

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Positive science or interpretive understanding? Transcending legacies of Durkheim and Weber in defining the nature and procedures of social research

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Abstract

Social science research has been fraught with presumably 'irreconcilable' objectivist versus subjectivist standpoints, which also goes by such names as structure versus agency, determinism versus freewill. Due to their divergent ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions and prescriptions, many researchers stressed the difficulty to work with both approaches to understand reality. This review article traces this methodological strain to the writings of Durkheim and Weber by way of understanding it and proposing ways to surmount the incongruity towards better informed and comprehensive social research.

Keywords: social research, positivism, verstehen, Durkheim, Weber, sociological method

Introduction

The question whether sociology is a proto-science struggling towards maturity (objectivism) or it is an intuitive-based historical approach to the study of human motivation (subjectivism) has been a source of fierce disagreements among sociologists. This divergence in approaching social reality has reflected itself not only on the nature and development of sociological theories but also on methodological approaches. It has always threatened to tear the sociological enterprise into hostile camps; and, with time, they inadvertently built a contingent of scholars whose works undermined the unity of the discipline from inside out. As in much of the West, this became institutionalized in the US to the extent, as one critic of the 'either/or approach' (Merton 1972) commented, opting for 'insider' or 'outsider' perspectives became mandatory for all sociologists.

A few sociologists, conversely, claimed to support or adopt both approaches at once, amongst which the works of Talcott Parsons' stands authoritative. The Structure of Social Action (1949), for instance, put forth a convergence thesis called 'voluntaristic theory of social action' based on a typically Parsonian appreciation of the underlying similarities (beneath their seemingly manifest differences) of Emilé Durkheim's positive science and Max Weber's interpretive understanding. He believed that his convergence thesis to be a "major revolution in social theory [and method] and that his book would be the first one to demonstrate it" (Pope et. al., 1975:417).

Ambitious as it were, the convergence thesis was not built on a faithful interpretation of Durkheim and Weber (Cohen, Hazelrigg and Pope 1975). It is beyond the scope of this paper to recount their differences. But we cannot overstate their contradictions on "conceptions of the social and of sociological explanation" (Pope et. al., 1975:417). Besides, we should point out that the premises, parameters and practices associated with the intui-

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tive/historical method are vastly different from those of an Anglo-American conception of 'science.' While the contrast could be extended to include the major theses of Durkheim and Weber, this paper focuses on their conceptions of the social and the appropriate sociological method with the aim of identifying pragmatic resolutions to their conceptual/methodological dilemma – primarily under what is referred to as 'mixed methods approach.' This paper aims at proposing an alternative exposition on the continuing relevance of the two methodological norms in contemporary sociology, if the mixed method approach is to become successful. The focus on Durkheim and Weber is justified as they were the founding fathers of sociology, none of the classical sociologists were as philosophical as they were in theoretical and methodological writings, and the default sociological mode is to work through their influences, significance and relevance to contemporary writers/writings. Their works represent the earliest, profound and comprehensive but alternative elaborations on the scientific status of sociology and the sociological method, which deserves a singular and worthy treatment in the literature on social methods such as this.

Durkheimian sociology – positive science of society

Emilé Durkheim was a sociologist par excellence courtesy of his formulation of the method and content of sociology from the forces and processes of the social, rather than biological, psychological or utilitarian principles (Nisbet, 1965). In so doing, he stressed the relative importance of society to its individual members. He took his claim to the extreme, and he was criticized for it hugely, when he writes, "When the individual has been eliminated, society alone remains." But he definitively established sociology as a distinctive discipline among the sciences when he explains, "We must, then, seek the explanation of social life in the nature of society itself" (Durkheim, 1895[1950]:102)).

Durkheim, as one major figure in French social thought of his time, wrote profoundly and established the earliest but articulate sociological theory in structural functionalism. A direct intellectual heir of Saint-Simon and Comte, Durkheim "is best known for founding sociology as a scientific discipline and for defining the boundaries of its subject matter" (Morrison, 1996:120). This claim was contested by Durkheim himself though: "It is only with Auguste Comte that the great project conceived by Saint-Simon began to become a reality.... It is Comte who is the father...." (1915 [1975]: I, 110–11)

Durkheimian sociology developed in response to the circumstances that characterized France in the last quarter of the 19th century. During this period, France, where political crisis was undermining national unity, was in search of a secular foundation to rebuild the 'French identity' and the concepts of 'science' and 'social progress' came handy. In the spirit of Enlightenment, many believed science is the best tool to extract French society from its crisis and promote its moral integrity and advancement. The ensuing advancements in physical sciences and society established positivism as the potent intellectual current, and forced science to the center and front in addressing or solving all problems, including social and moral ones.

Here, Durkheim's intellectual debt, positively or negatively, could be traced back to diverse personalities in French and British Enlightenment. Specifically, Comte's influence on his scientific orientation is less murky. In fact, Comte's synthesis of positive philosophy did not only influence Durkheim but also the trajectory of European social sciences (Pickering, 2003:13). And, through Comte, Durkheim benefited from the wisdoms of such learned men of science as Bacon, Descartes and Leibniz whom Comte acknowledged as "the founders of the Positive Philosophy" (Mills, 2005:5).

