

DISCUSS THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Ahmed Abdulazeez

Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Abuja

Umar Farukh Ahmed

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy
Baze University, Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria

Abstract

In the social sciences, research often faced with challenges related to subjectivity, value-laden interpretations, and methodological inconsistencies, raising concerns about the credibility and generalizability of findings. To this end the need for a robust philosophical foundation in research becomes evident, as scholars struggle with epistemological and ontological dilemmas that influence knowledge production. This study examines the philosophical approach to social science research, emphasizing epistemological underpinnings that shape inquiry, methodology, and knowledge validation. Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilizes secondary data sources, including books, journal articles, and reports, to critically analyze the philosophical debates associated with research in social sciences. The study is anchored in epistemology, particularly interpretivism and constructivism, as these perspectives provide a justification for understanding social phenomena within their contextual and subjective realities. Findings from the investigation indicate that a strong epistemological foundation enhances the coherence, rigour, and applicability of research in the social sciences by ensuring that choices in methodology correspond with the study under investigation. Furthermore, the study highlights that an epistemologically sound research approach fosters critical reflexivity and minimizes biases that often compromise the validity of social science research. Based on these findings, the study recommends among others that researchers in the social sciences should receive formal training in epistemological and philosophical paradigms to enhance methodological rigour and theoretical coherence. Secondly, interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy and social science disciplines should be encouraged to refine research frameworks and promote more holistic and credible knowledge production. These recommendations aim to strengthen research practices and enhance the credibility of knowledge generated in the social sciences.

Keywords: Philosophy, Epistemology, Ontology, Methodology, Research, Theory, Social Sciences

Introduction

Research in the social sciences is deeply embedded in philosophical traditions that shape the way knowledge is conceptualized, examined, and validated. Philosophy provides the foundation upon which scientific inquiry in the social sciences is built, thereby guiding researchers in the approach towards understanding human behaviour, societal structures, and social interactions. The philosophical approach to social science research involves engaging with fundamental questions concerning epistemological and ontological nature of reality, the possibility of knowledge, and the means through which knowledge is obtained (Crotty, 1998). This approach is necessary in clarifying assumptions, methodologies, and interpretations that reinforce empirical investigations. One of the primary concerns of philosophical approach is ontology, which deals with the knowledge of its realistic nature. To Guba and Lincoln (1994), ontological perspectives influence how researchers perceive the existence of social phenomena, influencing their inquiry into human experiences and societal structures. Realism, for example, assumes that an objective reality exists independent of human perception, whereas constructivism suggests that reality is constructed socially through human interactions. These ontological positions subsequently inform epistemology, which is primary connected with the nature of knowledge and the means to acquired it. Positivist epistemology, which aligns with realism, advocates for an objective and measurable understanding of social reality using quantitative methods. In contrast, interpretivism, aligned with constructivism, emphasizes subjective experiences and qualitative methodologies to capture the complexity of social occurrences (Bryman, 2016).

Methodology, as fundamental component of the philosophical approach, refers to the strategies and tools researchers use to investigate social phenomena. The philosophical underpinnings of research methodology influence whether a study adopts a deductive or inductive approach, as well as the extent to which it relies on empirical data, theoretical frameworks, or mixed methods. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), positivist methodologies often emphasize hypothesis testing, statistical analysis, and experimental designs to establish causal relationships, while interpretivist methodologies employ ethnography, phenomenology, and case studies to explore meanings and lived experiences. Pragmatism, as an alternative approach, bridges positivism and interpretivism by advocating for methodological pluralism, recognizing the significance of conducting social science research using qualitative and quantitative methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Similarly, critical realism gained prominence in research, particularly in the context of social science by addressing limitations in both positivism and interpretivism. It asserts that while an objective reality exists, human perceptions and social structures influence the ways in which reality is understood and studied (Bhaskar, 1978). Particularly, this approach is significant in exploring complex social issues such as institutional structures, power dynamics and social inequality. In furthermore, critical theorists extend this perspective by emphasizing the ideological role, discourse, and historical background influencing social reality (Habermas, 1984). In the context of social sciences research, the philosophical approach is fundamental in refining theoretical frameworks, guiding methodological choices, and ensuring the coherence of research findings. However, engaging with ontological and epistemological debates, researchers critically assess their assumptions and contribute to the broader discourse on knowledge production. The integration of philosophical perspectives enhances the rigour, depth, and ethical considerations of

social science research, fostering more comprehensive understanding of human behaviour and societal dynamics.

