

# Empiricism in geography

[Science](#), [Geography](#)



For the purpose of this essay I will critically discuss aspects of empiricism and the empirical method and their use in geography. I will discuss these aspects with close reference to a recommended reading for our course by Ward et al (2007). Empiricism is a philosophical idea that experience, which is based on observation and experimentation, is the only source of knowledge. Empiricism believes that the mind is a blank canvas and all knowledge arrives in the mind through the portals that are the 5 senses. It believes that all that we as a race know about the world is what the world wishes to tell us. Empiricism states that only information garnered using one's senses should be deemed as credible when making a decision. An essential characteristic of it is its commitment to the position that all knowledge is dependent on experience. It is directly in opposition with the fundamental ideas and attitudes associated with another philosophical doctrine, Rationalism. Rationalism champions all knowledge which is gathered through reason as opposed to through the senses. Essentially Rationalism vs Empiricism is a battle of reason vs. experience.

Empiricism has been largely discredited as a discipline in an academic geographical context but is still widely used in both human and physical geography. The Empirical Method is defined as a method of using a collection of data to form the basis of a theory and essentially form a scientific conclusion. The word empirical means information gained by experience, observation, or experiment. The central theme in scientific method is that all evidence must be empirical which means it is based on evidence. There are two prominent men who are credited with the development of modern empiricism.

Francis Bacon was termed the ‘father’ of empiricism. He deemed that the human mind gained their knowledge only through the senses and that the development of the ability to free the mind of all biases and consciences that could inhibit the truth about certain things. This method was called inductive reasoning. Following Bacon’s death in 1626 other philosophers were free to elaborate on the groundwork he had laid down. One such influential figure was John Locke. Locke believed that from birth human beings are ignorant and all that we know is derived from experience.

It was lock who coined the term synonymous with empiricism, ‘tabula rasa’ which basically means blank slate. The reading from Ward et al (2007) is entitled ‘Living and Working in Urban Class Communities’. It was compiled by Kevin Ward, Collete Fagan, Linda McDowell, Diane Perrins and Kath Ray. All the authors hold esteemed positions in prestigious third level institutes in the United Kingdom, among them the University of Manchester, the University of Oxford and the London School of Economics. This fact alone leads the reader to automatically assume that the reading is a credible piece of work.

All but one author are in the geographical field. Collete Fagan is part of a school of Sociology and therefore she brings a social viewpoint to the table. The reading was completed fully in May 2006 making it 6 years old at present. It focuses on an area of Manchester, England called Sharston. Sharston is a smaller district of the larger Manchester region called Wythenshawe. Sharston is predominately what the reading terms a ‘disadvantaged’ area which suffers from social and economic deprivation.

Most of the residents are involved in semi or unskilled work in the local area with low rates of pay.

There are also low levels of home ownership in Wythenshawe and the levels of people who are on permanent sick leave and disability are above average. Also to add onto all of this four in ten people there have no formal qualification. The reading focuses on the way that low income mothers cope in Sharston as they perform paid and unpaid work while at the same time juggling to maintain the social reproduction of the household. Manchester is the 2nd most deprived local authority district according to the 2004 index.

Wythenshawe, where Sharston is located is the most deprived region of Manchester. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that the authors would choose Wythenshawe as the basis for their study. The reading discusses the mass emergence of a working class in Sharston and how most families have to rely on either one and a half or 2 incomes to support themselves financially. A high proportion of women choose to maintain part time hours in employment so that they can be there for their children when they come home from school and begin their caring and nurturing duties within their home.

In the study, it became clear that the majority of women are employed in one of the 5 c's of employment: cashiering, caring, cleaning, clerical and catering. The researchers gathered their information through the process of 20 interviews with women from the area. These interviews took place in the women's homes. The interviews were recorded transcribed and analysed. They asked the women to think of their past, present and future and most women were frustrated when they thought of their situation. Questions like <https://assignbuster.com/empiricism-in-geography/>

here they lived and why they made the decisions they made were asked. The results of the interviews were all recorded in tables. There are six tables present in the paper. The tables were on the following: socio economic indicators of Sharston in comparison with the city region and nation, work performed by participants, summary of statistics of households in Wythenshawe, intergenerational mobility, paid work and the mix of unpaid and paid childcare. The results were illustrated on the paper in said tables. The tables were clear and easily legible, even to the untrained eye.

Upon a quick scan of the figures presented on the tables it was easy to ascertain the direction in which the trend of the women's answers and other numerical data was going. There were clear links to what the authors outlined they were intending to research in the abstract at the beginning of the paper and to the data contained in the tables. They had spoken about how low income families who were mostly women had to live and depended on their jobs in order to just get by, along with being the primary carers of the children as well.

The authors of this paper clearly use the empirical method throughout their research. Seeing as they all were college educated, their own personal experience of the problems faced by the women in Wythenshawe as regards low income struggles would be low. They would not have had any previous experience of the women in Wythenshawe's lifestyle. They also collected data from the women and used this to back up their findings which were outlined in the text and represented in table format on the paper.

However, that being said there is an area where this paper would not be on par with the empirical methods approach. As all of the compilers of this <https://assignbuster.com/empiricism-in-geography/>

paper reside in the United Kingdom, they would have been aware of some of the answers they were going to receive from the women before they received them. In geography it is practically impossible to have completely empirical approach as they would have went in to this paper with some idea of what they were going to meet.

The authors of this article had set out to examine and use statistics to illustrate the area of Wythenshawe in the context of it's deprived state and the effect its underdeveloped facilities had on the female residents and their families. It set out to investigate the women's attitudes to Wythenshawe, their home. So it is true to say that they authors had an idea of the response they were going to get and just used the material gathered as a means to statistically illustrate it through empirical methods.