Comte believed in the urgency of establishing a 'positive science' based on empirical orientations employing the methods of the natural sciences (i.e., observation, experimentation, comparison, and historical analysis) to generate and/or test "abstract laws of human organization." For Comte, scientific discovery of abstract sociological laws does not only serve the purpose of theoretical clarifications; they can and should be formulated to prescribe individual courses of actions and societal re-engineering (Turner, 2001:31).

One of these abstract sociological laws of human organization is what Comte referred to as "the laws of three stages," whereby a particular kind of spirit typifies each stage (Turner, 2001). He labeled the three stages as theological, metaphysical and positive. In 1825, he described this law and its stages as follows:

Man began by conceiving phenomena of all kinds as due to the direct and continuous influence of supernatural agents [theological stage]; he next considered them as produced by different abstract forces residing in matter, but distinct and heterogeneous [metaphysical stage]; finally, he limited himself to considering them as subject to a certain number of invariable natural laws [positive stage] (Comte, 1998: 145)

Comte adds, following Condorcet, this invariable law governs the process of change and it is conceited to think humans can influence its direction. The Course describe history/change as a fact of scientific development. Partly because of this, and partly due to the 19th century popularization of positivism, strengthened by Comte's compelling associations between the remarkable advancements in the natural sciences and their positivistic orientation, social scientists felt a sense of urgency to emulate the successes of the natural sciences and justify the scientific stature for their disciplines. Hence, Comte's positivism, and his enduring influence on sociology came via Durkheim's influential works that enunciate (1) the "thesis that the study of society be founded on the examination of [empirically verifiable] facts"; (2) "view that the only valid guide to objective knowledge is scientific method..."; and (3) the sociologist's unit of analysis is the social rather than the individual (Morrison, 1996:123).

Besides Comte, Herbert Spencer represents another intellectual influence on Durkheim's formulation of the nature and method of the sociological enterprise. In general terms, Spencer's positivism sets out to establish positive science of society based on the same laws – laws derived from 'the cardinal or first principles' of the universe – that dictate every realm of the universe. But, of course, these laws have to be specified and refined before they become applicable to the requirements of a particular realm. Accordingly, Spencer employed deductive reasoning as method of building his theory of social evolution. Within the framework of theory of evolution, positivism as a philosophical or methodological tool "rests on 'social facts' induced from the data available to diverse population ... [obtained based on] a comparative [and systematic] examination of different types of societies and ... 'social insects'" (Turner, 2001: 35).

Though his positivism is vastly abstract, it is insightful in that it aims "to formulate theories that have been disciplined and assessed by social facts from a wide variety of sources." Under positivism, hence, "if laws are to be truly general and universal [which is the objective Spencer sets out for sociology], they must explain data from a wide range of specific empirical cases" (Turner, 2001:36-7). Coser (1971) commented how an empirical fact that does not fit his theoretical formulations made Spencer feel unbearably irritable.

Spencer provided the necessary context within which Durkheim formulated his distinctive subject matter and methods of investigation for sociology. But their legacies and relations are contentious. Durkheim, on the one hand, rejected Spencer's individualistic sociology that hinges on Hobbesian notion of social contract as society's mechanism and microcosm. On the other hand, he leveraged on Spencer to defend the scientific legitimacy of sociology and its search for general and abstract law-like regularities in the social universe. For Spencer, many assume "fundamental forces directing human organization" to propose solutions to address social problems, and this is clear evidence that social laws do actually exist. Hence, he argues, the legitimacy of sociology lies in the adoption of positivistic methodology to unravel these implicit assumptions (Turner, 2001:37).

Spencer also took challenge with the claim that sociology cannot fully emulate the 'exact science' like physics since its laws cannot be expressed quantitatively:

Only phenomena of certain orders have had their relations expressed quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Of the remaining orders [social universe] there are some produced by factors so numerous and so hard to measure, that to develop our knowledge of their relations into the quantitative form will be extremely difficult, if not impossible. But these orders of phenomena are not therefore excluded from the conception of science.... It is thus with sociology (Spencer, 1873:45).

Verbal statements of insights and qualitative methods do not "make research or theory any less scientific, nor do they make laws less powerful," thereby "removing the burden of quantification from positivism" from all sciences:

The goal is to isolate the forces of the social universe, state their operation in laws, and seek to understand their relations to each other. Such activity need not be stated as a mathematical equation ... nor do the data collected to assess the plausibility of a law need to be quantitatively measured (Turner, 2001:37).