In the light of the above therefore, this study explores the philosophical foundations of social science research, emphasizing on the relationship between epistemology, ontology, and methodology in shaping research paradigms.

Methodology

This paper utilized qualitative research design, specifically a secondary data-based approach, to examine the philosophical approach in understanding social sciences research. Therefore, it relies on existing literature, including books, journal articles, and reports, this study critically analyzed key philosophical paradigms such as positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism, which shape the methodologies in the context of social sciences research. The secondary data utilized is justified by the need to explore established theoretical frameworks and scholarly discussions rather than collecting primary data. Since philosophical inquiries in social science research are profoundly rooted in theoretical discourse, secondary sources provided a rich and diverse foundation for analysis. The choice of a qualitative approach became necessary in addressing the conceptual and theoretical nature of philosophical paradigms. Rather than relying on numerical data, this method provide means for detailed investigation of ideas, arguments, and perspectives from various scholars. Secondary data sources enabled a comprehensive synthesis of diverse viewpoints, facilitating a deeper understanding of how different philosophical traditions influence research methodologies. Furthermore, secondary data allowed for a broader scope of analysis, incorporating insights from multiple disciplines and historical perspectives that would be difficult to capture through data from primary sources.

This paper utilized thematic analysis in analyzing the data. The method is suitable in identifying themes and patterns within the context of qualitative data. This approach ensured that the findings were well-grounded in existing knowledge while allowing for critical reflections on the implications of different philosophical traditions. Ultimately, the use of secondary data-based qualitative approach in this study provided a well-rounded, theoretically informed examination of how philosophical paradigms influence research methodologies in the social sciences.

Literature Review

Research in the social sciences is profoundly influenced by philosophical foundations that shape its methodologies, interpretations, and outcomes. Hence, examining various philosophical paradigms, researchers can better understand the assumptions underlying their methodologies and the implications these have for the knowledge produced.

Historical Evolution of Philosophical Approaches in Social Science Research

In social science research, the development of philosophical approaches has evolved through various historical epochs. Early social science research was rooted in the classical philosophies of thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, who emphasized rational inquiry (Benton & Craib, 2021). However, the Enlightenment period (17th-18th century) marked a shift toward empirical and scientific methods, largely influenced by thinkers like Francis Bacon and René Descartes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This period introduced the idea that knowledge should be based on observation and reason, leading to the rise of positivism.

It is important to note that however, that during the 19th and early 20th centuries, social science research saw the emergence of interpretivism, largely attributed to Wilhelm Dilthey, who argued that human behavior should be studied differently from natural sciences (Schwandt, 2000). The mid-20th century brought about critical realism, championed by Roy Bhaskar, which sought to bridge the gap between positivism and interpretivism through acknowledgement in existence of an objective reality while also recognizing human subjectivity (Bhaskar, 2013). More recently, pragmatism has emerged as an approach that integrates different methodologies in line with the nature of research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Key Philosophical Paradigms

a) Positivism

Positivism is grounded on the idea that reality is objective and can be understood through systematic observation and empirical evidence (Comte, 1830). Auguste Comte, often regarded as the father of positivism, argued that scientific methods should be applied to the study of society (Neuman, 2014). Positivist research largely depends on quantitative methods, with structured data collection process, in its investigation and in studying social behaviour (Bryman, 2012).

b) Interpretivism

Interpretivism, unlike positivism, emphasizes the subjective nature of social reality. It argues that human actions are meaningful and must be understood within the context of cultural and social framework (Weber, 1922). This paradigm, championed by scholars such as Max Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey, utilizes qualitative methods, like ethnography as well as interviews, to interpret individuals' lived experiences (Schwandt, 2000).

