

Positivism and its influence on studying society philosophy essay



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A research philosophy such as positivism has a significance importance in the study of society. There are three research philosophies that are recognised in the literature to the study of society – interpretivism, realism and positivism. The aim of each of these philosophies is to endow with a distinctive view on the way knowledge is developed. These philosophies in the social science are contrasted on ontological, epistemological and methodological bases as outlined by Corbetta (2003, p. 12-13) that ‘ ontological is related to the existence of a real and objective world; epistemological is related to the possibility of knowing this world and the forms this knowledge would take and methodological refers to the technical instruments that are used in order to acquire that knowledge.’ However, this essay is related to the contribution of positivism to the study of society.

Therefore, to address the essay aim, this essay is divided into three parts.

The first section of this essay gives an insight into historical background of the positivism philosophy. It mainly covers the work of Auguste Comte who was the first philosopher who introduces the term ‘ positivism’. This section also defines the term ‘ positivism’. The next part of this essay includes the epistemological perspective of the positivisms. It depicts about the possibility of knowing the society in the positivism perspective and also introduces the traditional positivism perspective i. e. neo-positivism and post positivism perspective of knowledge creation in the society. The last section of this essay includes the methodologies in positivism. It refers to the instruments and techniques which positivist researcher employs to acquire knowledge for the possibility of knowing the society. This section covers the two distinctive approaches i. e. deductive and inductive that positivist

researcher can utilise to discover universal laws for knowledge creation. This section also highlights that why positivist researcher expressed the effect of context in the form of institutions rather than expressing it in the context of whole society or culture. Some issues and concerns regarding positivism philosophy are also included in the last of this section.

Auguste Comte

Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber have an enormous contribution to the study of the society but Comte (1856) was the first who described the epistemological perspective of positivism. His work is contributed in the study of social science in the development of first sociological version of positivism. His work can be seen as a reaction to the philosophy of Enlightenment (Gordon, 1991). He coined the term ‘ positive philosophy’ which is now lasted down to shorter form of ‘ positivism’ which he called as antidote to the negative views of Enlightenment (Gordon, 1991; Hammersley, 1993). He criticised what he called as ‘ negative philosophy’ developed by the eighteenth century philosophers who stressed the role of reason in human affairs which were too critical of traditional institutions and therefore, he concluded that they had destroyed rather than provided the foundations for social order and social consensus (London External, 2010).

His theory was a statement about the power of science and of rational thought to understand the world and concerns the evaluation of ideas. As stated by London External (2010, p. 27) that ‘ Comte notes a final stage of evolution in which human thought abandons belief in essences or pure ideas such as absolute truth, but rather attempts to discover laws that link

different facts together, through the methods of observation and
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experiment; absolute notions of causes are abandoned, and the emphasis shifts to the study of facts.' Therefore, according to Fisher (2007), Auguste Comte rejected the metaphysical and subjective ideas and was interested only in the tangible. Consequently, he stated that positivism holds that an accurate and value free knowledge of things is possible even it holds that human beings and their action can be studied but an emphasis of tangible things is important in this regard. For example, it is possible to study scientifically the tangible aspects of human activity by studying external interpretation of human behaviours which are observable and quantifiable and in the study; there should be no regards to the intangible aspects of human activity (Porta and Keating, 2008). Therefore, the intension of positivism is to produce general laws that can be used to predict the behaviour (Fisher, 2007) and hence, positivism can be defined as an epistemological perspective which applies scientific reasoning to develop general laws in order to explain social phenomena in the process of knowledge construction (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2009; Remenyi et al., 1998).

Epistemological Aspect of Positivism

As outlined in the introduction that one of the bases on which philosophies of social science constructed is an epistemological aspect. Epistemology addresses the question of the ' nature, sources and limits of the knowledge' (Klein, 2005) and it tells about how people know things. In traditional approach of positivism, the world exists as an objective entity which is outside the mind of the observer. Epistemological aspect of positivist philosophy is assumed on the bases that the researcher can be separated

from the object of his research and therefore the task of the researcher is to describe and analyse this reality by observing it in neutral way and without affecting the observed object (Porta and Keating, 2008). The traditional approach of positivism is that social sciences are in many ways similar to other sciences. For example, in the natural sciences, there are systematic rules and regularities governing the object of study, which are also amenable to empirical research. In the words of Durkheim (1982: 159), ‘ Since the law of causality has been verified in other domains of nature and has progressively extended its authority from the physical and chemical world to the biological world, and from the latter to the psychological world, one may justifiably grant that it is likewise true for the social world.’ Therefore, reality is considered to be objective in positivism i. e. it is considered as an external to human minds and is easily knowable. This is also known as neo-positivism and it relaxed the assumption that knowledge is context free.