Durkheim's positivism also benefited from Spencer's systematic analysis of objectivity in social research. Spencer appreciates the challenges of social research i.e. human studying other human. He wrote, "from the intrinsic natures of its facts, from our own nature as observers of its facts, and from the peculiar relation in which we stand towards the facts to be observed, there arise impediments in the way of sociology greater than those in the way of any other science" (Spencer, 1873:72). The problems of objectivity in social research emanate from researcher's objective and subjective difficulties (arising out of one's intellectual allegiance and emotion, biases of educational, class, political and religious background, and theological formations). After warning "the student against the errors he is liable to fall to," Spencer specified the rules for a true or objective science of society (Spencer, 1873:314). Here, a researcher needs to be on guard to address three interrelated issues: (1) "data collected ... is directly relevant to formulating or testing [social] laws..."; (2) "collection and analysis of data should not be biased by a cherished hypothesis or ideological commitment..."; and (3) data should be collected "... overtime in order to see processes unfold..." (Turner, 2001:37). Researchers have to effectively navigate logical and empirical realities to meet the third requirement of objectivity (i.e., longitudinal study design, though several strategies were also identified over the years to compensate for the inadequacy of cross-sectional study designs to capture change overtime).

Besides Comte and Spencer, Durkheim's sociological theory and methods were also influenced by the 19th century intellectual traditions that placed the individual center and front in theorizing about society, hence, for many, undermining moral authority of the

group over its members. The excesses of individualism during the French Revolution (1789) distraught and forced many to adopt “an anti-individualist stance in their political and social views” (Lukes qtd in Morrison, 1995:124). On his part, Durkheim labored to show the need for reasons above and beyond individuals’ selfish interests to make social life possible. Specifically, he formulated his ideas on the relation between the individual and society in clear opposition to utilitarian social theory, an influential 19th century doctrine. By unduly emphasizing autonomous individuals acting on the basis of calculated self-interests, utilitarianism “ignored the larger system of social rules which acted as restraints on individual action.” For him, society is a historical precedent to the individual and as such “it would be scientifically defensible to focus on society” rather than on individuals. This distinguished his theory of society from individualistic theories of society i.e. theories that “generally looked for the origins of society by focusing on individual human nature” (Morrison, 1995:125) and/or self-interest. This made the social per se a unit of analysis for his sociology.

Weberian sociology – Interpretive understanding of society, *verstehen*

Max Weber, the German sociologist and economist, had catholic test with an unparalleled historical grasp of modern Western societies and their economic, political, legal and religious development. He developed distinctive methodology for social sciences, bearing the lasting imprints of various 19th century social thinkers. Before we proceed to a discussion about his specific methodology insights, a brief review of Weber’s intellectual heritage seems in place.

Early sociologists (Comte, Spencer and Durkheim) tried to model sociology and its methods on the natural sciences i.e. positivism. In as far as positive sociology “emphasizes observable human behavior” (Allen, 2004:68), Weberian sociology is part of the revolt against it. Weber emphasizes the roles played by mental activity or interpretation and free-choice in constructing social realities. In this regard, his intellectual heritage lay in German Idealism and Austrian School of Economics (Allen, 2004:68).

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant was central to the idealist stance on the methodology of sciences: “things in themselves were unknowable and that the mind had an active role in processing knowledge.” This philosophy, broadly referred to as German idealism, “stressed how all knowledges were the result of the process of selection according to values” (Allen, 2004:69); and, its contemporary relevance to Weber’s The Methodology was ensured through the continued debates on methodology, which, towards the end of the 19th century Germany, argued with intense fervor the basic differences between natural and social sciences. Historians and philosophers such as Wilhelm Windelband, Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert “argued that the ‘humanistic sciences’ – history and the social sciences – did not [or cannot] seek regularities or ‘laws’ in the same way the natural sciences did.” Humanistic interest lies in, or methodological tools limit the scope to, “the human mind and spirit (Geist) and these could only be understood ‘from the inside’ in terms of intentions and beliefs” of diachronically unique individuals (Allen, 2004:69).

Conversely, as a testimony to his eclectic taste, Weber was influenced by the Austrian School of marginalist economics, which represents “the main rival to the German historical school” and stresses the scientific value of “abstract concepts, and aimed at establishing general laws” (Allen, 2004:70). Carl Menger argued, for instance, if economics is to be a science, “social life must be subject to the laws of nature and investigated using the methods of the natural sciences” (Morrison, 1995:265). The influence of such conception of methods, in the home discipline of Max Weber, on his thought could not be overstated.

Weber's methodological resources, hence, lie in these debates; and, his problematic was to find an approach that "retain the emphasis on the values and sense of uniqueness of the social and cultural spheres," while enabling "access to the more 'scientific formulations'" and rigorous theoretical approach (Allen, 2004:70). Thus, he defined his sociology as

A science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. We shall speak of 'action' insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course (Weber, 1978: 4).

The debates over which methods were appropriate to the social sciences made up the central issues of Weber's methodological works. Accordingly, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* attempted to address three points of these disagreements: "the subject matter of the social sciences, the investigative methods pursued in the social sciences and the purpose or aim of the social sciences" (Morrison, 1995:265). Let us discuss these relevant cornerstones of social research methods by contrasting *The Methodology* with *The Rules*.