c) Critical Realism

Critical realism, introduced by Roy Bhaskar (2013), posits that reality exists independently of human perception but can only be understood through conceptual frameworks. This paradigm recognises both the empirical and interpretive aspects of research, making it a middle ground between positivism and interpretivism (Sayer, 2000). Critical realism is often used in mixed-methods research to analyze both structural forces and human agency in shaping social phenomena (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002).

d) Pragmatism

Pragmatism, as a philosophical approach, prioritizes practical solutions over strict adherence to any single paradigm (Dewey, 1929). John Dewey and William James argue that knowledge should be evaluated based on its usefulness in addressing research problems (Morgan, 2007). Pragmatist research embraces both qualitative and quantitative methods, advocating for methodological pluralism (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Debates in Philosophical Research Approaches

i) Objectivity vs. Subjectivity

Extant literature shows that, one of the longest-standing debates in philosophical research is the tension between objectivity and subjectivity. Positivists argue for objective knowledge, while interpretivists emphasize the role of subjectivity in understanding social phenomena (Neuman, 2014). Critical realism attempts to mediate this debate by acknowledging an independent reality while considering human interpretation (Bhaskar, 2013).

ii) Quantitative vs. Qualitative Methods

Another major debate revolves around the preference for quantitative versus qualitative research methods. Positivists favour quantitative methods for their ability to produce generalisable results, whereas interpretivists argue that qualitative methods provide deeper insights into human experiences (Bryman, 2012). Pragmatism resolves this debate by advocating for the integration of both methods based on research needs (Morgan, 2007).

iii) The Role of Values in Research

Scholars also argue whether research should be value-free or value-laden. Positivists argue that scientific inquiry should remain objective and free from researcher biases (Comte, 1830). In contrast, interpretivists and critical realists acknowledge that values inevitably influence research (Sayer, 2000). This debate highlights the ethical considerations in social science research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Relevance of Philosophy in Shaping Research Methodologies

Philosophical foundations play fundamental role in determining research methodologies. Through understanding of diverse paradigms, researchers can inform decisions about most suitable methodologies for their studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

1. **Choice of Methods:** The philosophical stance of a researcher influences whether they use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (Bryman, 2012).
2. **Data Interpretation:** Interpretivists focus on meanings and lived experiences, while positivists emphasize statistical analysis (Weber, 1922).
3. **Ethical Considerations:** Critical realism and interpretivism recognise the ethical implications of research and advocate for reflexivity (Bhaskar, 2013).
4. **Research Impact:** Pragmatism encourages researchers to choose methodologies that maximise practical impact (Morgan, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs epistemology as its suitable tool of analysis to examine the philosophical approach to the understanding of research in the social sciences. Epistemology, which represent a division of philosophy, deals with the investigation of theory in knowledge, seeking to understand what knowledge is, how it is acquired, and how it can be justified. Epistemology as a concept was championed by James Frederick Ferrier (a Scottish philosopher) in the year 1854 in his work “Institutes of Metaphysic”. However, the study of knowledge predates this period, with foundational contributions from ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. Plato, in his work “Theaetetus”, discusses knowledge as ‘justified true belief’, a view that have been debated extensively and later modified by other philosophers (Plato, 369 BCE/1997). Similarly, Aristotle, distinguished between different forms of knowledge, emphasising empirical observation and rational deduction (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1998).

The basic assumptions of epistemology revolve around the nature and scope of human knowledge. One fundamental assumption is that knowledge must be justified; mere belief or opinion does not constitute knowledge unless supported by rational justification (Audi, 2003). Another key assumption is that knowledge has sources, which may include perception, reason, memory, and testimony (Pritchard, 2014). Rationalists such as René Descartes argue that reason is the primary

source of knowledge, as seen in his famous statement "Cogito, ergo sum" (Descartes, 1641/1996). In contrast, empiricists like John Locke assert that knowledge derives from sensory experience, claiming that the human mind at birth is a "tabula rasa" (Locke, 1689/1975). Additionally, epistemology assumes that knowledge claims can be subjected to skepticism, a view prominently defended by David Hume, who questioned the certainty of causation and inductive reasoning (Hume, 1748/2000).