Porta and Keating (2008) states that post positivism also holds the same assumption as neo-positivism holds but the reality is only imperfectly knowable. They argue that if positivism resembles the traditional scientific methods in its research for regularities, then post positivism is closer to modern scientific approaches which accept a degree of uncertainty. Therefore, they conclude that there is a real material world exists in post positivism but the knowledge creation is often socially conditioned and subject to challenge and reinterpretation.

Methodologies in Positivism

The methodologies refer to the instruments and techniques which researcher refers to acquire knowledge. Positivistic social science lends itself to hard methods for acquiring knowledge by accessing unambiguous data, concrete evidence and rules and regularities (Porta and Keating, 2008). Positivistic social science aims at the discovery of universal laws of behaviour for knowledge creation. These laws can be discovered in two distinctive ways – inductive and deductive. The inductive approach is associated with behaviourism and involves deriving generalisations from specific observation to construct a theory (Porta and Keating, 2008). In contrast, deductive is mostly suitable for positivists in the scientific traditions and insist researcher to start with a theory, develops a hypothesis, which is tested and examined to establish a theory (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). This is also outlined by Corbetta (2003, p. 13) who states that ‘ this is hypothetico-deductive method in which the study of social reality utilises the conceptual framework, techniques of observation and measurement, instruments of mathematical analysis and procedures of inference of the natural science’.

Porta and Keating (2008) states that it is rarely possible for positivist researcher in social science to conduct experiments, therefore large datasets and statistical analyses are used in order to identify and isolates causes and effects and arrive at a single explanation. They further demonstrated that positivist arrive at a single explanation of a study by initially framing a research question and then usually start with a hypothesis building which is derived from theory and previous knowledge. In order to answer the research question, positivists often choose a large number of cases to

achieve the maximum generalisibility. They also usually employ the language of variables because they are concerned with general laws and want to know what factors cause which outcomes in the social life (Porta and Keating, 2008). In other words, the aim of the positivist researcher is to account for social processes by reference to general rules without considering individual cases as this will be accounted for within general rules (Corbetta, 2003). In neo positivist approach, according to Porta and Keating (2008), there is more emphasis on the way in which factors combine in different circumstances and therefore, researchers have increasingly resorted to the idea of institutions and these institutions may be expressed in the form of variables. The neo positivist researcher expressed the effect of context in the form of institutions because they try to avoid the concept of culture as it is impossible to operationalise.

As outlined above that positivistic social science utilises the hard scientific approach which can be invaluable such as mathematical models of crowd behaviours in shop and stadiums but there are also problems with these models. For example, it can only predict average behaviour rather than predicting the behaviours of individuals (Fisher, 2007). There are also other issues raised by many researchers such as Robson (2002, p22-23) states that 'research into social and institutional world cannot be value free and that aspiration for social researchers to become hard scientist is not achievable'. According to Porta and Keating (2008) critics also argue that positivist's researcher does not bring normative, ideological or political perspectives to bear on the research whereas positivists counter that if this

is the case, then all such normative tendencies should be declared in advance.

Conclusion

This essay is related to the contribution of positivism to the study of society. To address this aim, the essay initially covers the work of Auguste Comte who initially introduces the term positivism. His work is considered to be a reaction to the philosophy of Enlightenment. His work was based on critiquing the eighteenth century philosophers who stressed the role of reason in human affairs that were too critical of traditional institutions. His work shows that an accurate and value free knowledge of things is possible by giving an emphasis on tangible things in the society. The epistemological aspect of positivism part of the essay demonstrates the possibility of knowing the society in the positivism perspective. It shows two different epistemological aspects of positivism. The traditional or neo-positivism perspective of positivism depicts that the world exists as an objective entity which is outside the mind of the observer and the reality is considered as an external to human minds and is easily knowable. The other epistemological perspectives i. e. post positivism also holds the same assumption as neo-positivism holds but the reality is only imperfectly knowable and hence knowledge creation is often socially conditioned and subject to challenge and reinterpretation in post positivism approach.

The methodologies in positivism section illustrate the instruments and techniques which positivist researcher employs to acquire knowledge for the possibility of knowing the society. It shows that positivistic universal laws can be discovered by either adopting inductive or deductive approach. It also <https://assignbuster.com/positivism-and-its-influence-on-studying-society-philosophy-essay/>

depicts that positivist researcher expressed the effect of context in the form of institutions rather than expressing it in the context of whole society because they try to avoid the concept of culture as it is impossible to operationalise. Positivistic social science utilises the hard scientific approach which can be invaluable. However, there are also some issues raised by the researchers such as positivist researcher only predict the average behavior rather than predicting the behaviour of individuals.