Positivism and verstehen: Fundamental premises

After framing Durkheimian and Weberian sociologies within their respective historical and intellectual contexts, this and subsequent sections discuss the development of specific methods of social research and their continued relevance as we try to move beyond their classic prescriptions. We begin by highlighting the specific aspects Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method*.

Emile Durkheim. The rules of sociological method

The Rules had the primary aim of outlining the subject matter and rules of sociological investigation. Durkheim, like Comte before him, wrote *The Rules* to shift sociology from a science of existence to a science of things, thereby establishing a factual basis for the existence of social phenomena. Hence, Durkheimian sociological method is committed to the scientific study of 'social facts.' He emphasized, furthermore, the significance of distinguishing "facts that are commonly called social" i.e. facts that exist outside and prior to the individual. Hence, his definition of social fact: A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations (Durkheim, 1895:13).

After defining social facts as the subject matter of sociology and identifying its essential attributes in terms of their generality, exteriority and coercive powers, *The Rules* specified the rules of sociological research. The sociologist's first task is to make social phenomena susceptible to scientific investigation by treating them as 'things' since "ideas have no [physical] reality" (Durkheim, 1895:23). Durkheim did not say social facts are material things; but that they are things by the same right as materials, and treating them as such will make the consistent and external attributes of social phenomena amenable to the techniques of observation and identifying their laws. It also ensures objectivity as it defines social phenomena in terms of their external characteristics and "independent of their individual manifestations." This Rule dictates every social research to commence with such objective definition to ensure what is being studied is always made up of a group of phenomena that are defined by their external characteristics. This Rule also helped Durkheim to establish sociology as a distinct science, with focus on collective con-

sciousness than individual consciousness – with different laws.

The Rules also prescribes the appropriate method of sociological explanation. It warned against “any teleological confusion of the function of a social fact (i.e. the role it plays with regard to individual or social needs) with its cause (i.e. the fact which brought it into existence).” Since social facts are generic, external and coercive, “no human desire, however imperious, could be sufficient to such effect.” Even if individuals could create a new type of reality, “it is in the facts of that association rather than the needs and interests of the associated elements that the explanation for social facts is to be found” (Jones, 2003:198). Consequently, Durkheimian sociology attributes the “causes of social facts to the framework of society rather than to causes which are psychological, individual, or teleological in their nature” (Morrison, 1995:162).

Durkheim was illustrative as he was prescriptive. His social theory of suicide states, suicidal act, “which at first seems to express only the personal temperament of individuals, is really the supplement and prolongation of a social condition which they express externally” (Durkheim, 1897[1951]:263). He continues,

When suicide is considered as an individual action affecting the individual only, it must seemingly depend exclusively on individual factors, thus belonging to psychology alone.... If, instead of seeing in them separate occurrences, unrelated and to be separately studied, the suicides are taken as a whole, it appears that this total is not simply a sum of independent of units, but is a new fact *sui generis*, with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature – a nature, furthermore, more dominantly social (Durkheim, 1897[1951]: xliv).

Many treat *Le Suicide* as a methodological classic. It conceptualized Durkheimian methodology as the assumptions and concepts used in theorization; and, the tools of research in data collection. *Le Suicide* analyzed statistics, and made comparisons to eliminate rather than prove relationships. Durkheim used a methodology of multivariate analysis (Selvin, 1958) when he held one variable constant while comparing two situations. He used statistics to, as such, ‘manipulate’ variables and understand the nitty-gritty of suicide in terms of “the study and interpretation of complex interrelationships among a multiplicity of characteristics” (Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg qtd in Selvin, 1958: 609). His empirical study of suicide proceeded with “the progressive introduction [and elimination] of additional variables” (Selvin, 1958:608).

Max Weber. The methodology of the social sciences

The central starting point of *The Methodology* is the existential, subjective point of view of the individual. The Methodology came to be seen as part of the revolt against positivism, though Weber did not reject the importance of theoretical constructs and generic concepts to establish or prove causal relationships in all sciences including the social sciences (Parsons, 1947:9). *The Methodology*, nonetheless, assumes a methodological individualism that aim at understanding collectivities emanating from the social actions of individuals. From the standpoint of extreme Kantianism, Weber claimed that “society is formed by individuals choosing, interpreting and acting” based on values. In other words, scientific knowledge about reality “includes only those segments of reality, which have become significant to us because of their value relevance” (Allen, 2004:71-2).

The Methodology’s flirtation with extreme subjectivism required a remedy if the Weberian enterprise was not to come off as intellectual eccentric with little allusion to objectivity.

To this effect, Weber introduced an important distinction between value-freedom and value-relevance. 'Value-relevance,' a term borrowed from German historicist Heinrich Rickert, refers to "the choice of objects to study made on the basis of what is considered important in the particular society in which the researcher lives" (Weber, 1949). Weber himself never hesitated from freely stating his value judgements in choosing topics for his writings (Weber, 1930; Weber, 1978). The Protestant Ethic is a perfect illustration of how "his value system selected the problem" and "his cultural background led him to look in a particular 'direction'" (Allen, 2004:75). Simply put, research topic should be personally and socially relevant as well as interesting to the researcher.