However, in the context of this study, epistemology is relevant to the philosophical approach to social science research because it examines the nature knowledge limits as well as sources thereby helping researchers understand how knowledge is acquired and justified in social sciences. Since social sciences study human behavior and society, epistemology clarifies whether knowledge claims are objective or influenced by social contexts. It guides researchers in choosing appropriate methodologies to ensure reliability and validity. Epistemology justifies why qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods are used in research. It also helps in evaluating biases, assumptions, and the credibility of findings. Social science research relies on observation, interpretation, and analysis, which epistemology helps refine. It ensures that knowledge production is systematic and logical. Epistemology also differentiates between facts, opinions, and beliefs in research. It provides a foundation for understanding theoretical frameworks. Without epistemology, research may lack coherence and justification. It supports the credibility of research conclusions. It also fosters critical thinking and reflexivity. Epistemology ultimately strengthens the philosophical foundation of social science research. It ensures that research findings are meaningful and contribute to knowledge.

Findings and Discussion

From the foregoing investigation, therefore, the following findings emerge regarding the examination of philosophical approach to research in the field of sciences. The discussion explores comparative analysis of diverse philosophical approaches, as well as strengths and weaknesses of respective approaches. In addition, the paper also investigates impact of various philosophical choices on research outcomes.

a) Comparative Analysis of Different Philosophical Approaches in Social Science Research

Outcome of this investigation indicates that philosophy underpins social science research, providing frameworks that guide the construction of knowledge. The primary philosophical approaches include positivism, interpretivism, critical realism, and pragmatism, with each of the approaches offering distinct perspectives on reality and knowledge generation.

1. Positivism

- ✚ Positivism, associated with Auguste Comte (1853), asserts that social reality exists independently and can be studied using scientific methods. This approach emphasizes objectivity, quantifiable data, and hypothesis testing (Creswell, 2014).
- ✚ **Example:** Large-scale surveys and experiments in the field of social science like Political Science, International Relations, Sociology and Economics are deep-rooted in positivist traditions (Bryman, 2016).

2. Interpretivism

- ✚ Interpretivism, influenced by Max Weber (1904), emphasizes understanding human behaviour by interpreting subjective meanings. It relies on qualitative methods such as interviews and ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

- ✚ **Example:** Ethnographic studies in anthropology and participant observation in Sociology illustrate interpretivist approaches (Geertz, 1973).

3. Critical Realism

- ✚ Critical realism, a paradigm developed by Roy Bhaskar (1975), argues that while reality exists independently of perception, social phenomena are shaped by underlying structures and mechanisms. It incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods (Sayer, 2000).
- ✚ **Example:** Studies examining structural inequalities in education and healthcare often apply critical realism.

4. Pragmatism

- ✚ Pragmatism, advocated by John Dewey (1925), focuses on practical problem-solving and the use of multiple methods. Researchers prioritise what works best for answering specific questions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).
- ✚ **Example:** Mixed-method research in public policy and business studies frequently employs pragmatic approaches.

(b) Strengths and Weaknesses of Each Approach

Philosophical Approach	Strengths	Weaknesses
Positivism	Enables generalisability and reliability through objective data	Ignores subjective experiences and context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
Interpretivism	Provides deep understanding of human behavior and social interactions	Findings may lack generalisability and are often subjective (Patton, 2002)
Critical Realism	Bridges objectivist and subjectivist paradigms, acknowledging deep structures	Can be complex and difficult to operationalise (Archer, 1995)
Pragmatism	Allows flexibility in method selection and practical problem-solving	May lack theoretical consistency (Morgan, 2007)

(c) Real-World Examples of Research Studies Shaped by Different Philosophies

1. **Positivist Research:** Durkheim's (1897) study on suicide analysed statistical correlations to explain social phenomena, illustrating the positivist focus on objective, quantifiable data.
2. **Interpretivist Research:** Clifford Geertz's (1973) work on Balinese cockfighting demonstrated interpretivism by using thick descriptions to analyze cultural symbols.
3. **Critical Realist Research:** Archer's (1995) study on agency and structure in sociology highlighted the influence of underlying mechanisms on human behaviour.
4. **Pragmatist Research:** Creswell & Plano Clark (2018) conducted mixed-method research on educational interventions, showing the application of pragmatism in real-world studies.

