach does not fix the function of normative question because it rejects the assertion that there are fundamental metaphysical truths beyond appearances. In short, positivism deliberately confuses reality with knowledge and interpretivism reacts by removing the possibility of knowledge (Trigg, 2001). Thus, we are in search of an alternative to positivism's blindness to ethical considerations and interpretivism pessimism and fatalism (Hay, 2002). In response, the via media take seriously the ethical responsibilities that come with an acknowledgement that epistemology cannot determine social learning claims while still accepting the possibility of making them. For Hay, this means social scientists must acknowledge the automatically normative content of their duties and clarify their normative assumptions as straightforward as possible. We should not deny empirical study altogether because it provides the grounding for our descriptive analysis, but as soon as we move from this statement we go from the realm of science to that of interpretation. In this latter realm there is a conflict between competing narratives premised on different meta-theoretical assumptions, which necessitates that we do our normative assumptions explicit (Hay, 2002). In this way, a via media are developed that appeals to a variety of certified empirical research that acknowledges the

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interpretivist critique. The questions remain as to whether or this via media constitutes a reasonable approach.

Explanation and understanding:-

Alexander Rosenberg (1988) claims that with many philosophies of social science questions there is rarely a favourable medium that splits the difference because accounts are often logically contradictory and attempts made to combine parts of each usually result in incoherence rather than actual compromise. At the very least, theories that purport to resolve the tension positivism and interpretivism or explanation and understanding tend to be weak because they are always telling two stories (Hollis and Smith, 1990). So, does Hay's via media maintain a successful combination?

According to Martin Smith, Hay (2006) is plotting a careful path between explanation and understanding equivalent to Odysseus navigating between Scylla and Charybdis. He makes two attractive claims about Hay's research: first, that Hay totally rejects attempts by positivists to develop predictive models due to the inherent uncertainty of social life and says nothing more about his way to positivism. Second, although Hay also questions the basic negativity of postmodernism, he still appreciates the way it sensitizes us to the need to question assumptions. Here, arguably, Smith's interpretation of Hay presents flawed has more value for social science. Perhaps Hay is sailing too close to Chablis, understanding, rather than navigating a successful intermediate way. Yet equally, one could argue, Hay (2002) priorities description. He claims that whereas social scientists are expected to remain divided over the meaning of certain events or processes, there is a greater chance of reaching agreement on their description through the accumulation

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of empirical evidence. This echoes post-positivist positions which take analysis and use as necessary, but tend to treat them as intervening variables without fully acknowledging the subjectivity of the observer (Marsh and Furlong, 2002). The emphasis still lies with explanation rather than understanding; experience rather than substance. This is problematic because an appeal to moral experience is uncertain: experience can refer to both what is presented to us and the actual performance of experiencing, which is something Hay would certainly recognize given his appeal to the interpretivist critique (Hollis, 2002). Thus, Hay is open to criticism from both sides of the argument for being too close to the other. It is not easy to recover an alternative of this tension. Interestingly - even though they are co-authoring the same book - Martin Hollis opts for understanding as an approach to social scientific inquiry whereas Steven Smith chooses explanation (Hollis and Smith, 1990). Smith sees actors' understandings as conditioned by factors external to them; Hollis sees them as the pure essential parts of the world which they seek to understand. For them, this uncertainty is irresolvable, leading them to call for a range of acceptable positions. In the final analysis, they are forced to admit that the field that represents a middle ground between explanation and consideration should be thought of as a portable piece that can be repositioned to whatever place on the table the reader finds most reasonable (Hollis and Smith, 1990).

Likewise, David Marsh and Paul Furlong (2002) adopt the contested nature of epistemological positions and appreciate a multiplicity of voices. After a call for plurality, it would appear that the foundational assumptions on which this option between explanation and understanding is made ought to be

rendered explicit, as Hay argues, if readers are left to give up their own minds. Thus, at least the via media is powerful. In this spirit, perhaps it is telling to look in Hay's substantive work for indications as to whether the via media is reasonable. The analysis found in *Demystifying Globalization* provides a convenient example of how a combination of interpretation and expertise can inform our understanding of social phenomena (Hay and Marsh, 2000). Here, proper processes are identified, such as the extent of financial markets and increased levels of trading, which constitute recognizable patterned forms of interaction. Nevertheless, simultaneously, care is taken to recognize that the way in which these processes affect outcomes is mediated by the pure long construction of these processes. In other words, the ideas commonly held about these processes actually create the fancy forms of interaction greater causal efficacy. Indeed, British Governments have in the past argued that the aim of neoliberal policies is inevitable in light of Globalization, even though there is only limited empirical evidence that a globalised political economy must necessarily direct monetary policy. As such, causal mechanisms can be revealed empirically but only fully accounted for through recognition of their social structure. At once there is a call to the real world, but the emphasis is on the discursive construction of that world (Marsh and Furlong, 2002). Thus the via media strategy effectively illustrates how main ideas about globalization are causally efficacious, in the point of making a real difference to social outcomes through the shaping of economic policy, but it also acknowledges that the real processes of globalization limit the resonance of different discourses. Other areas of social learning that might benefit from the via media approach include, for example, the study of global poverty in the <https://assignbuster.com/research-on-the-paradigms-positivism-and-interpretivism-sociology-essay/>

international political economy literature. Indeed, Branwen Gruffydd Jones (2003) demonstrates that although orthodox approaches to global poverty provide accurate explanations at the descriptive amount of surface appearances for example, that the global poor are unable to meet their basic needs because they lack access to income-earning opportunities they remain blind to the real, non-empirical relations that cause these empirical appearances, such as the social relations that govern the activities of producing the objects of basic human needs. As such, a via media approach to the study of global poverty might recognize the importance of observable characteristics, in as much as they are revealed as true fancy forms of interaction, but might also acknowledge that ideas about these characteristics themselves have causal outcomes, including the printing of the social relations that help bring them about.

Conclusion:-

Hay's via media system remains a strong and consistent approach to act with respect to the principles of social science for a number of reasons. First, the central principle on which his argument is built the difference among the area under study of the pattern and the public sciences is useful and accurate. Second, given that this subject-matter brings certain moral responsibilities to take on the social scientist, we can apply the limitations of both the positivist and the interpretivist approach, and call for a via media that make normative and meta-theoretical assumptions explicit. Finally, we have some grounds on which to argue that Hay's strategy remains competitive in the wider variety and understanding reasons. Rather than assuming mutual incompatibility, by recognizing that the debate requires a

trade-off that is essentially the reasoned choice of the social scientist and crucially, also of the conference which has to accept it, we can use the via media time to get seriously both positivist details and interpretivist understanding.