As such, Weber challenges positivism, for there can be no "absolutely 'objective' analysis of culture or 'social phenomena' independent of special and 'one-sided' viewpoints according to which – explicitly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously – they are selected, analyzed and organized for expository purposes" (Weber, 1949:72). Nonetheless, this is where the relevance and scientific acceptability of researchers' personal values stops. In other words, researchers should be 'value-free' in subsequent stages of the research process. Hence, researchers' values and interests may rightly affect the choice of topic for a scientific inquiry – but its design and implementation should follow strict scientific procedures or protocols.

In the spirit of German idealist tradition, *The Methodology* was skeptical of positivism in sociological understanding of why people act the way they do. The polemics of *The Methodology* against positivism argued the advantage sociologists hold over natural scientists in understanding social action or reality (Girth and Mills, 1946; Ritzer, 1996). This advantage is predicated on a unique method of *verstehen* which enables sociologists to: identify a concrete 'motive' or complex of motives 'reproducible in inner experience', a motive to which we can attribute the conduct in question with a degree of precision that is dependent upon our source material. In other words, because of its susceptibility to a meaningful *interpretation* ... individual conduct is in principle intrinsically less 'irrational' than the individual natural event (Weber 1975:129).

The Methodology specified two types of *verstehen*: *direct-observational* understanding, whereby meaning is grasped based on body expression or overt behavior; and, *explanatory* understanding, whereby meaning is grasped by putting overt behavior in a chain of actions or motive to unravel the reason or rationale why a particular course of action, rather than others, is happening. Sociological knowledge should combine both these two aspects of social action to be complete. On the other hand, Weber's advocacy for fieldwork and survey research to furnish required data for *verstehen* (Weber 1978) shows his interesting in combining sociologists' focus on culture or motives with the rigorous scientific requirements of the natural sciences.

To be a method to generate comprehensive and reliable knowledge, *verstehen* has a specific requirement on the part of the researcher: value-freedom. Value-freedom is imperative to "access the mind of others who might have opposing values," while recognizing the existence of "unbridgeable gap between the world of 'what is' and 'what should be,'" (Allen, 2004:73) which make any value judgment a matter of faith rather than scientific proof (Weber, 2004:110). If this requirement is met, Weber suggests, a systematic and/or scientific knowledge about social reality is possible.

The Methodology integrated Weber's focus on subjective values with his desire for objective and disciplined scientific rigor he saw in the methodology of the ideal-type. The meth-

od of ideal-type, associated with the Austrian School of Economics, is appreciated for its conceptual superiority in the formulation of analytically coherent model/systems of human behavior to understand economic transactions (Weber qtd in Allen, 2004:77). Weber was fascinated by the potential of the ideal-type methodology to “impose an intellectual discipline on the researcher who was using the *verstehen* method” (Allen, 2004:77).

He stressed that the ideal type, as a methodological construct, is neither a typology, nor a dichotomous list of contrasting or comparative elements. He defined ideal-type, rather, as a “conceptual pattern which brings together certain relationship and events of historical life into a complex which is conceived of as an internally consistent system” (Weber qtd in Morrison, 1995:270). As such, they are only explanatory than descriptive, and as scientific conceptualizations, they “are abstract and never fully exhaust or reflect concrete reality” (Parsons, 1947:11). The criterion for their success was whether they revealed “concrete culture phenomena in their interdependence, their causal conditions and their significance” (Weber qtd in Allen, 2004:77).

Weber revised the economists’ methodology of ideal-type to fit *The Methodology*, and wrote: “the actor is treated not merely responding to stimuli, but as making an ‘effort’ to conform with certain ‘ideal,’ rather than actual, patterns of conduct with the probability that his efforts will be only partially successful, and there will be elements of deviation” (Parsons, 1947:12). He adopted the economists’ ‘rational ideal-type’ to *The Methodology*, for he thought that “since they were defined by the role of scientifically verifiable knowledge, [they] directly embodied this element of generality in the determinants of action” (Parsons, 1947:12-3). For him, in these “types of action which were treated as most highly rational, there was both a high sense of freedom and a maximum of predictability and understandability in generalized terms.” Thus, Weber writes,

The construction of a purely rational course of action ... serves the sociologist as a type.... By comparison with this, it is possible to understand the ways in which actual action is influenced by irrational factors of all sorts, in that they account for the deviation from the line of conduct which would be expected on the hypothesis that the action was purely rational (Weber qtd in Parsons, 1947:12).

In such a way, Weber attempted to address his methodological problematic with ideal-type: “to define the kinds of generalized categories [*ideal-type*] which met the logical requirements of this schema [*causal explanation*] and at the same time embodied the point of view peculiar to the historical-cultural sciences, the use of subjective categories [*verstehen*]” (Parsons, 1947:11).