(d) Impact of Philosophical Choices on Research Outcomes

Philosophical approaches strongly influence various aspect of research, ranging from the formulation of question formulation to interpretation of findings or outcome of investigation.

1. Research Methods

- i. Positivism leads to structured methodologies like experiments and surveys.
- ii. Interpretivism favours open-ended, exploratory techniques such as case studies.
- iii. Critical realism combines quantitative and qualitative methods.
- iv. Pragmatism allows for the integration of multiple methodologies.

2. Data Collection Techniques

- i. Positivism employs standardized instruments like questionnaires (Bryman, 2016).
- ii. Interpretivism relies on in-depth interviews and participant observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).
- iii. Critical realism integrates social indicators with qualitative insights (Sayer, 2000).
- iv. Pragmatism selects tools based on research needs, such as combining interviews with statistical analysis (Morgan, 2007).

3. Data Interpretation

- i. Positivist studies focus on statistical correlations and causality.
- ii. Interpretivist research emphasises meaning construction and contextual analysis.
- iii. Critical realism identifies causal mechanisms beyond observable patterns.
- iv. Pragmatism evaluates findings based on practical applications.

Conclusion

This paper critically examines the philosophical approach to the study of research in the social sciences. From the investigation, findings indicate that philosophical underpinnings in the context of social science research represent the foundation upon which epistemological and ontological inquiries are constructed, ultimately shaping the trajectory of knowledge production. The study has interrogated how diverse philosophical paradigms, including positivism, interpretivism, critical realism, and pragmatism, contribute distinct yet interconnected dimensions to social inquiry, influencing methodological choices and the interpretation of empirical realities. The dialectical relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, causality and meaning, structure and agency underscores the complex nature of social phenomena and the inherent complexity of human behavior.

Therefore, interrogating the epistemic assumptions that inform research design, this study underscores the imperative of reflexivity in scholarly endeavours. The philosophical lenses adopted in research not only delineate the parameters of inquiry but also shape the analytical frameworks through which social realities are comprehended. The evolving nature of knowledge, contingent upon shifting theoretical perspectives and contextual exigencies, necessitates an adaptive and pluralistic approach to social science research. This study highlights the indispensability of methodological congruence, advocating for a synthesis between theoretical orientations and empirical applications to ensure intellectual rigour and coherence.

Recommendations

From the foregoing investigation, the study made certain recommendations to enhance the philosophical approach to the study of research in the social sciences.

1. First, researchers should integrate multiple philosophical perspectives, such as positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena. By embracing diverse viewpoints, scholars can better appreciate the complexities of human behaviour and societal structures, leading to more well-rounded and insightful research outcomes.
2. Second, there should be greater emphasis on ethical considerations in social science research. Researchers must be guided by philosophical inquiries in addressing issues such as bias, informed consent, and the impact of their findings on society. A strong ethical foundation ensures that studies contribute positively to knowledge while respecting human dignity and rights.
3. Third, academic institutions should incorporate more training in philosophical reasoning and epistemology within research methodology courses. This will immensely help students and scholars to critically evaluate their assumptions, refine their theoretical frameworks, and enhance the rigour of their investigations. A strong philosophical grounding allows for deeper engagement with research questions and more meaningful interpretations of data.
4. Lastly, interdisciplinary collaboration should be encouraged to enrich the philosophical discourse in social science research. By engaging with fields such as philosophy, history, and cultural studies, researchers can develop more perspectives, fostering innovative approaches and broadening the scope of their inquiries.

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