Positivism and *Verstehen*: In Contrast

Positivism and *verstehen* make up the substantial core of the debates in the philosophy of the social sciences i.e. the scientific stature of the social sciences. The profound debate in the social sciences was due to their developments in “close contact with philosophy” which made their methodologies scientifically suspect – by association. Since the early days, “the question has always remained open whether the social sciences should imitate the natural sciences or the term ‘science’ should be understood in a much weaker sense of systematic inquiry” (Outhwaite 1996:83).

Note here the weighty semantics issues. In predominantly Anglo-American scholarly setting, the term ‘science’ refers to the disciplined search for regularities in and universally viable explanations for human experiences, which are capable of generating predictions

of new testable regularities. Science is synonymous with empiricism; and, “the first methodological rule of empirical science is that no proposition accepted into the corpus of science is exempt from empirical control” (Kaufmann (1944) cited in Rex, 1961:12). As such, scientific regularity or “law which regarded as incapable of falsification should not be admitted to science at all” (Karl Popper (1958) cited in Rex, 1961:13). Conversely, the term ‘science’ has a second and broader application in, for instance, Germanic and Slavonic languages, and it refers to “any systematic scholarly inquiry” that is logically coherent and meaningful (Outhwaite, 1995:85) – rather than mere observability and empiricism.

Against the backdrop such semantics, the focus of philosophy of social science became “a concern with knowledge and foundations of knowledge.” Hence, the standard question ‘*Is social science a science?*’ Those who answer in affirmation, conventionally known as *naturalists*, were bearers of “a strong residual influence of Auguste Comte and his positive philosophy” (Outhwaite, 1996:86); and, those who respond in negation, conventionally labeled as *anti-naturalists* or methodological dualists, “stress the distinctiveness of the science of culture or spirit from the natural sciences.” For anti-naturalist, due to either methodological problems (for instance, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert) or “ontological differences in interests” (for instance, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, and Wilhelm Dilthey), the students of culture and society proceeded to understand rather than develop general regularities or causal explanations (Outhwaite, 1996:85-6).

As noted in the preceding section, Emilé Durkheim, an intellectual heir to Comte’s positivism, subscribed to the science of society and invested his energy and intellectual rigor to the development and advancement of sociology as a positive science with distinct subject matter and methods of investigation. Max Weber, on the other hand, took “an intermediate position, heavily influenced by Heinrich Rickert but increasingly conceiving his own version of *verstehen* sociology as the investigation of social regularities by means of ‘ideal-type’ concepts” (Outhwaite, 1996:86).

They chartered different paths for sociological theory and method. While Durkheim insisted that “relative to its members, society was a *sui-generis*, emergent phenomenon,” Weber, rejecting Durkheim’s conception of society, argued “holistic concepts as ‘state’ or ‘society’ refer only to the probability that individuals will act in certain ways under given conditions.” For Weber, sociology must be couched in terms that have “reference ultimately to the behavior of individual actors.” Hence, “in so far as Weber’s stance can be characterized as one of methodological individualism, Durkheim’s views formed a contrary stance” (Pope et al, 1975:418) in methodological holism.

They also differ on whether research should start with a definition of its subject matter. Durkheim stressed the prime methodological importance of definition since the subject matter of research must only include a group of phenomena defined beforehand by certain common external characteristics, and all phenomena which correspond to this definition must be so included. Positivist investigation must begin by defining that specific social phenomenon with which it is concerned – definition provides a conceptual/analytical boundary to objectively discriminate against variables that are trivial and, this is equally important, include all essential features of the phenomenon (Jones, 2004). Weber, on the other hand, argued against any full-blown definition of a phenomenon to be studied at the start of an investigation, for such a procedure limits the investigator’s imagination and/or privileges/reifies the definition/concept over the phenomenon under investigation. Weber explained that any type of definition of phenomena under investigation would be scientifically valid only if it is attempted at the end of an investigation (Allen, 2004).

Weber's and Durkheim's approaches to social causation and explanation mirror their views on the logical status of the concept of society. Durkheim proposed to explain action by "disregarding the individual, his motives and ideas" in order to directly seek its social antecedents. For "subjective states are insufficiently accessible to scientific observation [and are highly inconsistent] to be legitimate objects of scientific analysis" (Durkheim, 1950:27-8). Hence, Durkheim was confirming to a more critical stance which assumes that "science becomes more scientific as it externalizes its outcomes to 'reality,' instead of attributing them to 'standpoints' or 'perspectives'" (Fuchs, 2001:23).

Weber has an alternative view: "a correct causal interpretation of a concrete course of action is arrived at when the overt action and the motives have both been correctly apprehended and at the same time their relation has become meaningfully comprehensible" (Weber, 1949:12). He adds, "an 'objective' analysis of cultural events, which proceeds according to the thesis that the ideal of science is the reduction of empirical reality of 'laws,' is meaningless" (Weber, 2004:112). Pope et al (1975:420) concluded:

In sum, Durkheim's dictum that 'The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness' may be contrasted with Weber's assertion that 'subjective understanding is the specific characteristic of sociological knowledge.' Weber would have rejected Durkheim's 'social realism' as reification, while Durkheim would have rejected Weber's approach as psychological reductionism and, therefore, not truly sociological.

The predicament of the sociologist!

The convergence thesis. Towards integration?

As indicated at the outset, Talcott Parsons, among many (including Reinhard Bendix, Jeffrey Alexander, and George Ritzer), represent the most ambitious and influential undertaking within the synthesizing project of Durkheim's and Weber's insights on the methodology of the social sciences. Parsons claimed that these two sociologists and their theoretical and methodological orientations converge in his '*voluntaristic theory of social action*.' His Theory of Social Action was predicated on the "recognition of the importance of subjective states," which is specifically assumed as enabling actors not only to "adopt a normative orientation" but also direct "efforts to conform to norms" (Pope et al, 1975:420). Hence, "Parsons's sociology is caught in a cleft stick between agency and structure, and that his theory goes a long way towards reconciling those ancient contradictions." In this respect, we would have to argue that "Parsons's theory is strictly speaking neither a theory of action nor a theory of systems; it is in fact an action-systems theory" (Turner, 1999:168). But, in the end, it was hoped it has brought to Parsonian sociology the strengths of positive science and interpretive understanding approaches to address the rift in the discipline between positivists and hermeneutics towards a comprehensive understanding of the sociological phenomena.

However, *Theory of Social Action* as representing a convergence thesis of Durkheim and Weber have been criticized on several grounds. Pope et al argue, "clearly Weber and Durkheim cannot be said to converge on a voluntaristic theory of action unless they agree on the place of subjective states and normative elements in sociological theory" and methods. As we have already noted, Durkheim rejected the use of subjective phenomena in sociological explanation; and, as such, he cannot be considered as action theorist or voluntaristic. Besides, "whereas Durkheim saw shared norms as decisive influences

on behavior, Weber sharply circumscribed the importance of normative elements in actor's subjective orientations, stressing instead the importance of habits and self-interests" (1975:420). Furthermore, the ontological and epistemological contradictions between the two and their approaches to the study of social reality remain requiring a better conceptualization.

Comte was all up for a 'mutual adjustment' of subjectivist and objectivist methodologies in the 1951 revised version of *Discourse*. The possible inclusion of subjectivist method under positivism is, however, conditional on its practitioner's abandonment of the search for hidden causes and redirect their focus to the search for laws to ameliorate human nature and human circumstances. Subjective methods must become sociological to enter into a 'natural harmony' with positivism i.e. objectivism and constituting a new logic that does not necessarily mean fusion of methods into a single methodological synthesis or eclectic reconciliation. Comte (1968: 364) describes the new harmony:

The long antagonism of analysis and synthesis passes into a permanent alliance, in which each method will in its own way supplement the principal shortcomings of the other. The objective method used alone is of great value, when wisely employed.... Conversely, the subjective method exclusively employed, while keeping the system as a whole constantly before us, would not leave the mind sufficiently free to gather the materials necessary for the stability of the edifice. It is only by a skillful combination of these two methods used alternatively, the one beginning where the other leaves off, that the defectiveness of each can be remedied; and thus the best use made of our small supply of intellectual force, so inadequate when left to itself for the social problems with which it has to deal. No doctrine of the final [scientific] religion can be considered as satisfactorily established until it has passed through the ordeal of both methods.

Conclusion

Many scholars who wrote on social research methodology, consciously or unconsciously, proceed without acknowledging the relevance of their divergent approaches over three aspects of social research: ontology, epistemology and methodology. Specifically, the positivistic strand which had been dominant in social science research between the 1940s and 1960s (Outhwaite, 1996) has been one of the bearers of Durkheim's formalization of the nature and procedure of social research. Hence, the ontological existence of society or social facts, with the attributes of externality, generality and coercive powers over the individual, was assumed through what is called 'argument by elimination,' leading to a surge of search for adequate quantitative methods to study their external and objective attributes and identify regularities in their functioning. Knowledge was assumed to exist 'out-there' in the social world rather than in the subjective states of the individual, which made the use of methods of positive science more appropriate.

The critical tradition, which emerged in the late 1930s but became profound from the 1960s onwards, forced a paradigm shift in social research towards the agenda set, among others, by Weber in terms of interpretive understanding of meaning and cultural representations. This reflected itself in the shift from the dominance of methods of social research which attempt to quantify social life to methods which proceed with the aim of untangling the fluid meanings of cultural symbols from the point of view of the cultural element/actor – this trend has been alternatively referred to as post-positivism.

Straining under enormous critique, positivism increasingly lost favor among social sci-

entists; and, a new surge of a theoretical orientation called postmodernism developed a critical stance towards not only modernity's promise towards ever-increasing rationality in society (as suggested by the positivism) but also its assumption that knowledge could be based on secure foundations of objective science. Central to postmodernists reading of postmodern condition is that it is "riddled with ambiguity and controversy." Their postmodernist critique of postmodern conditions prepared ground for the development of postmodern analyses. Postmodern analyses emphasized the "the centrality of language, discourses, and texts" (Smart, 1996:397-9).

Within this tradition, we have the works of Michael Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu who have been widely regarded as 'postmodernists.' Foucault's view, for instance, represents a critical reinterpretation of history of society and man (Foucault qtd in Smart, 1996:401). His "postmodern method is critical genealogical history, which helps social researchers describe "how we have come to be what we are" (Hoy (1988) qtd in Smart, 1996:401). This was a reflection of the reflexive nature of post-modernity about which Giddens writes, "The point is not that there is no stable social world to know, but that knowledge of that world contributes to its unstable character" (1990:45). Specifically, towards the 1980s, constructivist approach, or 'metaphysical paradigm' (modeled after a highly refined form of Weber's *verstehen*), gained a wider acceptance and fruitfully applied as method of analyses vis-à-vis to what was then seen as an "outmoded positivistic paradigm." This shift initiated "a broader reconceptualization of methodological issues throughout the social sciences" (Morgan 2007:49).

There were also attempts to integrate both strands of methodology in social research which have been made problematic due to the incompatibility of the basic premises and procedures of data collection advocated by positivism, defining social research as a search for objective knowledge, and *verstehen*, defining social research as an interpretive understanding of meanings based on cultural values. This is not to mean there were no sociologists whose works moved the discussion of sociological method outside these two approaches or propose an approach wholly challenging to their assumptions, premises and prescriptions – collectively referred to as post-positivists (e.g. Harding, 1987, 2008; Smith, 2005). Regardless, except in a few subdisciplines, sociology still continues to suffer from the failure on the part of the practitioners resolve the lack of logical consistency and empirical reliability of its early foundations, and to forge sound and roots. Besides, sociologists have to take into consideration all the issues involved in selecting quantitative or qualitative research methodology, or attempting to combine both in what is commonly referred to as mixed method, which requires a reconciliation of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the two, or move beyond both.

Nonetheless, I would like to argue the challenge to reconcile the ontological, epistemological and methodological orientations of quantitative and qualitative methods under the currently fashionable 'mixed methods approach' may not be as insurmountable as it may appear at first glance – at least at methods level. The problem could be especially weighty when we think about combining quantitative and qualitative methods in research with each generating data that are not simply different but contradictory. It is possible for survey to come up with results that indicate strong macroeconomic performances while, at the same time, in-depth interviews with citizens reveal growing deprivation and inequalities. How do we deal with this conundrum of combining methods producing different outcomes – rather than complementing each other?

This has discouraged many from even designing a research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods (Bryman, 2007). In those instances where mixed methods re-

searchers adopted both methods, they avoided the ontological and epistemological problematics and exhibited clear pragmatism in their works (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2005; Bryman 2007).

Nevertheless, in the literature on methods, three possibilities are identified to resolve such a scenario: (a) prioritize results from quantitative methods; (b) prioritize results from qualitative methods; or, (c) present both quantitative and qualitative results without prioritizing either. These choices are made based on pragmatic – which method supplies the ‘right data’ to meet the objectives of the research – or realistic – which results are more appropriate to understand both regularities and processes – considerations. But all these three choices forgo the possibilities of the strengths of each method complementing one another, enabling a better, comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under consideration.

Regardless, depending on disciplinary prejudices and ideological convictions, social scientists opted for one of the three options. Economists, and sociologists but to an increasingly less certitude, preferred the first option, while anthropologists opted for the second. This may sound very simplistic to researchers whose works transcended traditional disciplinary boundaries. For these researchers, there is always the third option of not prioritizing numbers over words, or breadth over depth. But the third option is fraught with the problems of inhibiting clearer understanding of the phenomenon as well as definitive conclusions and insightful recommendations for concerted action (including policies) based on unresolved contradictions and undecided assessments and/or weighing of empirical evidence.

What can one recommend as a course of action if his/her/their findings from different methods indicate in different directions? What if a thorough methodological integration, rather than “unfolding the complex relationships in the topic of study” (Bazeley 2009: 205), brought increased confusion in the research? This is where we may consider the possibility of a fourth, and probably underdeveloped, option. But it is empirically sound; and, the fourth option is: *whatever the nature of relations between the results of different methods, they all are true to the nature of the phenomenon under investigation*. Objective and subjective knowledge complement and form a holistic system of knowledge about reality. If our methods produce contradictory results, then this is an indication that either the methods are faulty, or they did not develop fully to capture the reality in its totality; or, we, as researchers, failed seeing beyond the seemingly and/or overt contradictions that create enduring connections, or, our study participants, knowingly or unknowingly, omitted, forgotten or misrepresented a reality to protect their interests and/or fit the profile of socially desirable responses. In other words, contradictory results from different methods does not show the phenomenon under investigation has different realities but the methods have not developed enough to help us to have comprehensive knowledge about it. Hence, when the results contradict because we used different methods, it means we have to refine and improve our methods and tools by returning back to a field to gather better data. This process is iterative, time-taking and we could not perfect our tools yet. That is the scientific enterprise that the current knowledge society demands.

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